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Chapter One: Thiacene

Thraxis was in trouble. Again.

He pasted a smile on his lips and struggled not to show his disappointment to the others seated at the long table. A dry desert wind blew in through the open window, and he took a deep breath, acutely conscious of the silence gathering in the stone dining hall. It had been a long day, and weariness that was as much spiritual as physical was beginning to take its toll.

The day had started out well enough. He had ridden—forgetting through familiarity that actually *sitting* on a horse’s back was the act of a barbarian—into the Sanctum Minoris of Gypta, seeking out parents he had not seen in twenty years. Although his memories of them were vague, he’d had little trouble picking out Cyaraxes and Jumica from the other Athraskani who toiled in the Sanctum’s fields, which lay in the narrow strip of fertile land wedged in between the life-giving brown river and the hot desolation of the red desert. After he had identified himself to them, they had been overjoyed to see him.

At first.

The problem with joy was that it tended to fade before such things as doubt and suspicion. And among the Athraskani, doubt and suspicion were habits by necessity.

“So, Thraxis,” said Anarete from her seat at the head of the table, “what brings you to Gypta?”

Thraxis suppressed a sigh. Anarete was a plump, silver-haired woman with a permanent expression of suspicion. She was also the Prima of the Sanctum Minoris, and as such had nominal authority over him even though she only wore red robes. It was her right to ask why a black-robed Athraskani, who normally would never be let outside the precincts of the Sanctum Majoris, had suddenly appeared on her doorstep.

Unfortunately, there was nothing about his situation that could be described as ‘normal.’

“I came to see Cyaraxes and Jumica,” he said, truthfully enough. His mother, who sat across from him, gave him a faint smile. But her eyes, so pale a shade of silver that they bordered on white, were troubled.

Anarete took a sip of wine from the single glass a day that the Rule allowed her. Her shrewd, silver eyes touched Thraxis’ shaved head—radically different from Athraskani norm, where complicated braids indicated a wizard’s rank—then moved on to his traveling companions.

To his left sat Viabold. If Anarete recognized Viabold’s name, it was as that of an Athraskani who had left the Sanctum years before due to his inability to adhere to the tenets of the Rule. Although Viabold had actually made an effort—undoubtedly for Thraxis’ sake rather than his own—to look presentable by washing out his travel-worn blue robes and fixing his long hair in the traditional braids, his behavior was not so easily altered. With a mental sigh, Thraxis noted that his friend was even now finishing off his third glass of wine and looking about for more.

To Thraxis’ right sat his wife, the Arrow that Flies the Farthest, former Champion of the Red Feather Clan of the Skald. And who, Thraxis had no doubt, would be the main topic of gossip this evening among the inhabitants of the Sanctum. Bad enough that one of the most powerful of their race would wed a human without magic, but to compound the offense by marrying a *barbarian*—it was

unthinkable.

Thraxis felt a fond smile touch his lips as he studied Arrow's profile. He could still remember his shock when he had first met her. She was so *different* from the Athraskani, who prided themselves on being civilized and cosmopolitan. Leather trousers and vest hugged her form, accompanied by a wide variety of weapons. Her long, copper-colored hair hung loose and wind-tangled about her strong features, except where a few random braids made an effort at taming the mass. The blue line of her Champion's tattoo bisected her face horizontally, centered about her dark eyes, and more tattoos showed on her shoulders and stomach.

His first reaction upon seeing her had been one of horror—*he* was to travel with such a crude barbarian? And when he had realized that she was his *amria*, the woman he was destined to love...well, horror had not even come close to describing what he had felt.

To their credit, both his parents had smiled politely when he introduced her, even though Jumica looked like a woman trying to be happy about swallowing a live fish when she did it.

Anarete set her glass down deliberately, catching Thraxis' attention. "I see," she said dryly, leaving no doubt that she didn't believe him at all.

Perhaps a bit more of the truth, then. "The Black Council sent me with Arrow to bring Balthazar to justice," he explained. "I believe Vilhardouin sent word to all the Sanctum when he rebelled?"

Anarete nodded slowly, the silver braids of her hair catching the late afternoon light as it streamed in through the high windows. "She did. I understand that he stole a *doyan'si*." Her tone clearly asked how he had gotten access to such an abomination. When Thraxis only gave her a mysterious look, she shrugged and went on. "Vilhardouin feared that he might carry his vengeance to the outlying Sanctum."

"He came to my people," Arrow explained. Her command of the Empire's language had improved greatly, but her accent would always be atrocious. "Many died," she added awkwardly, glancing down at her pottery plate.

"Viabold was kind enough to offer me his help," Thraxis went on, neglecting to mention *why* a black-level mage would need the aid of a blue robe. He waved his hand airily. "And once we had dealt with Balthazar, he offered to come here with Arrow and me."

"It all sounds so very simple," Anarete said acerbically. Thraxis winced, knowing that his story raised more questions than it answered.

Jumica leaned across the table with an eager smile. "Tell us more about your travels, Thraxis. Did you see anything interesting? How did it compare with the Wandering Monk's accounts?"

For a moment, her eagerness put his guard up, and he wondered if she was seeking to make him look foolish. Then he realized that it was nothing of the sort. *She wants to be proud of me.* Jumica wanted to be able to tell people about the great things her son had done. It was a strange revelation, for he could recall little but disdain and disappointment from the Athraskani who had raised him in her place.

If only he had done anything worth telling. Instead, it seemed that he had spent most of the journey miserable, hurting, and afraid. Not really the stuff of heroic epics.

He glanced at Arrow, but she only looked back at him, arching a single brow as if to say: "*These are your people—you tell them.*" With a shrug, he launched into the tale, trying to think of anything that might interest his listeners while at the same time making the whole thing sound more like a pleasure jaunt than the trial of endurance that it had been. No one, he felt certain, wanted to hear about him coughing blood and being nearly beaten to death by Skald warriors. Certainly, he wasn't about to mention the fact that he had poisoned himself through his own ignorance and pride.

The entire time he spoke, though, he was acutely conscious of Anarete's eyes on him: weighing, judging...and questioning.

* * * *

Arrow yawned and stretched, glad that the long day was finally over. After their communal supper, the Athraskani had all retreated to conduct the evening meditation that their society required. Left to her own devices for a while, she had spent the time checking on her two steeds, Nightwing and Stalker. Both horses were corralled just outside the Sancta, near the odd creatures that the Gyptoans used as beasts of

burden. The cloven-footed, hump-backed animals had eyed her in a way she thought of as distinctly unfriendly, and she had no desire to get any closer to them.

Afterward, Thraxis had returned, accompanied by his parents. Jumica and Cyaraxes had asked if they would like to go to their quarters and talk, but to Arrow's surprise, Thraxis had declined the invitation. Perhaps, she thought, her husband was feeling as overwhelmed as she.

A young man in green robes had shown them to the chamber set aside for their use. The Sancta consisted of a large number of buildings, all made from stone or mud brick. Their room was in one of the stone buildings, and Arrow found herself idly running her hand over the large, cool blocks, wondering how they had been fitted together so precisely. Magic, no doubt.

The chamber was small and contained only a bed, a table, and a chair. The bed was tucked back into a small alcove and flanked by two statues clutching fans made from palm fronds. The outer wall of the room was almost completely open to a balcony outside, and so gave the impression of spaciousness. The air within smelled of cool stone and incense.

Arrow pushed aside a hanging of gauzy white cloth and stepped out onto the balcony. The night air touched her face, and she breathed deeply, exploring the unfamiliar scents of desert and spices. Resting her hands lightly on the balustrade, she stared out over the lower buildings beneath. Glowing balls of magical light moved here and there, marking the passage of Athraskani.

Thraxis came up behind her, sliding his arms around her waist. She leaned back against him, glad to feel the solidity of flesh rather than the sharpness of bone. There had been a time, when Balthazar's death curse still devoured him by inches, when bone and skin had seemed all that was left of him.

"How are you?" he asked softly, his deep voice like the touch of soft fur. "I know that this must all seem very strange to you." He sighed, and then chuckled ruefully. "It seems odd to me, to be perfectly honest."

"How so?"

"After so many months living out of a tent, doing whatever I wanted...it's hard to go back, in a way."

"But we aren't staying long," Arrow reminded him.

"No, of course we aren't." He hesitated. "But they do have a library here...it's said to be very impressive. I would like to take a little while to look at it. And to spend more time with Cyaraxes and Jumica."

Unease touched Arrow's heart, but she shoved it aside. "But then we'll leave and go back to the Skald, right?"

"Wherever you want to go, love," he reassured. His arms tightened about her waist, and she felt the silken brush of his lips across the tattoo on her shoulder. She shivered in delight, closing her eyes as he nudged aside her hair to explore the sensitive spot on the back of her neck. When she opened her eyes again, it was to see the face of a young girl hovering just beyond the edge of the balcony.

Arrow let out a yell of surprise. A lifetime of training took over, and she pulled away from her husband, drew her sword, and put the tip to the throat of the intruder in the space that it would take a normal human to draw breath.

"You're fast," the girl said appreciatively, as if she wasn't even slightly concerned about being threatened with immediate death. She hung suspended in the air, her hands resting on the balustrade, her red robes flowing idly about her in the night breeze. Like most of the Athraskani, her braided and coiled hair was black as a raven's wing. Her face was angular, striking rather than pretty, and dominated by a very long nose and a pair of eyes as yellow as clear wine.

Thraxis' black brows beetled together in a glare. "By all that's true, who are you? What are you doing looking into other people's windows?"

The girl only grinned, utterly unrepentant. "I was curious. I wanted to know what they were all trying to hide from me."

Arrow slowly let her sword drop, and then sheathed it again. This girl did not strike her as a threat. "Hide from you?"

"Oh, yes. When they told me I had to stay with the novices today, it was clear that they didn't want

me to see something. I spied the light in here and thought that there might be visitors to the Sanctum.” The girl’s pale eyes narrowed critically as she studied Arrow. “Are you some kind of bodyguard?”

“You should be answering questions, not asking them,” Thraxis snapped.

The girl rolled her eyes. “I’m Thiacene. Honestly, can’t you come up with better questions? ‘Who are you, why are you looking in the window’—really, not much of a challenge.”

“Given that Anarete didn’t want you fraternizing with outsiders, I’d think you’d be more polite to people who could report you to her.”

Thiacene didn’t seem terribly concerned. “I thought investigating would be worth getting caught—but then, I thought I’d find something more interesting than two strangers with no more sense than to make love on a balcony where the whole world can see them.” Ignoring Thraxis’ sputters of indignation, she levered herself up so that she perched like an imp on the balustrade. “So who *are* you?”

“None of your business,” said Thraxis.

Arrow tried to hide a smile and failed. Ignoring her husband’s annoyance, she said, “I think that should be obvious, Thiacene. This is your brother, Thraxis.”

The two Athraskani looked at one another, as if they routinely met long-nosed strangers with the same unusual eye color. “Jumica and Cyaraxes are your parents?” Thraxis asked, as if he doubted it could be true.

Thiacene nodded. “Yes. I knew that I had a brother who was ten years older than me—Mother would get images of him every so often from a friend at the Sanctum Majoris.” She looked at Thraxis skeptically. “You don’t look anything like him.”

“People change,” Thraxis muttered.

“I suppose. What happened to your hair?”

“I shaved it off.”

“Oh.” She frowned thoughtfully at him some more. “I don’t know why they didn’t just let me come to supper with the rest of the initiates and meet you there. Have you done something scandalous?”

“I’m his wife,” Arrow offered.

Thiacene’s eyes lit up and she laughed. “Ah ha! Perhaps that’s it. They don’t want me getting strange ideas from my older brother.” She looked as though she would say more, but at that moment the faint sound of voices came from another part of the Sanctum, carrying clearly in the night air. Thiacene made a face. “Father’s looking for me—I’d better go.” She dropped easily over the side of the balcony. “See you tomorrow!”

Arrow peered over the side, but Thiacene was lost to the shadows. Straightening, she turned to see Thraxis leaning against the wide entrance to their room, his face thoughtful and slightly sad.

“Did you know that you had a sister?” she asked softly.

He glanced up, and she saw grief in his eyes. “No. No, I had no idea.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” He held out his arms, folding her close when she came to him. “But at least I know why they tried to hide her from me.”

Arrow shifted her head against his shoulder so that she could see his profile. “Why?”

“I know that you understand the different levels of power among the Athraskani,” he said slowly, “but I don’t believe I explained to you how we know what a child will become when it is born, before it grows into its full magic. There is a spell that can be cast which reveals the baby’s potential—the level of power that it will someday attain, once it reaches adulthood.”

“That’s how the Black Council knew that you would be of the black level someday,” Arrow guessed.

“Yes. And they used that knowledge as the basis of their decision to take me away from my parents to raise themselves.” His mouth tightened in old anger. “But after we gain our full power as adults, other Athraskani can often sense how strong an individual is. Lower-level Athraskani can only tell if someone is stronger than they—Viabold, for example, couldn’t easily distinguish whether I was a red or a black level mage unless I did something to make it clear. But I would be able to guess Viabold’s general abilities even if he wasn’t wearing his robes. Do you understand?”

“I think so. But what does this have to do with Thiacene?”

“After...what happened to me...it must have been a terrible risk for Cyaraxes and Jumica to conceive another child. They must have prayed that their baby would be a red level wizard like themselves. A future red robe would most likely be left with them. How horrified they must have been when the testing showed that Thiacene was yet another black.”

Arrow pulled back in surprise. “But she was wearing red robes!”

Thraxis looked at her gravely. “I know. They’ve lied to her—not only to her, but to everyone else in the Sancta. Most of the Athraskani here are lower level mages, after all—they would never know. Anarete must be in on it as well—she would have been present at the testing, and she would know that Thiacene is stronger than a red robe should be.”

Arrow swallowed heavily. “They lied to keep Thiacene with them.”

“Yes.”

“What will happen when the truth comes out?”

Thraxis shook his head. “I don’t know. The Black Council will be furious, that’s for certain. But I do know that they won’t find out because of us.”

“No.” Arrow leaned against him again, wrapping her arms around his waist. “No, they won’t.”

* * * *

Anarete settled to her knees, silently railing against the age that made her joints creak. She could feel the hardness of the stone floor through the reed mat that she knelt upon, and she cursed that as well for good measure.

Damn Vilhardouin, she thought as she arranged her scrying ball in front of her. The old bitch must not trust her, sending a spy like that fool Thraxis down here.

Like many of the other inhabitants of the Sanctum that she ruled over, Anarete had been born in the Sanctum Majoris, the heart of Athraskani civilization. As a red robe, she had never been a rival for Vilhardouin’s power, and so had done her best to strike as many alliances as possible with the ambitious woman. In time, when the Primus of Gypta’s Sanctum died, Vilhardouin had been in a position to offer it to one of her old supporters. Anarete had taken the post gladly. It meant that she could more or less run her own Sanctum her own way, without constant toadying to the Black Council. And it meant that she could get away from Vilhardouin, for, despite their alliance, they had never liked one another at all.

And now, after all these years, she’s decided that I need a keeper. Anarete scowled, clinging to her anger so that she couldn’t feel the trepidation that boiled underneath it. *If Thraxis sees Thiacene...* There was no telling what Vilhardouin would do if she learned that Anarete had kept one of her precious black robes from her. That Anarete would lose her position as Prima and be forced to return to the Sanctum Majoris in disgrace was the least punishment she could expect.

Fifteen years ago, it had seemed worth the risk. A chance to help two of her own and secure their loyalty to her. And a chance as well to spit in Vilhardouin’s eye. Now, though, with discovery so close...she couldn’t imagine what she had been thinking.

Taking a deep breath, Anarete composed her thoughts as best she could and chanted the spell that would summon Vilhardouin to her own scrying ball far away. After several minutes, Anarete felt the answering touch of magic and opened her eyes.

Vilhardouin scowled at her from the ball’s crystalline depths. Age had marred her beauty, but had only enhanced her regal bearing and air of command. Her silver eyes were hard and cold as flint, and Anarete almost felt sorry for Thraxis. The poor child had probably never had any choice other than become Vilhardouin’s lackey.

“This had best be important,” Vilhardouin said icily.

Keeping her face composed, Anarete bowed slowly, nearly touching her forehead to her knees. “Greetings, Vilhardouin of the Black Council,” she said, letting the ritual calm conceal her anger and fear.

Vilhardouin responded with a chill little nod. “You may speak, Prima of the Sanctum Minoris.”

Anarete resumed her kneeling position. “It is not for me to question the Black Council,” she said, “but I request clarification.”

“On what matter?”

“This...*observer*...you sent—did you wish him to report on our work here? If so, I will show him the ruins on the morrow.”

Vilhardouin frowned. “I sent no observer.”

Quibbling over semantics—that was what the Athraskani did best, Anarete thought in annoyance. “Forgive me. This visitor, then.”

“I said that the Black Council sent no one.”

Now it was Anarete’s turn to frown in confusion. “Thraxis. He came here to visit Cyaraxes and Jumica. I assumed you had sent him to more purpose than that.”

“Thraxis is dead.”

To her surprise, Anarete saw that Vilhardouin had actually paled. It gave her some pleasure in the face of her fear. “I assure you he is not. He sat at my table this evening, and unless ghosts can eat and drink, he was very much alive.”

Vilhardouin’s face went even whiter, and her mouth tightened. “Damn him.”

“He is not here by your leave, then?”

“Aren’t you listening? He was supposed to be dead! That cursed Viabold must have lied in his letter. Is he there as well?”

“He is. Along with that woman—Thraxis’ wife.”

“*His what?*”

“His wife,” Anarete said triumphantly. “The barbarian. Spear, or some such.”

“No.” Some of the shock eased from Vilhardouin’s features. “Another lie. I wasted years trying to maneuver Thraxis into Melilandra’s bed—the Black Council ordered it, and still he defied us with his excuses and evasions. If she was not good enough for him, he would not demean himself by rutting with some filthy barbarian.”

“Oh?” Anarete whispered a chant and passed her hand across the surface of the scrying ball. The image within—and within Vilhardouin’s as well—altered to show the bedchamber she had given her guests. The room was still well lit, and she had no trouble making out the intertwined shapes on the bed. She watched their writhing with interest, until Vilhardouin’s image abruptly reasserted itself.

“Thraxis will report to me at dawn tomorrow morning,” the leader of the Black Council said in a voice that would allow no argument. Then she broke the spell binding the two scrying balls, leaving the small room in darkness.

* * * *

Thraxis knew that there was something wrong when he came up the stairs to the small set of rooms he shared with his parents . It had been a long day—one of the other boys had knocked him down while they were playing, and he had skinned both knees. Old Ligares, who supervised the novices’ recreation, had snapped at him to quit crying and heal himself. Thraxis had managed to ease the wounds on his knees, but the pain from the comments of the older boys didn’t go away so easily.

Mama would make him a cup of tea when he got home—that would help . But the stairwell felt oddly cold and quiet as he made his way up it, his brown robes clutched awkwardly in one small fist to keep them from tripping him up. Filled with trepidation, he climbed the last stairs slowly and pushed open the door.

Inside, everything was dark and still . Things were missing—the wall hanging his father had woven, the small statuette of a woman that his mother had cherished. Suddenly afraid in this familiar place that no longer felt like home, Thraxis called “Mama?” in a small, quavering voice. Surely she would appear and tell him what was wrong.

But his call went unanswered . Panic took hold. “Mama! Da! Mama!” he screamed. He dashed through the rooms, looking for them, but there was no trace of their presence. Even their extra robes were gone.

The sound of a footstep in the outer room brought him running back out . But the thin woman

in the black robes wasn't his mother. She caught his arm roughly when he ran up to her.

"Mama—Da—I can't find them," he gasped between sobs .

Vilhardouin looked down on him with eyes that held no pity . "Your parents are gone."

Terror . "Gone? Where? I want to go with them!"

She gave him a little shake. "They've left the Sanctum. You'll never see them again."

To a five-year-old boy, those words were the end of the world .

"Stop crying!" Vilhardouin snapped in annoyance . "I knew we should have taken you before this. I said stop crying this instant!"

It was an impossible request . With a hiss of aggravation, she turned and left him huddled in the middle of the empty room. "You may come down to supper when you stop crying, and not a moment before. Don't you realize that this is for your own good? Your parents were nothing but red robes—they could never take care of you like we can."

Thraxis couldn't manage anything more than a confused sob . Still angry, Vilhardouin shut the door hard behind her, leaving him alone in the darkness.

Chapter Two: Ancient Days

Thraxis strode briskly down the corridor leading to Anarete's chambers. The flap-flap of his sandals chased echoes from the walls, and was mimicked by the quicker stride of the young man she had sent to roust him out of bed before the sun rose.

Vilhardouin .

Somehow, he had hoped to have more time. It had been a vain hope, but still...he had not believed that Anarete would be so eager to carry tales back to the Black Council.

My error, he thought grimly. And, among the Athraskani, any error in judgment was a weakness to be exploited by others.

Anarete waited in a small meditation chamber. Despite the early hour, her eyes were bright and alert, and there was a look of smugness on her face that he did not like at all.

Well, easy enough to get rid of it. "You may leave us," he said loftily, drawing upon all the arrogance he could muster. She started to protest, but he fixed her with a cold look, reminding her that, no matter her nominal rank, in the end his power would always mean more to anyone who mattered. Pursing her lips in annoyance, Anarete nodded and left.

Thraxis turned towards the scrying ball as though it were an enemy. His long-fingered hands absently brushed imaginary specks from his traveling robe, and then tugged his hood forward until it hid his shaved head and most of his face. Folding his arms across his chest, he tucked his hands into his sleeves and waited.

He did not have to wait long. Light flared from the scrying ball, illuminating the little room in harsh white radiance. Vilhardouin's familiar features formed deep within it, her expression one of grave displeasure.

Well, at least that was also very familiar.

"Vilhardouin," he said coolly, as if they met casually in a hallway. "You wished to speak with me?"

Her mouth tightened, and he realized that she was too angry even to play her usual games. "Do not taunt me, Thraxis," she warned. "You are in very grave danger of being declared apostate."

He bowed to her slightly. "I had not realized. And which of my vows have I broken?"

"Obedience. Obedience to your peers, to your people, and to the Black Council."

"Ah. And how have I disobeyed?"

"You know that very well, Thraxis—you are not ignorant, even though you pretend to be. You lied to the Black Council by faking your own death. And you wed without our permission or approval."

A mixture of anger and bitterness surged in his heart, but he forced himself to maintain a calm, slightly aloof, demeanor. "I did not lie. Viabold sent word that Balthazar was defeated—that was all. There was no mention of my fate in his letter."

“A lie of omission, then.”

“And aren’t you the slightest bit curious as to how I came to be alive at all?”

“That is irrelevant.”

It hurt. It shouldn’t have, not after so many years of knowing that the woman who had raised him cared nothing for him at all. Vilhardouin had never loved him, had never even pretended to feel any affection towards him. The only thing that was relevant about him was his power.

But still, in his heart he had always held on to some tiny fragment of hope that she did care, after all.

“Very well, then,” he said with another slight bow. “And my marriage to Arrow is also of no concern to you. The Black Council cannot force any Athraskani to marry against his or her will—the Rules are very clear on that point, are they not? By extension, you have no right to deny me the spouse of my choice, either.”

Vilhardouin’s face was colder than he had ever seen it. “You have done this out of spite.”

“I *love* her!” he snapped, then cursed himself. Vilhardouin always out-waited him, always sat smug while his temper frayed and hers remained intact. Taking a deep breath for calm, he silently spoke a mantra to ease his racing heart. “I don’t expect you to understand that.”

“You’re right. I cannot comprehend such irresponsibility as you have shown. You will remain in Gypta until the Black Council arrives.”

That surprised him—he had expected her to demand that he come crawling back to the Empire on his knees. “Surely you aren’t coming all the way here just to decide what to do with me.”

“No. You are only one of the matters that we must deal with. Anarete says her mages have made progress—tell her that I expect to see it when I arrive.”

And with that, the scrying ball went dark.

Thraxis took a deep breath, let it out, and contemplated smashing the ball into a thousand pieces. Not that such an act of destruction would help anything ultimately. But it might make him feel better for a moment.

“Damn,” he said aloud.

* * * *

“Where’s Thraxis?” Viabold asked curiously when Arrow slid onto the bench beside him. They sat in the common dining hall, an enormous room lined with three long tables. Athraskani of all ranks formed a rainbow of colored robes as they moved about the room, but without them the hall would have looked plain indeed. The lack of decoration was alien to Arrow’s eyes, used as they were to the riot of color and ornamentation favored by the Skald.

“I don’t know,” she replied, poking uncertainly at her breakfast with a wooden spoon. A mash of cooked barley huddled in the bottom of a pottery bowl, wafting out the scent of cardamom. “He was summoned to Anarete’s chambers early—I don’t even think the sun was up yet.”

Viabold frowned, then shrugged. “I’m sure he’ll turn up soon. Too bad Anarete had to get him so early—I, for one, enjoyed a night in a real bed.”

“You’ve been sleeping in a real bed for months.”

“My dear Arrow, a bunch of pillows in a tent is not a real bed, no matter what you Skald think. Especially not when the thin wall of said tent is all that’s separating you from a pair of energetic newlyweds.”

A woman of about Viabold’s age walked past at that moment. She flashed him a grin, and he responded with a little wave. “Not to mention the other, er, opportunities that can be found here,” he added.

A dark figure appeared in the doorway like a thundercloud on the horizon. Although Thraxis neither spoke nor made any overt motion, all eyes were suddenly on him, drawn perhaps by some Athraskani sense of the power radiating from his thin body. His pale eyes flashed like yellow fire in the shadow of his hood, and his mouth was set in a grim, taut line.

“Something’s wrong,” Arrow murmured to Viabold even as she shifted her position so that her sword was in easy reach.

Without looking to either side, Thraxis strode across the room until he stood before Anarete. “Vilhardouin says that you have made progress—on what?” he demanded without preamble.

She looked up at him slowly from where she sat at the head of one of the tables, forcing him to wait on her reply. “That is none of your concern.”

“Really? Did I mention that the Black Council is coming here?”

Anarete paled sharply. “Th-they are?”

“Indeed. They’re going to find out about Thiacene—you can’t stop them.”

Someone let out a little cry—Arrow thought that it might have been Jumica. Thraxis, however, didn’t take his gaze away from Anarete’s. “If the Black Council has you working on some sort of project, your best chance is to amaze them with your progress when they get here. It might make them more lenient. Tell me what it is, and I will help you.”

A faint flash of hope touched Anarete’s plump features, then vanished. “Why would you do that?”

“Because Thiacene shouldn’t have to suffer for this. Because you did the right thing when you lied about her true power.” There was a murmur of startled voices at this announcement, but Thraxis ignored them. “Let me help you if I can.”

The two Athraskani stared at one another for a long moment, yellow eyes and silver locked, as if they sought to read one another’s thoughts. Then Anarete gave him a short, sharp nod.

“Very well,” she said. “Come with me.”

* * * *

An hour later, a small party of Athraskani and humans made its way across the desert. Without further explanation, Anarete had led Thraxis, Arrow, and Viabold outside to the corrals where the Sanctum’s animals were kept. A human servant, Kefre, retrieved two mules from the corral and hitched them to a small wagon with a linen awning to keep off the sun. While Kefre took the reins, Anarete and Viabold sat in silence in the back, beneath the awning. Thraxis and Arrow both mounted horses and rode alongside, much to the amazement of Kefre, who had never seen such a thing before.

They soon passed out of the fertile lands and into the dust and stone of the desert. Wind pushed the sand into high dunes, and Arrow could feel tiny grains pelting her flesh whenever a breeze picked up. The sun beat down mercilessly, even though the morning was not far advanced. Kefre had given her a white burnoose to keep off the sun. Thraxis’ traveling robe, enchanted to keep the wearer either warm or cool depending on his needs, provided all the protection her husband required.

Although the land around them looked deserted, Arrow could discern the track of other footsteps in the sand before them. “Do you come this way often?” she asked Kefre, hoping to glean some hint of their destination.

“Often enough, pretty one,” he said with a broad smile. Kefre claimed that his parents had come from a kingdom even further to the south, which he referred to as the Land of the Bow. His skin was an incredible shade of brown, so dark that it bordered on true black. He was, she thought with a touch of regret, probably the most beautiful man she had ever seen in her entire life.

Realizing that she wasn’t going to get a better answer, she glanced away, only to find Thraxis glowering at Kefre. No doubt he had heard the driver’s mild flirtation.

She steered Nightwing over to amble along beside Stalker, Thraxis’ mount. “Kefre isn’t going to tell us anything without Anarete’s permission,” she said in a low voice.

“Hmph. He probably doesn’t know.”

“Stop acting so jealous.”

“I saw the way you were looking at him.”

Arrow rolled her eyes. “Now you’re being ridiculous.”

“Am I? You’ve been staring at him since the moment we left.”

“Just because I’m looking doesn’t mean that I’m planning to run off with him.”

“You don’t see me staring at every woman who walks past.”

Now she was annoyed. “Forgive me—I forgot that I’m married to the paragon of self restraint. Let me know when you decide to be a real person again.”

So saying, she tapped her heels against Nightwing's flanks. The gelding leapt forward eagerly, hooves churning the loose sand. The little caravan had just started up a particularly steep dune, and Arrow leaned low over Nightwing's neck as he passed the slow cart, following the tracks in the sand. Thraxis called out something behind her, but the wind swept his words away. With a triumphant surge, Nightwing crested the top of the dune—

And came to a halt as Arrow hauled on the reins in shock.

Below her the land dropped away into a grand sweep of valley. On the other side, craggy cliffs towered up, their surfaces riddled with carvings half worn away by wind and time. At the base of the cliffs was a great sprawl of tumbled masonry: columns as wide as Nightwing was tall, a gigantic stone face half-sunk in sand, and huge granite blocks each as large as a yurt. Robed figures milled around the ruins, dwarfed by their surroundings.

Stalker's hooves crunched softly in the sand as he came to a halt beside her. Thraxis stared at the scene before them, his yellow eyes wide with surprise. "What—what is it?" he whispered.

Anarete climbed out of the cart as it pulled up by them. The wind blew the ends of her braids back, making her round face appear uncharacteristically harsh. She did not look at Thraxis, but instead stared with him into the valley below. "That, Thraxis, is our heritage," she said.

* * * *

"I don't understand," Thraxis said as they walked among the ruins.

Arrow stayed close at his side, her hand hovering near her sword despite the contemptuous looks some of the Athraskani gave her for such an open display of barbarism. The place made her uneasy for reasons that she could not fully explain. In part, it was simply because the *scale* of it all seemed so utterly inhuman. Most of the carvings that had seemed small at a distance were far greater than life-sized when viewed up close. Although the style was different, something about the bas-reliefs reminded her of the sculptures that decorated the outside of the Sanctum Majoris, where she had first met Thraxis.

But...when she let her eyes stray over the few fragments that remained intact enough to form a scene, she could see that the people who had left these ruins were very different from the peaceful Athraskani of the Sanctum. Although a few murals depicted what might have been tranquil scenes, many more showed death and terror. Entire cities cowered from a threat that could no longer be made out on the weathered stones. Dead bodies dammed a river. A holocaust of flame burned a village alive.

A laughing woman threw what looked like lightning bolts from her hands and watched naked slaves writhe in torment.

"They used magic," Arrow said aloud, staring at the last carving.

"Of course they did," Anarete said impatiently. "They were Athraskani."

Thraxis stopped walking and looked around, his eyes wide with awe. "Xaqqara," he whispered, like a priest speaking a holy word.

"No," Anarete said, a grim smile touching her lips. "There are only a few of us here who can read the inscriptions, but we have translated enough to know that this was merely a minor outpost."

Arrow glanced around at the gargantuan fallen columns and walls. *This is* minor? "What is Xaqqara?"

Viabold came up beside her. Thraxis, too consumed in the carvings on the ruins to have heard her question, moved off with Anarete, talking and gesturing wildly. Thiace appeared from somewhere and followed after her brother, her head bowed slightly; apparently, she had already been chastened for her escapade of the night before.

"Xaqqara is a legend," Viabold said softly. "Many centuries ago, we Athraskani did not live as we do today. We were lords of the earth, it is said, although I think the claim exaggerated. Either way, the Athraskani of old used their magic for selfish ends: to acquire dominion over others, to amass great wealth and luxury, to destroy those who defied them. Xaqqara was their great city, the center from which their power extended outwards to touch the farthest lands.

"But in time, the ancients turned against one another. Rivals battled bitterly, and their spells laid waste to the land about them, turning it to desert. Our race was almost destroyed. In order to save

ourselves, a handful of us fled to the north, where we set up a new society. We vowed to do no harm, to abjure wealth, to forget the dreams of the past and live simply. It was the only way to save us from repeating the mistakes of the past.”

Arrow stared at the depiction of the laughing woman. “And those who had been your victims?”

Viabold smiled grimly, but there was no humor in his voice. “Ah, but no one cared about them. They were only human, after all.”

Arrow’s mouth tightened. “Of course.” Thraxis had once said something much the same to Balthazar, who had been married to a human woman. And not everyone was as willing as he to let go of old prejudices.

“And this was one of your people’s ancient works,” she said, glancing about. Now the colossal size of the ruins made sense—magic could move even great stone blocks such as these. “I do not think that they were good people. I do not think I would like to meet them.”

“Nor I,” Viabold agreed uneasily. “So what is the Black Council’s interest in the ancient past?”

Arrow didn’t know the answer to that. But, seeing the scenes of long-ago cruelty around her, she shivered in sudden fear.

* * * *

“No! No, no, no!” Toxeus shouted in irritation . “Have you not looked at the text at all? Try again!”

Thraxis shrank back in fear on the hard stone bench of the classroom . His heart pounded and his mind went completely blank—at the moment, he couldn’t have formed a sentence in his native tongue, let alone the obscure ancient dialect that was the subject of their lesson.

Like many of the young novices, he was utterly terrified of Toxeus . Some of the older children joked that Toxeus taught ancient languages only because they had still been in use when he was young. The oldest of the Athraskani at the Sanctum Majoris, Toxeus had been the head of the Black Council for more years than most of his followers had been alive. Although his silver hair had gone thin with age, and his face was heavily lined with wrinkles, he nevertheless retained good eyesight and a sharp tongue—the only two tools he needed to keep his students firmly in line.

“Well, speak up, boy!” Toxeus bellowed .

Thraxis swallowed hard . He looked again at the page before him. “I...I...” he stammered.

Toxeus threw up his hands in obvious disgust . “Clearly, you are too stupid to translate,” he said, snatching the page away. “Is there anyone here with enough sense to complete a simple sentence?”

“I can do it!” sang out Melilandra, a young girl the same age as Thraxis . Toxeus took the page to her, leaving Thraxis alone.

As soon as Toxeus’ back was turned, one of the other students threw a dead fly at Thraxis . Thraxis flinched back when it landed in his hair, but didn’t dare try to get it out lest Toxeus spy him. “Idiot,” his neighbor mocked, following their teacher’s precedent.

“Well,” Toxeus announced, “Melilandra has been paying attention . Good for you. And as for you, Thraxis, I shouldn’t let such an imbecile darken my doorway. But since I’m a generous man, I’ll just give you an extra assignment tonight.”

“It’s not like you have anything else to do,” one of the other boys jeered when Toxeus finally dismissed them . “After all, your own parents couldn’t stand you.”

Thraxis sat alone in the classroom for a long time, staring blankly at the desk in front of him . It had been almost six months since his parents had left, but he still woke up crying every night. Why had they left him? Was what his classmate said true—was he somehow to blame for driving them off?

Had they...had they been ashamed of him?

Toxeus was the head of the Black Council . He was already ashamed of Thraxis. What if he decided to do what Mama and Da had done? What if the Black Council left, too? Or worse—what

if they made him leave?

Terror gripped him so hard that it made him sick . He couldn't let that happen. He had to do better at his lessons, that was all. Mama had always said that he was smart—and he knew that almost no one else in the class would have been able to translate the text as perfectly as Melilandra, either. He just had to be better than her. He just had to make sure he didn't make any more mistakes.

He just had to be perfect . Then everything would be all right. The Black Council would love him. Maybe Mama and Da would come back, too, if they saw how well he was doing.

He had to be perfect .

Chapter Three: Beautiful Girl

“I don't like this quest to uncover your lost city, Thraxis,” Arrow said.

After a few hours of exploration, they had left the ruins. Feeling too restless to return to the Sanctum, Arrow had asked instead to go to the nearest human town. Although Viabold and Anarete had no interest in joining her, Thraxis quickly agreed. Perhaps, she thought hopefully, he was growing tired of the Sanctum already.

Now they walked through the streets of Djoser. The town lay just south of the Sanctum, and the two traded regularly. Although she had seen many strange sights in her journeys, the towns of Gypta were yet another new oddity. The mud-brick buildings were all square and built practically up against one another. Most of them were taller than a single story, and all of them had flat roofs, which seemed to double as animal pens.

People swirled about them, their skins burned brown by the sun. For the most part they had black hair, and they often beaded and braided it nearly as elaborately as the Athraskani. Men dressed in simple linen kilts, and women wore plain white dresses that left their arms and shoulders bare. Children ran naked under the sun; unlike the adults, most of their hair had been shaved off, except for a single lock on the left side. Arrow wondered what it signified.

As with the towns in the Empire closest to the Sanctum Majoris, the people in Djoser were not ignorant as to the significance of Thraxis' black robes and yellow eyes. Although the streets were crowded with women selling everything from bolts of cloth to dates soaked in honey, a path miraculously cleared in front of them. Most people simply stared at the two strangers guardedly, but a few made signs against evil behind Thraxis' back. Was it simply fear of a power they didn't understand, Arrow wondered, or had tales of the ancient Athraskani lingered long enough to cast a shadow over their descendents' return?

Thraxis paused a moment to watch a trained baboon streak up a tree, fetch some fruit from a branch, and then run back down to its owner. “Really?” he asked, seeming surprised by her comment. “Why is that?”

Arrow sighed. “Did you look at the carvings we saw today?”

“Of course! Actually, I think I may be able to help them translate some of the writing more accurately. We may even be able to find Xaqqara!”

She stopped and stared at him. A man herding goats down the street cursed under his breath and began to usher his unruly flock back the other way. “Why would you want to? Thraxis, your ancestors weren't like you. They weren't even like Balthazar!”

He frowned. “I know that, Arrow. I grew up with the legends.” He hesitated. “It...it isn't something I can explain to you easily. But Xaqqara would be a scholar's dream. So much was lost during the Transition. If anything remains at Xaqqara, we could learn much about our past that has been forgotten. Even just the opportunity to read the inscriptions on the walls would be an amazing thing.”

Thraxis was right—she didn't understand. His talk of scholars and reading was beyond her realm of experience. But, looking up into his thin face, seeing his pale eyes alight with eagerness, she realized that it was important to him.

“You think you can help them?” she asked, resigned.

“Yes! If we can show the Black Council real progress, I know that even they will be impressed enough to be lenient towards Cyaraxes and Jumica.”

“You’re going to stay until they arrive, then?”

“I have to. Cyaraxes and Jumica are my kin, Arrow. I know you understand that better than anyone.”

She stiffened. “I betrayed my kin.”

“No.” His hands closed gently on her shoulders. “They betrayed you.” He sighed and let her go. “I was separated from my parents for most of my life. I have a sister I didn’t know existed until yesterday. I might as well be a total stranger to them. But I still can’t just...just leave and not wonder whether I could have helped them.”

“I know.” She managed a smile for him. “But I still wish—”

A high-pitched yelp suddenly cut through the rumble of the market around them. Startled, Arrow turned, trying to use her height to see over the heads of the crowd. “What was that? Thraxis, can you—”

But he was already striding away from her; if people hadn’t been scrambling to get out of his way, she thought he might have started to shove them aside. “You there! What do you think you’re doing!” he shouted, his magically-enhanced voice carrying easily over the crowd.

Arrow swore and dashed after him. She had forgotten what a knack Thraxis had for getting into trouble.

By the time she caught up with him, Thraxis stood beside the mud brick wall of a low, wretched building. In front of him was one of the local men, holding a wicked-looking switch cut from cane. At his feet huddled a small, miserable shape that Arrow only gradually realized belonged to a puppy. The switch had broken its skin in a dozen places, and blood and urine formed a puddle around its feet. Its tail was tucked so far under its legs that Arrow at first thought it had been cut off.

The man peered at Thraxis, swaying slightly, and Arrow realized that he was drunk. “What business is it of yours, foreigner?” he spat.

“Amuth, don’t,” pleaded one of the market women who sat on a nearby carpet, her wares spread about her. “He’s one of the sorcerers!”

Amuth, however, was clearly too drunk to be mindful of his own safety. “I don’t care who you are,” he slurred at Thraxis. “Go away and leave me alone.”

Thraxis’ eyes blazed with a fury Arrow had only seen in him once before. Then, she had been honestly worried that he would break his vows and kill the man who had angered him. “You will not touch that animal again.”

“It’s my property—I’ll do whatever I want! Worthless cur,” he added and aimed another savage blow at it with the switch.

Before the blow could land, the switch twisted suddenly in his grip. Amuth screamed in shock and flung it away. A snake the color of the sand slithered away into a crack in a wall.

“Sorcerer!” he shrieked, as if he had only just realized the identity of the man he was arguing with. He looked about frantically, but if he had expected the other denizens of the market to come to his aid, he was mistaken.

Thraxis took a step towards him, towering over the shorter Amuth. “You will go from here,” he said, his voice soft but cold as the heart of a *v’juga*. “And you will never mistreat another living creature, or else I will know, and you will spend the rest of your days as a cur yourself.”

Amuth blanched and stumbled backwards. When Thraxis made no move to pursue him, he turned on his heel and fled, quickly disappearing into the warren of buildings around them.

“Would you?” Arrow asked, hooking her thumbs into her belt now that the danger was past. “Know if he did anything, I mean.”

“No,” Thraxis admitted. “But he certainly doesn’t know that.”

Going down on his knees in the dusty street, he stretched one hand out towards the terrified puppy. It whined pathetically, flattened its belly against the ground, and licked his fingers in a desperate gesture of appeasement.

“That,” Arrow said, “is the ugliest dog I’ve ever seen.”

Indeed, the puppy probably wouldn’t have been the pick of its litter even on a good day. Its eyes were mismatched, one blue and one brown. Its fur—what little hadn’t been eaten away by mange, that is—fluctuated between dark gray and muddy brown, tipped with silver. From the size of its paws, she guessed that it would become a large, long-legged animal—if it lived. A quick check underneath its nearly-hairless tail revealed that it was a female.

Thraxis frowned in annoyance. “She isn’t ugly,” he said. “Just, um, dirty.” When he reached out and gently caught the puppy by the scruff of its neck, a battalion of fleas leapt off in all directions, including onto him.

Thraxis sighed and tucked the cowering animal between his arm and chest, apparently resigned to sharing its parasites for the moment. “I suppose we’d best get her cleaned up, then.”

* * * *

On the way back to the Sanctum, Thraxis cast a spell to rid both himself and the puppy of the fleas by suddenly convincing the insects that they weren’t sitting on anything edible after all. Once they hopped away to find better hosts, he turned his attention to the puppy’s wounds, trusting Arrow to keep watch while he descended into a light healing trance. Between his rage over what had been done to her and the puppy’s own attempts to lick his face, it was not easy to find the composure necessary to work magic. But at least he managed to ease most of her discomfort and tend the more serious threats to her health.

“I think we should wash her,” Arrow suggested when they neared the Sanctum. Wrinkling his nose at the smell coming from the puppy, Thraxis heartily agreed.

Although many of the living quarters of the Sanctum were equipped with spouts that magically delivered heated water whenever one wanted to wash, there was also a single, large bathing room that could be used by anyone. Three round, placid pools reflected the white plaster of the ceiling. One contained cold water, the second warm, and the third steaming hot.

Shoving the sleeves of his robe to his elbows, Thraxis set about trying to wet down the puppy and work a lavender-scented soap over its skin and fur. The puppy objected strenuously to this treatment, flinging water and soap everywhere. One of Thraxis’ sleeves slid back down off his elbow and promptly became thoroughly soaked.

Arrow sat cross-legged by the pool, grinning broadly at the sight. “You know, you could do something useful,” he told her pointedly.

“But this is much more entertaining.”

“I’m so glad.” The puppy flung soap in his face, making him sputter.

Arrow laughed. “All right,” she relented, leaning over the pool with him to hold the animal firmly while he tried to clean off layers of dried blood and filth. By the time they were done, they were both soaked and laughing too hard to speak.

“Lady of Beasts, we’re pathetic,” Arrow managed at last. She flicked soap from her hair. “We’re going to need baths after this.”

Back on dry ground, the puppy toddled a few feet, stopped, and shook herself dry, spraying them both with water.

Thraxis eyed the creature regretfully. “Gods, what a mess,” he said.

“That she is.” Arrow pulled her foot out of reach as the puppy began to gnaw at her boot. “She’ll need to be fed. And trained. And cared for.”

“Does she need milk?”

“She looks big enough to eat on her own, though not by much.” Arrow peeled back one side of the puppy’s muzzle to expose the small teeth. Wagging her tail wildly, the puppy turned her efforts to chewing on Arrow’s finger. “I’ll try to find some food for her.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Anarete coldly.

Startled, Thraxis glanced up and saw the Prima standing at the doorway to the bathing room. Behind her he caught a glimpse of Viabold, along with some of the Sanctum’s mages, whose names he didn’t yet know. Acutely aware of the wet and bedraggled state of his robes, Thraxis rose to his feet and faced

them.

“The mayor of Djoser has just left,” Anarete said, striding into the room. Her silver eyes swept the scene before her, and Thraxis saw contempt flare in their depths. “He claims that you assaulted one of his people.”

“I did no such thing!” Thraxis exclaimed indignantly.

“He also said that you were seen to steal the man’s property.”

“He was going to beat her to death!”

“That was not your concern!” Anarete glared at him furiously. “Clearly, your time away from the Sanctum has made you forgetful. You are Athraskani. We hold ourselves apart from the world. We do not interfere.”

He drew in a ragged breath for calm. “We also Vow to do no harm.”

“That has nothing to do with this matter.”

“Of course it does!” he exploded. “Gods, you sound like the Black Council! We don’t do harm by our own hands, but we allow it to be done nonetheless! When Balthazar went rogue, our people did nothing—*nothing!* They would not even have sent me—when Vilhardouin gave me the choice to go, she never thought I would actually take it!”

Anarete’s eyes narrowed warningly. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that the absence of doing evil isn’t the same thing as doing good. Standing by passively and watching the world fall apart around you isn’t abstaining from doing harm—it is abetting those who would destroy everything. If I had allowed that man to kill this animal in cruelty, I would have been as responsible for her death as he was.”

Silence followed his outburst. Realizing that he had probably sounded foolish, Thraxis felt his face start to burn, but he forced himself to face Anarete nonetheless.

“Forget these mad notions, Thraxis,” she said. Her mouth was tight with anger. “Vilhardouin has already threatened to declare you apostate. If you are still spouting this heretical nonsense by the time the Black Council arrives, you will suffer for it—as will the rest of us.”

“There’s no reason for them to punish you for anything other than what you have already done,” he said, trying to remain reasonable.

“If I allow you to continue on as you have, Vilhardouin will blame me. I am the Prima of this Sanctum—it is my responsibility to make certain that all within it behave properly.”

“And what is proper, then?” he asked, knowing that he wouldn’t like the answer.

“To follow the Rules and the Vows as approved by the Black Council, not according to your own interpretation.” She changed tactics suddenly, spreading her hands in a gesture of appeasement. “I understand what has happened, Thraxis. You have been in strange places with strange companions. Not only that, but you had to face your own mortality. These things will naturally make a man question that which he once knew to be true. But it is a passing thing, not worth throwing away your position in society over. A year from now, you will look back on this moment and laugh at yourself.”

So saying, she folded her hands in her robes, turned, and left. Thraxis remained standing, staring after her, feeling a tight knot of anger grow in his chest. *Damn her!* he thought savagely. She dismissed everything he said, as if none of it mattered, as if it was, in her words, “a passing thing.”

But what else did I expect?

Viabold wandered up and clapped him on the arm. “Arguing philosophy will never get you anywhere, lad,” he counseled. Bending down, he scratched the puppy thoughtfully on the head. “Dear heavens—that’s the ugliest dog I’ve ever seen.”

* * * *

That evening, there came a soft knock on the door to their chamber. Thraxis was perched on the balustrade of their balcony, staring grumpily out at the setting sun. The bell had rung to summon all to the evening meditation, but he had foregone joining the rest, instead seeking solace in his own thoughts. Arrow had not mentioned his lapse, instead devoting herself to practicing various maneuvers with her sword. Another warrior would have put the draperies in serious jeopardy in such a small space, but

Arrow was far too quick and graceful to make such a mistake. Despite the martial nature of her moves, Thraxis found watching her oddly soothing.

When the knock came, she lowered her sword and glanced at him. Thraxis shrugged, and she went to open the door. Jumica stood on the other side, looking a bit taken aback to be greeted by someone holding a weapon.

"I, ah, would like to speak with my son in private," she said hesitantly, as if she thought Arrow might suddenly decide to lop off her head.

Arrow sheathed her blade and glanced over her shoulder. Thraxis contemplated refusing Jumica's request and putting her through the ordeal of trying to conduct a polite conversation while remaining as far away as possible from her barbaric daughter-in-law. But instead he only said, "Do you mind, love?"

Arrow shook her head. "No. I'll go check on the cousins."

Once she had left, Jumica hesitantly crossed the room to the balcony. The puppy toddled after her, mismatched eyes staring up with a mix of eagerness and fear, her little tail wagging furiously.

"She meant the horses, correct?" Jumica asked uncertainly.

Thraxis had to suppress a smile at the look on his mother's face. "Yes."

"Ah." She ran a pale hand over the polished stone balustrade, then turned to look at him with her silver-white eyes. "Were you this troublesome for Vilhardouin?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I see. You remind me of Thiacene, you know. She's very headstrong as well."

"And you aren't?"

"No." The expression on her face was suddenly one of pain. "No, I'm not. We didn't forget about you, you know, after we came here. We had reports from friends who still lived at the Sanctum Majoris. When I...when I heard that you were dying, I asked for permission to return, so that I could see you one last time. The Black Council denied my petition. But I think that, in my place, you would have gone anyway."

"But you had the courage to keep Thiacene's power a secret," he pointed out.

"Courage—or selfishness?" Jumica shook her head, cutting off any response. "It doesn't matter."

"I'm sorry," he said at last, because he didn't know what else to say. "I'm not what you expected, am I?"

The setting sun touched her pale hair, dying it red, then gold. "No. It wasn't fair of me to have any expectations of you. But I thought...I don't know. I thought that you would be cultivated, cosmopolitan. That you would be next in line to join the Black Council."

"And instead I come riding up on a horse like a barbarian and start arguing with Anarete," he said with a smile. To his surprise, he didn't feel any bitterness over Jumica's unrealistic views of him.

She laughed weakly. "Not to mention the shaved head. And that woman! Tell me truthfully, Thraxis—why did you marry her? I'm sure you could have had your pick of Athraskani women."

He stiffened, old pain flaring involuntarily in his heart. "Oh, yes, I could have had my pick of Athraskani women whose only interest in me was to bear a powerful child," he said coldly. "A child that I would not be expected to show any interest in. You might be able to do that, Jumica—but I could not."

"We didn't want to leave you!"

"But you knew—you had to have known—that they would ultimately take me away from you." He slid off the balustrade and faced her, feeling something harden deep inside him. "You and Cyaraxes allowed yourselves to be bred like cattle. And like cattle, you did nothing when the herdsmen came to take your offspring for sacrifice."

Tears flashed in her eyes. "That isn't true. That was why we lied about Thiacene—we couldn't stand to lose her the way we had lost you."

"So you loved her more? Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"We didn't!"

She turned away, wiping tears from her face. With a sigh, he leaned back against the balustrade, rubbing his temples with his fingers. The puppy came over and curled around his feet.

"I'm sorry," he said at length.

“No. Don’t be. I deserve everything you said, and more. So you married the woman to keep the Black Council at bay, because any children she bears you will be worthless to them, the magic too far diluted.”

Thraxis bit his lip. Jumica didn’t know that Arrow was barren, thanks to the transformation she had undergone to make her a berserker. “No,” he said quietly, levelly. “I married her because I love her. She is my *amria*.”

Jumica gave him an odd look. “I’ve read the word, but I’ve never met anyone who admitted to believing Kahven’s philosophy.”

“I’m just full of surprises.”

“Indeed.” Her hands knotted together nervously. “I should go. But...I would like the opportunity to get to know my son as he is, rather than as I imagined him to be.”

Thraxis grinned. “No matter how odd he may be?”

“Yes.” Jumica made a step towards him, then stopped when she noticed the puppy. “Oh, Thraxis, that really is the ugliest—”

“I know, I know! She isn’t ugly! In fact, I’m naming her Beautiful Girl,” he added defiantly.

“I see that blind hope is one of your virtues as well,” Jumica said with a wry smile. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

* * * *

Thraxis lay in bed, his left arm stretched out over the coverlet . The tisane that Xertrevar had given him made him feel as though he floated a few inches off the bed, far away from any pain. The room’s single window was unshuttered, and the scents of the herb garden blew in on the breeze: chamomile, lavender, and thyme. A bird sang nearby, and from farther off came the shouts and laughter of children, made faint by distance.

Vilhardouin’s voice came from the outer room . “How is he?”

“Fine,” Xertrevar answered . The monotonous scrape of pestle against mortar underscored his words. “From what I’ve been told, he got into an argument with one of the other boys and fell down the stairs. His left arm was broken in three places. He could have healed it himself, but I think the pain and shock scared him too badly. I gave him something for the discomfort and set the bones myself. The arm should be fine if he doesn’t do anything strenuous with it for the next few days.”

“I see .” There came the tap of sandals on stone, and a shadow appeared in the doorway connecting the two rooms. “Are you awake?”

“Yes, Vilhardouin,” he answered, half wishing that he could have gotten away with pretending to sleep . But she would have known.

“I expected better from you . Brawling like some sort of barbarian...”

He stared at the pattern the shadows made on the ceiling . “I’m sorry.”

“I won’t have a repeat of this . You could have been badly injured. From now on, you will not be required to join the other youths in any of the physical games or the kai’ten. After your classes, you will devote yourself to your studies.”

The relief he felt was acute . “Thank you, Vilhardouin.”

After she had left, he lay awake for a long time, remembering the taunts the other children had flung at him . They hated him because the Black Council had singled him out. Why that would inspire envy in anyone, he couldn’t imagine—did they want to be taken away from their parents? Did they want to have to do everything perfectly the first time, or else face damning scorn? If he could have worked a spell that would have allowed him to change places with his tormentors, he would have done so in an instant.

But of course, there was no magic that could do that .

So what good is it? he wondered in despair. What good is magic at all?

Chapter Four: Heretics

The next morning, Arrow and Thraxis walked quietly in the Sanctum garden, holding hands. At their feet, Beautiful Girl rooted under every bush and rock. An ibis soared overhead, on its way to the great river nearby, and from far off sounded the bellow of a hippopotamus. The scent of herbs perfumed the air, along with the lotus blossoms growing in a small ornamental pool.

“Are you going back to the ruins today?” Arrow asked.

Thraxis let go of her hand to drape his arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer. “No. Anarete ordered that all of the notes and translations that have been made so far should be left for me in our quarters. I’ll go over those today, perhaps tomorrow as well. But I’ll want to compare them with the originals at the ruins, in case mistakes have been made.”

There came the crunch of footsteps on the marble-chip path behind them. Glancing over his shoulder, Thraxis saw a small group of about six of the younger Athraskani approaching. For the most part, their robes and beaded hair declared them to be lesser powers: white, green, and blue. They came to a halt several feet away, all looking rather uncertain. One or two shuffled their feet uncomfortably.

“Yes?” Thraxis asked, thinking that they looked willing to stand there until nightfall without gathering the courage to say anything.

Someone poked the only red robe among them in the back. She shot a hard look over her shoulder, but took a step forward nonetheless. Bowing so that her braids hid most of her face, she said, “I am called Kalika, um, sir. We heard you yesterday, when you were talking to Anarete.”

His mouth twitched wryly. “When Anarete was yelling at me, you mean.”

“You said some things to her that I—that we—thought were interesting. We were, um, wondering if you would talk to us about them.”

Thraxis exchanged a startled glance with Arrow. “What things?”

“About how we shouldn’t use our Vows as an excuse to turn our backs on the world.” Kalika raised her head, a gleam of defiance in her golden eyes.

Suddenly nervous, Thraxis cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Well...there isn’t that much to say...that is, I’ve thought a lot about it, but I never really considered talking to anyone else except Arrow.”

The six youths all looked at Arrow as if she had been the recipient of some miracle. Thraxis felt her body shake against his, and realized that she was trying to hold in laughter.

“And, you know, Arrow suggested it to me in the first place,” he added truthfully.

“Oh no.” She pulled away from him with a grin for his discomfiture. “You got yourself into this.”

With a helpless look at the group of young Athraskani, he spread his hands apart. “Well...what did you want to know?”

* * * *

“You know, Anarete won’t like it if she finds out that you’re spreading your...what did she call it? Heretical nonsense?”

Thraxis looked up from the pile of scrolls in front of him. The translations had been magically burned into long rolls of papyrus, so that the texts were at least clean and clear, but hours of staring at the marks had left him with a cramp in his neck and the beginnings of a niggling headache. With a shock he realized that the sun had already set, and the only illumination in the room came from the glowing ball of light he had conjured over the table.

Viabold sat on the other side of the desk, his hands folded across his belly. Shelves of neatly filed scrolls and books spread away from them in all directions, disappearing into darkness. The smell of dust and age hung heavy in the air.

Thraxis frowned at the scroll in front of him, picked up a slender pottery stylus, and used its tip to guide the flow of power into the papyrus as he marked a correction. Ignoring Viabold for the moment, he

compared his reading against the line of symbols above, which had been magically copied from the stones of the ruins. Satisfied, he set the scroll and stylus aside.

"I'm not 'spreading' anything," he said, rubbing at his eyes. His stomach growled, and he realized that he had missed dinner.

"What do you call it then?" Viabold asked.

"I call it answering questions. I could be wrong, but I was never informed that there was a stricture against curiosity, at least."

"Don't be so sure." Viabold leaned across the table, and the look in his eyes was uncharacteristically grave. "Listen, lad, you know I've had my share of problems with the Black Council. They didn't approve of me enjoying life, and I didn't approve of them being so prudish. But I'm just a blue robe—they could send me off where I would be out of their sight, and it didn't matter. You don't have that option."

"What do you want me to do, then? Grow back my hair? Throw Beautiful Girl out to starve alone? Tell Arrow to go back to the Skald and marry Bird Bones Broken?"

"Have you thought about it?"

"You can't be serious."

Viabold toyed absently with a thin ribbon used to bind one of the scrolls. The runes of a preservation spell had been woven into its length, to protect the precious papyrus against the ravages of fire, mice, water, and time. "I just want you to stop and think about what you're doing. About what will happen once the Black Council shows up. You can defy and ignore Anarete—but the Black Council won't tolerate it. If you continue on as you have, then you had best be prepared to fight them. And perhaps lose. If you decide that it isn't worth it, then you have to think about the consequences of that, too."

Thraxis stood up sharply, knocking his chair over. "I won't go back to the Sanctum Majoris."

"Then what *will* you do? Convince them to leave you here? Would you be happy here? Would Arrow? Or will you try to escape and go back to the Skald? Do you *really* want to spend the rest of your life on horseback, wandering the steppes?"

Thraxis carefully righted his chair and sank back into it. "I don't know."

"They aren't just going to let you go, Thraxis. You know that. You're lying to yourself if you think any different."

He sighed and put his head in his hands. "I know. I don't know what I'm going to do, Viabold. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Not really. Actually, I was rather hoping that you had a plan, and it just *looked* like you were making it up as you went along."

Thraxis shot him an annoyed glare. "I do know that I'm not just going to abandon everything I believe in, everything I learned on our journey, because the Black Council doesn't like it. So, yes, if some of the Athraskani want to hear my 'heresy' as you put it, then I will answer their questions as best I may. And I'll encourage them to seek out their own answers."

Viabold took a deep breath, and then let it out. "You're a dangerous man, my friend."

"What do you mean?"

But Viabold only shook his head. "It doesn't matter. You'll learn soon enough."

* * * *

Arrow slid from Nightwing's back and took in her surroundings. It was early morning, and the air had not yet become unbearably hot. She had ridden away from the Sanctum, out into the desert and a valley ringed about by low, weathered cliffs. The ground here was packed hard beneath a thin layer of loose shale and provided better footing than the rolling dunes beyond.

Beautiful Girl whined from inside a basket strapped to Nightwing's saddle. Pulling the puppy out of her carrier, Arrow turned her loose to investigate her surroundings. Nightwing nosed half-heartedly at a scrawny plant that had somehow managed to survive the wind and the dryness long enough to put out a few withered leaves.

“Sorry, cousin,” Arrow said, patting the horse’s neck affectionately. “There’s not much for you in this barren land. Not much for either of us.”

Leaving the horse to find whatever vegetation he could, Arrow climbed up a low rise. Once there, she launched into a slow *kai’ten*, the meditative exercise favored by the Athraskani. After her muscles were loose and warmed up, she drew her sword and went into a series of her own exercises, meant to hone her skill through repetition.

As she practiced a difficult maneuver, Arrow saw Nightwing’s head suddenly come up, ears perked forward. *There’s someone else here.*

Her heart sped up, easily passing the limits of a normal human, and she had to force herself to keep her movements slow and steady. Pretending that she had noticed nothing, she gradually worked her way in the direction that Nightwing was looking. Stealing a glance as she swung her sword through a long arc, she noted the pile of rocks that could be the interloper’s only possible hiding place. Taking a deep breath and expelling it to prepare herself, she abruptly broke off her practice and rushed the rock fall.

A normal human would have seen nothing but a blur, although to her own perceptions Arrow moved at no great speed. She crossed the distance in a few strides, cleared the high rocks in a single leap, and came down on a small, huddled figure that was only just beginning to react. As they rolled across the ground, Arrow seized a handful of black robes, jerked them up, and set the edge of her sword to a white throat.

“That was *amazing!*” Thiacene exclaimed.

Startled, Arrow let go of Thiacene’s robes and dropped her sword. As the shock passed, her heartbeat dropped back towards normal, and the world regained its usual perspective. “What are you doing here?” she demanded as soon as she could.

Thiacene was beaming, as if she hadn’t almost had her foolish head cut off. “I followed you. That move was *incredible!* How did you do it? How did you know I was here?”

Arrow sat back on her haunches. Logically, there was no reason that the Athraskani shouldn’t know what Balthazar had done to her, but she nonetheless felt reluctant to confess what had once been a closely guarded secret. “Nightwing smelled you,” she said, answering the last question first. “And that’s all I’ll say until you tell me why you were spying on me.”

“I wasn’t spying.” Thiacene picked herself up, dusted off her robes, and then sat down on the nearest rock. “I was curious, that’s all. And I was afraid that you wouldn’t let me come with you if I asked.”

“You were right,” Arrow said.

The corners of Thiacene’s mouth drooped. “I know. I tried to ask Mother and Father about you, but they said I didn’t need to know. They don’t tell me *anything.*”

Some of Thiacene’s petulance was simply that found among many young people. But beneath it, Arrow heard an undercurrent of anger and betrayal. Taking a closer look at the young woman, Arrow noted that she was now dressed in black robes rather than red. She had been told what she really was—had been told that her parents and her chieftainess had been lying to her for her entire life.

Arrow sighed. Thiacene was in a difficult position, one that wasn’t likely to become any easier when the Black Council arrived. Her loyalty to her parents would be sorely tested. Her world had changed unexpectedly, and she did not feel at all certain of her own place in it. That, at least, Arrow understood very well.

“Among my people, you would be old enough to be a woman with her own household,” Arrow said at last.

Thiacene’s eyes brightened. “Really?”

“Yes. You would be responsible for yourself and your children.”

“Did you have your own household when you were my age?”

“No. I was the Champion of my clan, and was not expected to do the normal things. I still lived with my granduncle.” Arrow pushed away the spark of grief and homesickness that the memories engendered. “But I had won my first Challenge by then.”

“Really? How?”

Arrow smiled slightly. “How do you think? I killed my opponent, of course.”

Thiacene’s face paled a little, but the interest in her eyes didn’t turn to disgust. “Was he...was he fifteen, too?”

“No. He was much older and more experienced.” Arrow drew her knees up and wrapped her hands around her ankles. “But I had prepared my entire life for that moment.”

“Did you...did you do what you did to me? Move really fast?”

“No.” Again, a memory full of pain and lingering shame. “No, that came later. One of your own people altered me, so that I could win a dangerous Challenge. Balthazar.”

“The rogue,” Thiacene breathed in awe. “But...he tried to kill Thraxis.”

“I didn’t know Thraxis then.”

“Oh. But—”

“Thiacene, if you only want to hear stories about my life, you could have come to me at the Sanctum, where we wouldn’t have to sit out in the sun. Why did you follow me here?”

Thiacene hesitated and looked down at her hands. “I...do you promise not to tell anyone?”

“I promise.”

“I want you to teach me how to do what you do. How to use the sword. How to fight.”

Arrow sat in silence, her heart threatening to speed up again. Lady of Beasts! If Anarete thought Thraxis was treading on dangerous ground...

“I don’t think your parents, or your brother—or anyone—would approve,” she managed.

Thiacene looked up, her face set in an expression of defiance. “I don’t care. I want to *learn*. I’ve always been taught that knowledge and truth were the most valuable things in the world, that we should devote our lives to their pursuit. That we should never be afraid of the truth.”

“You also took a Vow.”

“I don’t need a reminder of that! Had you ever killed anyone before your first Challenge?”

“No.”

“But you had spent your life up until that point learning how to do it, right? Just because you know how to do something doesn’t mean that you *have* to apply that knowledge.”

A neat trap. Thraxis would have been proud of his sister. “But knowing how to do something makes it easier to actually do it,” Arrow pointed out. “And it increases the temptation.”

Thiacene rose to her feet, a black silhouette against the blue sky. “But I already know how to kill with my magic,” she said softly. “We all do, at least in theory. How could it be easier to kill with a sword or a bow than with a spell?”

Arrow remembered all the deadly enchantments that Balthazar had used. They had slaughtered great numbers of warriors, men who’d had no opportunity to fight back. It had not truly occurred to her until that moment that all Athraskani, especially the most powerful, must feel the temptation to do the same thing. She wondered suddenly how many of them gave into it, and if they accounted for the awe and terror that the townspeople, both here and in the Empire, displayed towards the all wizards.

“All right,” she said at last. “But you must not breathe a word of this to anyone. I don’t have to tell you what would happen to me if anyone found out. At the least, they’d send me away. And Thraxis would be furious.”

“I know.” Thiacene’s young face was suddenly grim. “They kept a secret from me for fifteen years. Surely I can do the same to them.”

* * * *

Magical light illuminated the huge meditation hall only slightly, leaving most of it shrouded in darkness and mystery . For the most part, the stone symbols of the gods reflected the light only dully from their niches. But the central symbol—the single, stylized feather representing Truth—was bathed in a slender column of white radiance. Sandalwood incense scented the air, streaming out of censurs swung slowly by robed figures. Except for the shuffle of sandals on stone and the occasional rustle of a robe, the enormous hall was silent.

Thraxis stood among the other members of his age group, his heart pounding . Although he

had been in the meditation hall many times before, tonight the dim lighting and smoke made it seem strange and mysterious. He restrained the urge to stand on his tiptoes and peer around, reminding himself that this was a solemn occasion.

Three black-robed figures walked slowly to the front of the room . Two stood off to either side, while the third took up position directly before the symbol of Truth. She raised her hands, and even the smallest sounds ceased.

“Tonight, the longest night of the year, we have gathered,” Vilhardouin said, the words an ancient ritual spoken hundreds of times before . “All Athraskani within these walls have come together, to witness the turning of the year. As the sun grows in strength from this night on, so grows the strength of the young among us.”

She lowered her arms and looked towards the gathered novices . “It has been commanded that all those who saw their tenth winter during the old year should present themselves here. Have they come?”

“We have come,” the novices murmured, and Thraxis heard several voices break with excitement and fear .

“Tonight you will set aside your status as novices and be initiated into the Athraskani order . I call upon Novitiate Thraxis to come before me.”

Thraxis’ heart surged into his throat, and nervousness gripped his belly . Somehow, though, he managed to walk more-or-less steadily from his place among the other novices until he stood before Vilhardouin. The other two members of the Black Council came forward and stripped off his brown robe, so that he was clad only in the unbound hair that brushed gently against the backs of his knees.

“Novitiate, will you accept the strictures that the Athraskani put upon you?”

“I will .”

“Will you live according to the Vows and the Rules?”

“I will .”

“Then prepare yourself for the initiation .”

As he had been instructed beforehand, Thraxis stretched face-down on the floor, abasing himself to indicate his willingness to submit to the strictures which would guide his life from that day forward . The stone was cold, but he whispered a quick spell to warm it against his flesh. Only levitating could remove the discomfort of the hard surface, but such an obvious display would not be tolerated at this moment.

“Speak to me your Vows,” Vilhardouin ordered .

He took a deep breath, offered a prayer to the watching gods that he could remember them all in the correct order, and launched into the recitation . “Firstly, I vow to do no harm,” he said, his lips brushing the smooth stone floor. “Secondly, I vow to seek knowledge in all its forms. Thirdly, I vow obedience to the Black Council and to those greater than I, except wherein it would lead to evil or to the breaking of another vow. Fourthly, I vow to surrender all possessions to the Sanctum and to take only that which is given to me by the whole. Lastly, I vow to do no harm.”

“Your vows are accepted,” Vilhardouin declared . Thraxis rose to his feet, legs shaking. The other two members of the Black Council brought a black robe to him, which they helped him don before braiding his hair in accordance with his new rank. When they were done, he stepped aside and waited for the rest of the novices to pass through the ceremony.

After the final child had been dressed and tended, Vilhardouin called upon all initiates to renew their dedication to their vows . Once the last voices had faded, she read the Rules to instruct the new initiates and remind the old ones. “I will speak no falsehood. I will take no more than a single glass of wine a day, and avoid intoxication. I will perform the work allotted me without complaint. I will...”

It was almost dawn before the ceremony was complete and the new initiates were allowed to return to their quarters . Sitting alone in his tiny cell, Thraxis stared out the window at the sunrise and tried not to cry.

For weeks he had hoped...had dreamed...that his parents might come see him on this most important of days . After five years of their absence, he no longer expected them to suddenly reappear, but surely they could have at least sent word. Even a written message of congratulations would have been better than this silence.

But of course they had not come, had not sent word . They didn't love him anymore.

Biting his lip hard, he strove to focus . He might not have his parents, might not have any real friends, but at last he did have something outside of himself. He would dedicate his life to upholding the Vows. He would be above reproach in all his actions. Then everyone, including his parents, would see that he didn't need them after all.

Chapter Five: Distance

For the next few weeks, the Sanctum was a bustle of activity. Even the Black Council could not travel any faster than the vagaries of the roads and seas allowed, but the season was right for such voyages, and there was not as much time until their arrival as most of the Athraskani would have liked.

Thraxis spent most of his days away from the Sanctum at the nearby ruins, meticulously going over the symbols that had been carved into the stone so long ago. Many of them were half-obsured from the constant action of wind and sand. Sometimes, a sentence would end abruptly at the edge of a block, and the next stone could not be found to complete it.

Despite its frustrations, however, Thraxis seemed to truly enjoy the work. He often came back in the evening and spent hours discussing what he had discovered with his fellow Athraskani. The first few times, Arrow tried to be a part of the conversation, but felt hideously out of place and so stayed away afterwards. Staring at the lengths of papyrus with their strange markings, she wished that she could understand this odd magic. But the Skald did not even write down their own tongue, let alone that of others.

When Thraxis wasn't occupied with his translations, the youths who had approached him earlier came to him discreetly, full of questions about the world outside and what he thought of it. Before too long, it began to seem as though Thraxis had time for everyone other than his wife.

It's only temporary, Arrow told herself. His people need him for now . Once this work is done, we'll leave, and things will go back to the way they were .

Left to her own devices, Arrow explored the area around the Sanctum. It was a wild land and a bitter one, so different from the endless sea of grass that she had grown up in. Beautiful Girl accompanied her on every journey. Given good food and treatment, her coat grew back in quickly, making her look a little less strange. Her legs got longer, and her body gained and then lost its baby fat. Soon Arrow could see the large, lean hunter that she would someday be.

When not exploring, Arrow met secretly with Thiacene. She started the young woman with a staff, a weapon she had already taught Thraxis to use. At first, she hoped that Thiacene would be content with learning only to defend herself, but soon came to realize that her sister-by-marriage was determined to master the sword and bow as well.

Ironically, what worried her the most was that Thiacene had a natural talent for the weapons. Although she would never reach the level of proficiency possessed by a Champion, who after all trained steadily from birth, with enough time she would be able to hold her own against most normal warriors. Except that she wouldn't—couldn't—continue her training for that long.

And when Arrow left, would Thiacene be content to forget everything she had learned? Or would the hunger that showed in her eyes remain, burning her from within until she gave herself away with some word or deed? And what would become of her then?

* * * *

One morning, when Arrow was saddling Stalker, she heard the sound of footsteps approaching the corral. Curious, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Kefre there, leaning casually against the fence. A

smile creased his dark face, and a long bow hung over his shoulder.

“Hello, pretty lady,” he said. “I’m going hunting. Join me?”

Arrow paused for an instant before answering. Part of her hesitation came from the fact that she had been feeling uncharacteristically tired over the last few days, even though she had been sleeping well enough. The other part came from the fact that she knew Thraxis wouldn’t be all that happy if she spent the day in the company of the gorgeous Kefre.

If he doesn’t want me spending time with Kefre, then he should be here himself, she thought in annoyance.

“I’d love to,” she said. Very soon, she was mounted on Stalker, with Nightwing trailing behind on a lead. Kefre, however, traveled in a light chariot pulled by a single horse that was much smaller than either of Arrow’s animals. Arrow tried not to look askance at the sacrilege of putting a horse in the traces—she had long ago learned that it was a common thing outside of the steppes.

“I knew you were a huntress,” Kefre said once they were away from the Sanctum. The sun had risen over the river, and the land all about them was gold and bronze.

“The Athraskani don’t mind your hunts?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I am their servant, but I am a free man. I have no duties today, so what I do is my own business. What of your husband?”

“I don’t need his permission to do what I want.”

His smile bloomed. “You are an unusual woman, pretty one. That husband of yours doesn’t appreciate you. If you were mine, I wouldn’t spend all day and night with my nose stuck in books or rubbing against old stones.”

She smiled back at his bantering tone. “Oh, you wouldn’t, huh?”

“Of course not. You will forgive me for saying so, I hope, but these Athraskani are not real men! They do not fight, they do not hunt—bah!”

“Why do you serve them, then?”

“It’s easy work, and the pay is very good. Many thought me mad when I said I was going to serve the sorcerers. But I was not afraid of them.” He paused and glanced at her sidelong. “Did your family marry you off, then?”

“No. Thraxis was my choice.”

“I don’t understand, pretty lady. You do not seem suited for one another.”

She shrugged uncomfortably, not liking this reminder of her own thoughts as of late. “I know. There were many in my clan who didn’t understand what I saw in Thraxis. But in the end everyone saw his courage, not just me. He has a lion’s heart.”

“If you say so,” Kefre said, giving her a skeptical look.

At that moment, a rabbit broke cover. With a wild whoop, Kefre slapped the reins against his horse’s flanks. “Now you will see why my homeland is called the Land of the Bow!” he shouted, drawing his bow and fitting an arrow even as the chariot raced forward.

Arrow smiled and let him have the kill, knowing that she could have taken down the rabbit before Kefre had even seen it move. They continued on, hugging the fertile land on the edge of the river, until they had taken several birds and rabbits. Kefre even managed to spear a fish in the shallow water. As the sun rose higher and the day grew hotter, they rested beneath the trees, cooking part of their catch on a spit over a small fire. Kefre flirted with her outrageously, which pleased her more than she had thought it might. Until Bird Bones, no one among the Skald had seriously considered her a potential wife due to her status as Champion, and she was unused to such flattery and attention from anyone but Thraxis. *And even that has been rare of late.*

Only one thing marred the afternoon. While the fish was cooking, Arrow leaned close to the fire, breathing in the aroma. One moment, everything was fine. Then, without warning, her stomach twisted violently. Startled, she barely managed to scramble away before nausea overtook her altogether, and she fell to the ground and vomited.

“Are you ill?” asked Kefre worriedly. He stood up and moved towards her, then stopped, uncertain what to do. “Should I fetch one of the sorcerers?”

She shook her head. Going to the river, she used its water to wash her face and rinse her mouth. “I’m all right,” she said, a little shakily. “I just—I don’t know what happened.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Better.” She managed a smile. Nevertheless, the nausea did not leave her completely for some hours.

* * * *

Thraxis felt a thrill of excitement rush through him as he bent over the broken shard of pottery. Until now, he had concentrated on the great stone blocks of the ruins, certain that anything important would be inscribed on them. But, much to his disappointment, most of the translations so far had revealed nothing to help them locate Xaqqara. Oh, there was mention of the city, yes, but only vague references. For the most part, the carved symbols dealt with the conquests made by the ancient Athraskani. Many of the things he had read over the last few weeks had been distinctly unpleasant—the slaughter of entire villages of humans had apparently been of little consequence to his ancestors. And there were other things as well, tantalizing hints of forgotten spells that, perhaps fortunately, weren’t themselves inscribed on the stones for just anyone to read.

Throughout the ruins, constantly underfoot, had been small shards of broken pottery, some of them still with traces of writing on them. Expecting the usual things—spells to keep the water cool and fresh, or to defeat poison—Thraxis had paid little attention to them. Until that morning, that is, when he had seen a man on his way to the human tombs that lay near the Sanctum.

In an attempt to seem a little less barbaric, Thraxis had taken to riding in the cart with the other Athraskani. When he saw the man, he caught the attention of Kalika, who happened to be sitting by him. “That man—what is he carrying?”

She had glanced at the figure and away, uninterested. “A bit of broken pot. Why?”

“He was holding it out towards one of the tombs. Was it some kind of offering? It seems like a very strange thing to offer the dead.”

Kalika laughed in surprise. “No, of course it wasn’t an offering! It was a letter.”

“A letter?”

“Yes. The people here believe that the dead linger near their tombs. They often leave letters for them, asking for help in some matter.” She shrugged, as if to indicate her own lack of knowledge of such primitive superstitions.

“No, not that. I mean, a letter on a pot?”

“Of course,” she said, looking surprised that he didn’t know. He felt a brief blush of shame sting his cheeks, and forced himself to quell it. “They only use papyrus for very important things—it’s too expensive for them to waste. But there are pieces of broken pots all over the place. So they write everyday things on them. Letters, shopping lists, how many goats they’re going to trade for a boat—that sort of thing.”

Thraxis stared in the direction of the tombs, even though they and the man had already fallen out of sight behind the first line of dunes. “Do you think the ancients did the same thing?”

“I don’t know. What does it matter?”

He hadn’t answered her then, but as soon as they arrived at the ruins, he’d immediately reorganized everyone. Abandoning the public monoliths, he turned them to the private communications, and soon everyone was digging and sorting through piles of ancient pottery. Much of it had been further smashed by time, and very little remained that could still be read. But there was enough...just enough...

Very carefully, Thraxis used a breath of magic to flick away the last grains of sand from the shard, then lifted it in trembling fingers. The symbol for “Xaqqara” had caught his eye, and now he saw that it appeared several times. He read through once, carefully, half-afraid that wishful thinking had made him over-eager. Then he let out a wild yell of joy that drew looks from everyone.

“What is it?” shouted Kalika, scrambling down from her perch on a half-tumbled wall.

He held it out as everyone crowded around him. “It’s a letter,” he said triumphantly. “One of the men who lived here traveled to Xaqqara and sent a letter back to his children describing the journey! The

landmarks have changed, I'm sure—but there might be enough here for us to duplicate his route and find the city!"

Wild cheers and shrieks burst out all over. Someone pounded Thraxis on the back, and he felt himself grinning like an idiot. This was it—this was the key to finding Xaqqara and appeasing the Black Council, he knew it. He couldn't wait to tell Arrow!

* * * *

The sun had nearly slipped below the horizon by the time Arrow and Kefre returned. Its last rays painted the Sanctum's buildings in red, as if they had been washed in blood. As they rode past the building that held the chambers of the more important Athraskani, Arrow caught sight of Thraxis standing on their balcony and waved to him cheerily. She felt in a better mood than she had in weeks. Tonight she would convince Thraxis to put aside his scrolls for this one evening. Perhaps they could go down to the river—his magic would surely keep the dangerous animals away, and they could sport naked in the water and make love on the banks without anyone seeing.

"Good night, pretty lady," Kefre said as she dismounted. "I enjoyed our hunt. And if you decide to put aside that scrawny husband of yours, I hope you'll think of me."

She grinned and clasped his arm in friendship. He seemed surprised at the gesture—most likely it differed from his own customs—but returned it nonetheless. "I'm afraid that you'll have a long wait, my friend," she said.

"Such is the burden of hope." He bowed extravagantly, then clicked his tongue and guided his horse away into the night.

Her spirits light, Arrow tended the horses before heading for her quarters. Humming a war song under her breath, she leapt up the stairs two at a time and burst through the door into the room. Thraxis was standing at the balcony, his back very straight and his hands clenched on the balustrade. On the table behind him lay a single shard of pottery.

"So. You spent the day with Kefre," he said. His deep voice was low, calm, but there was an edge to it.

"Yes," she replied warily, her good mood draining away. "So?"

"What did you do?" Again, that false calm.

"We hunted rabbits. We talked. We ate lunch. Why?"

"Is that all?"

Her temper flared. "What are you asking me? No—what are you accusing me of?"

She saw in his eyes that he knew he'd made a mistake. "Nothing. Arrow, I—"

"No! What am I supposed to do, Thraxis? Just sit here in our quarters all day and wait, while you spend all your time poking about those damned ruins, looking for that evil city?"

"It isn't evil!" he snapped, anger sparking. "It's our heritage, just as the kurgans of your people were your heritage."

"And we let them lie in peace—we don't disturb them. We know better."

"This is different." He took a deep breath and visibly fought for calm. "Arrow, my love, please, let's not fight. I don't expect you to just sit here and wait for me. But...if you want friends can't you...I don't know, make friends with some of the women?"

"And do what?" she challenged coldly. "Weave cloth? Talk about babies? I'm a *Champion*, Thraxis. It's the only thing I know. Most of my friends—and there've been damned few of them—have been men for that very reason."

"You aren't a Champion anymore," he reminded her.

She held herself very still as her heart tried to race and her perceptions began to shift. How dare he? How could he?

"No," she said at last. "I'm not. I'm not anything at all, it would seem."

"Arrow—"

She ignored him, spinning on her heel and storming out the door. It closed behind her with a slam that was probably heard by everyone in the building.

About halfway down the stair, however, she came to a sudden halt. Another wave of nausea swept over her, this time accompanied by dizziness. Feeling irrationally close to tears, she sank down on the step and put her head in her hands.

“Arrow? Are you all right?”

Startled, she looked up and saw Viabold standing a few steps below her, his expression one of concern.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” She sighed and ran a hand through her tangled red hair. “Were you looking for Thraxis?”

“Yes. I’d heard about his big discovery today and wanted to congratulate him.”

“A big discovery?” she asked wistfully.

“Didn’t he tell you?”

“No. I came in. We argued. I left.”

“And ended up sitting here.”

“I felt dizzy.”

A frown of concern touched Viabold’s face, and he reached up and brushed a hand across her forehead. “Hmm. Any other symptoms?”

She shrugged uncomfortably. “I’ve just...been tired lately. And nauseated.”

He closed one hand around her wrist. “Will you come to the herbarium with me?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing—”

“Arrow, you’re surrounded by healers. Take advantage of it.”

With a chuckle, she flung her hands up in defeat. “All right then. If it will make you happy.”

“It will.”

Sobered by his uncharacteristic seriousness, she followed him out into the desert night. The herbarium was a small building by the garden and filled with the scents of fresh herbs. As they entered, Viabold spoke a single word and touched a small glass ball hanging from the ceiling. In moments, a soft yellow light filled the room, illuminating bunches of drying herbs hanging from the rafters. A long worktable occupied most of one wall, its surface cluttered with bottles, mortars and pestles, and the other tools of the herbalist’s trade.

“I’ve been working with Lyata, the Sanctum’s herbalist,” he explained as he cleared a space on the table. “She won’t mind if we use the room for some privacy.”

At Viabold’s direction, Arrow sat on the table so that they were at eye level. Viabold asked her no more questions, only placed one hand on her forehead and descended into a healing trance. With nothing else to do, Arrow let her eyes roam about the room, wondering what some of the strange plants were. With the exception of treating wounds taken during battle, she knew little about healing. And although disease had occasionally stalked the Red Feather camps during her youth, she herself had never fallen sick before. Perhaps it was the desert climate making her ill.

When Viabold dropped his hand the expression on his face was one of confusion. Wondering if this was good or bad, Arrow asked, “So? What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing. That is, nothing is *wrong*.”

She frowned, not understanding his evasion. “So why have I been feeling odd lately?”

He hesitated again, then laid his hand over hers. “I’m not sure how to tell you this. It’s unexpected, to say the least. Arrow...you’re with child.”

* * * *

Night hung over the gardens of the Sanctum Majoris . Magical light bloomed from the windows cut in the cliff high overhead, as if the Athraskani within sought to add stars to the firmament. Crickets and toads sang their mating songs from the spring foliage, filling the air with their strident sound.

“Look, there’s Icene,” Cynixia said, pointing to a bright dot of light just above the horizon .

Thraxis swallowed, feeling distinctly nervous, even though he knew that he shouldn’t . Cynixia was only thirteen, an entire year younger than him, and was only a red-robe as well. Still,

she was a girl, and he had asked her to take a walk with him...and he had never been alone in the garden at night with a girl before.

"I see it," he said, relieved to have a topic of conversation instead of the uncomfortable silence that had lain between them .

"Have you studied astronomy?"

He hesitated, fearing a trap . If he admitted that he could pick out the constellations, but otherwise was largely ignorant, she would have the upper hand. Most likely, she would make fun of him.

But it seemed that Cynixia wasn't all that interested in his answer, for she continued to prattle on without it . "I'm studying it now. We went up to the top of the cliff last month, when Icene was the highest and looked at it."

Thraxis nodded . He was at least familiar with the great glass lens that allowed one to see objects even as far away as the planets. The spells set upon it had been the masterwork of one of the greatest wizards to rule the Sanctum.

"I've been reading about the motion of the planets," Cynixia went on, "but all the current theories don't adequately explain everything . I'm thinking about making astronomy my Search. What about you?"

"I haven't decided yet," Thraxis confessed . "I still have a few years before I declare what path my Search for Knowledge will take."

She smiled at him suddenly, pixie-like with her pointy features and curly brown hair . His heart pounded—what did she expect from him? What did she want him to do? What if he did the wrong thing?

Cynixia solved the problem for him by standing on her tiptoes and planting a kiss on his lips . Half-scared and half-elated, he kissed her back. It was awkward—neither of them were totally sure what they were supposed to do with their tongues—but as they walked back to the edge of the garden afterwards, he felt as though he could fly away without the use of magic.

"My parents expect me back," Cynixia apologized, and then disappeared inside through a small door. Knowing that no one would be looking for him at this time of night, Thraxis found a marble bench and sat for a while, dreaming the dreams of the young who are just beginning to discover the mysteries of the other gender.

The door from the Sanctum opened, then closed again. Startled out of his reverie, Thraxis glanced over his shoulder, but the tall bulk of a hedge blocked him from sight of the door. Then he heard Vilhardouin speak.

"It will not be much longer before he's ready to breed."

"Aren't you getting ahead of yourself?" asked a male voice, and Thraxis recognized Shatrevar. He had been appointed to the Black Council a few weeks ago, upon the timely death of old Toxeus. "He's only fourteen."

"Perhaps. But one cannot plan far enough in advance, my friend. Not with so much at stake."

"Who are you going to put him with?"

"Black robes at first, of course. Melilandra, as soon as she's ready to bear children. Then red robes, like that Cynixia."

"You certainly aren't going to give him much rest, are you? Or will his Search be for better ways to pleasure women?"

Vilhardouin chuckled. "That's the advantage of a male, Shatrevar. You can put him to stud with as many females as you like. He won't be the one tied up for nine months with a baby in him, or for three years after while nursing. And it isn't as though any man is going to complain about bedding as many women as he can get his hands on. If I want to put him with every woman in the Sanctum, it will hardly be unwelcome news to him."

Shatrevar laughed. "Naturally. But tell me one thing, Vilhardouin. What is it about him that is so important? Why Thraxis?"

“You didn’t witness his testing,” she said, and her voice was startlingly grim. “We had put his parents together, hoping that they would be able to produce a black level child. As soon as he was born, I put the Testing Crystal on him myself.”

“And it turned black.”

“Yes, it turned black. Before it shattered.”

“It shattered?”

“I thought the crystal had a flaw, so I sent for another . And another. They all shattered as well. Do you understand what that means, Shatrevar? He’s more than a black-level. His potential is so great that it was more than the crystals could bear. We gave him a black robe only because we have no higher rank. When he grows to manhood, he will be the most powerful Athraskani that any of us have ever seen.”

“And you hope to breed more like him .”

“Yes .”

Their voices faded as they walked away—fortunately, to another part of the garden . Alone, Thraxis sat frozen on the bench, his heart pounding in an agony of knowledge.

Chapter Six: Once You Know

“No,” Arrow denied. “That isn’t possible.”

Viabold’s hand tightened gently on hers. “I know. But it is true, nonetheless. I checked three times because I knew that I had to be seeing things incorrectly. But every time I perceived the same thing. You have a daughter growing in your womb.”

She shook her head, feeling oddly numb and detached. “But...the changes that Balthazar made in me...they rendered me barren, Viabold.”

“I know.” Letting go of her hand, he went to a pot sitting on another part of the table. Checking its cleanliness, he filled it with water from a large jug on the floor, added herbs to steep, and put it over the cold hearth. He spoke three words of a spell, and a pile of rune-inscribed stones beneath the pot began to glow with heat. As soon as the tea was done, he poured some into a pottery cup and pressed it gently into Arrow’s hands. “Magic is a tricky thing, my dear. Even those of us who are born to it don’t always know exactly how it will behave. It is possible that your body has somehow adapted to what was done to it and will be fertile from now on. It is possible you would never have conceived by a normal man, but the magic that is inherently a part of us Athraskani somehow affected you through Thraxis’ seed. It may be that this is the only baby you will ever carry. I don’t know.”

She gave him a shaky smile and sipped her tea. It tasted of mint and flowers, and she felt a little of the tension drain from her. “You’re a true fount of knowledge, Viabold.”

He grinned, unoffended. “I wish I could tell you for certain, but I can’t.” The smile faded back into seriousness. “I don’t even know that you’ll be able to carry the baby to term. The way your body has been altered...I don’t know. You might kill the baby the next time you go into berserker mode. Or you might not be able to bear it for long no matter what happens. Or you may have a perfectly normal pregnancy and deliver a healthy baby girl. I don’t know, but I want you to be prepared for any eventuality.”

She nodded and bit her lip. “How...how far along am I?”

“Not long. A month at most.”

Clutching her cup, Arrow tried to sense the baby in her but couldn’t. “What am I going to do?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that. You and Thraxis have to decide that for yourselves.”

“I can’t tell Thraxis!”

Viabold looked at her in shock. “You can hardly avoid it!”

He was right, of course. But... “I can’t tell him. Not yet.” She met his golden eyes with a pleading look. “What would he say, Viabold? I told him that I was barren. How can I suddenly tell him, oh sorry, I was wrong? He’ll think that I used him the way the Black Council wanted to use him! He’ll think I

tricked him into this.”

To her annoyance, tears gathered in her eyes again. “Damn it,” she swore, wiping them away angrily. One of her earliest lessons had been that a Champion never cried. The only time she had wept since she was a very small girl had been during the hellish days when she believed Thraxis dead.

Viabold put one arm around her shoulders. “It’s all right, Arrow. It’s normal for you to be feeling as though your emotions are out of control.” He gave her a comforting squeeze. “Talking to Thraxis and allaying your fears might help.”

“No.” She imagined the look on her husband’s face when she told him, imagined the words he would say to her. He would be angry, he would accuse her of tricking him, of lying to him... “I can’t. Not yet. You said that I might not even be able to carry the babe to term. If I lose it early on, he doesn’t ever have to know.”

“Unless you conceive again. And, besides, the man has a *right* to know! That’s his daughter as much as yours.”

“No.” She pulled away and glared at him. “These are women’s matters. Until this baby comes out of me alive, it’s my concern alone, not Thraxis’.”

Viabold sighed in exasperation. “Arrow, that’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t make fun of your ways.”

“Arrow, I know Skald men love their children even before they are born. I saw more than one man taking care of his pregnant wife.”

She clenched her fists, trying to still the trembling of her muscles, the racing of her heart. “Don’t tell him, Viabold. Please. As you said, if the babe survives long enough, I’ll have to admit it to him eventually. Just...let me pick the time and place. All right?”

His expression said that he didn’t think she was making the right decision, but he nodded reluctantly anyway. “Very well, Arrow. But I think the sooner the better.”

“I know what you think.”

“And I want you to come see me if you feel at all ill, or think that there might be a problem with the baby, hear me?”

“I will.”

He helped her down off the table. “I’ll give you some tea that will help with the nausea. Are your breasts painful?”

“Not yet.”

“Every woman is different. I’ll prepare something for that as well, just in case.” He embraced her unexpectedly. She hugged him back, smelling the scent of smoke and herbs in his hair. “Whatever you do, take care of yourself, please?”

* * * *

Much later that night, Arrow lay in bed beside Thraxis, staring at the ceiling. Beautiful Girl’s head formed a warm, solid lump across Arrow’s ankle. The heat of the day had collected in the room, so before they lay down Thraxis had activated the spells on the two statues that she had thought purely ornamental. Now they waved their large fans tirelessly up and down, creating a gentle breeze across her bare skin.

After leaving Viabold, she had gone back to the room, in desperate need of comfort. Thraxis had been waiting for her, and to his credit had been full of apologies for his earlier behavior. She had asked his forgiveness as well, and they had reaffirmed their bond by tenderly making love for a long time in the big bed.

But now, as her husband slept, her hand stole reluctantly to her belly. It was far too soon for her pregnancy to show. Indeed, she still had trouble believing that there was a little girl growing inside her at that very moment.

What am I going to do? she wondered yet again. *What am I going to do?*

* * * *

The next morning, Arrow disappeared with Viabold, claiming that she wanted to learn the different herbs the Athraskani used. Her desire surprised Thraxis—she had never shown any interest in herbs before—and he wondered if she was using it as an excuse to spend time with someone whom Thraxis could not possibly object to.

Guilt touched him when he recalled their argument of the night before. He had been busy at the ruins and with the other Athraskani, and truly had not spent as much time with Arrow as he should have. He wished that he could make her understand the importance of the ruins and of finding Xaqqara, but she stubbornly persisted on viewing the ancients and all their artifacts as evil, and would have nothing to do with them. It both frustrated him and reminded him of why he loved her so.

Nothing further would be done until the arrival of the Black Council, which could happen at any time now. Although some of the other Athraskani wanted to discuss the ruins and what they might find at Xaqqara, he excused himself from their company. Taking Stalker, he went out into the desert, until he was far enough away from the Sanctum that any spell casting he did would not attract attention. Beautiful Girl followed them; Lyata had flatly refused to allow her in the herb garden with Arrow for fear of the dog digging up the precious plants.

Thraxis had spent the morning pondering what he could do for Arrow. Certainly there must be some spell, some magic, he could create that would surprise and delight her, as well as serving as an apology for neglecting her earlier. It didn't have to be anything practical—just something that would let her know that he had been thinking about her.

Once he found a likely spot in the lee of a stony cliff, Thraxis stopped and dismounted. Stalker nosed about despondently, probably wondering why his humans had been so deranged as to come to a land with so little grass. Thraxis removed the horse's saddle and bridle, and then ran his hands over the animal's strong neck, back, and legs, memorizing the way the joints and muscles worked. He breathed in the smell of the sun on bay hide, holding it inside himself.

As soon as he felt that he had done all he could to prepare, he settled on the rocky ground and dropped into a trance. The magic rose in him, ready to do his bidding, and he almost laughed aloud with the joy of it. It would take a great deal of power to cast this spell, but he had all he needed and more. Fixing the image of what he wanted as closely as he could in his mind, he whispered the word he had chosen to key the spell: "*Equus*."

The magic came, reshaping where it passed. He went slowly, making certain that he got it right, ignoring the pain that came whenever he paused to consider his next alteration. When at last he opened his eyes once again, the desert spread wide to both sides, his vision wrapping about almost all the way behind him. He snorted, took a step, and felt hoof strike stone.

Success.

He held the spell only long enough to take a short trot that turned briefly into a gallop. Stalker and Beautiful Girl both stared at him, as if puzzled where the strange black stallion with the yellow eyes had come from. Then he let go of the spell and took his natural shape, collapsing back against the cool, shaded stone of the cliff. Weariness clawed at him, for shape-changing was a magic done only by the most powerful, and then only seldom. He had performed it only a few times before in his life, once when learning the shape of a raven and twice when taking that form on his journey with Arrow.

When he felt stronger, he saddled and bridled Stalker once again. He would show Arrow his new spell in a few days, he decided as he guided the horse back to the Sanctum. The Skald had a special relationship with their horses, and he hoped that his homage to that would please her. If nothing else, it might make her laugh.

But as they crested the last hill before the Sanctum, he found his gaze drawn to the river beyond. Although Thraxis was used to seeing small barks and barges traveling up and down the river at all hours of the day and night, what caught his eye now was the conveyance of no simple fishermen. Three enormous barges floated grandly upstream, their black sails filled by a wind that touched nothing else around them. For a moment, he tried to tell himself that he was mistaken, that it was only some human lord passing by who had happened to catch a fortuitous, if odd, breeze. But there was no denial.

The Black Council had arrived.

* * * *

As it happened, Thraxis proved to be the only person in the Sanctum who hadn't known of the Black Council's impending arrival. The news had come that morning after he had left, via words that burned themselves into a scroll on Anarete's desk. As soon as the second meditation was over, the Prima had suspended all work for the rest of the day, instead sending everyone into a bustle of activity to make certain that everything was as perfect as it could be. Sand was magically banished from every nook and cranny, linens were brought from storage, and vegetables from all seasons of the year were freed from the enchanted chests that kept them fresh indefinitely. Novices had their faces scrubbed by worried parents, and everyone put on their best robes and braided beads into their hair.

By the time the three barges carrying the Black Council and their retinue came into view, a palpable air of tension hung over the Sanctum. The Athraskani hurried out to the spot where the boats would dock, on the bank alongside their fields, and organized themselves to greet their august visitors. They lined up by level of power, with the red robes in front and the novices in the back. Anarete, her plump face slicked with the sweat of anxiety, took her place front and center. Thiacene, a lone spot of black, stood by her with a look of fear stamped over her young features.

Thraxis lingered at the back, watching as the Sanctum's inhabitants rushed about. He held himself apart, along with Arrow and Viabold, not wanting to add to Anarete's troubles if he could help it. Supper had been more of a gesture than a meal; his stomach had tightened with a worry that even the evening meditation couldn't dispel. Why on earth had he ever thought coming here a good idea? Why hadn't he stayed on the steppes, where he could have gone the rest of his life without ever seeing the Black Council again? He'd had the whole world to choose from—what folly had made him come back into their power?

The three barges floated grandly up to the bank, their sails billowing in a magic wind that failed to touch anyone on shore. He could see black robes rippling in the breeze on the foremost barge, along with the rainbow of servants and hangers-on that would naturally accompany the Black Council.

"This is probably the first time in centuries that the Black Council has left the Sanctum Majoris," he realized.

"Well, then, you should be proud. Your talent for annoying them must be truly phenomenal," said Viabold cheerfully.

Thraxis shot a glare at his friend, and then glanced down at Arrow. Her coppery brows were drawn together in a frown of concentration as she studied the figures on the barges. "I will have to stand before them," he said regretfully. "If you would prefer to stay back here, I would understand."

Her dark eyes left the barge and came to his face. There was a troubled look in their depths that he attributed to the coming confrontation. "What would you prefer?"

His fingers tightened on hers. "To have someone with strength and courage with me."

"I'll be with you," Viabold chimed in.

"Shut up, you drunken fool."

"I'm not drunk," Viabold replied. Fishing about in the pockets of his robes, he pulled out a small ceramic jug and took a judicious sip from it. "Not yet, anyway."

Arrow smiled up at Thraxis. "Then of course I will stand with you. Someone will have to prop up Viabold, after all."

Wide planks were run out from the three barges. As Thraxis watched tensely, Vilhardouin appeared at the head of one and made her stately way down it. The sun gleamed off her silver hair with its onyx beads. Two more figures in black followed close on her heels: Gallinarches and Shatrevar, the other members of the Black Council. Then, to his surprise, a fourth person in black came after.

Raven-dark hair formed an elaborate crown that terminated in two long braids, which swept the ground behind her. Spells no doubt protected her milky-white skin from the harshness of sun and wind. The roundness of her golden eyes gave her a false look of innocence, as did her small, bow-like mouth. But her robes were cut to expose the smooth column of her neck and alabaster shoulders, and gave a tantalizing glimpse of leg and thigh.

Hatred tightened around Thraxis' heart, making him want to scream in fury. It was bad enough that the Black Council was here—why, by all that was true, did they have to bring *her*?

"I say," said Viabold, peering blearily over Thraxis' shoulder, "is that the Beautiful Melilandra?"

Thraxis was too busy grinding his teeth together to reply. Vilhardouin wouldn't just drag Melilandra along for no reason. If he caught the slightest hint that she thought she could still mate him to Melilandra, he would go straight back to the steppes, and to damnation with anyone else among the Athraskani.

Vilhardouin stopped several paces in front of the first rank of mages waiting to greet her. The rest of the Black Council and the assorted hangers-on they had brought formed up around her, and Thraxis was suddenly reminded of two armies facing one another across the field of battle.

Anarete bowed low, and the rest of the Sanctum followed suit, dropping to their knees in the sand. Only Thraxis, Arrow, and Viabold remained standing.

"The Sanctum Minoris of Gypta greets the Black Council," Anarete said, her voice magically amplified to carry over the gathering. "All that we have is yours."

But Vilhardouin's eyes were not on the Prima. Instead, she stared fixedly at the young girl beside Anarete. "And what do we have here?" she asked, a scowl of displeasure forming. "Who are you?"

"Th-Thiacene."

Vilhardouin's frown intensified. "Daughter of Cyaraxes and Jumica? I was told that you wore the red."

"I-I did," Thiacene stammered.

"It is a grave offense to put on robes above your station, initiate. Why are you wearing the black?"

It was clear that Thiacene was terrified of the old woman, all of her usual bravado reduced to ash. Wishing that he could have kept out of things a little longer, Thraxis nevertheless knew that it was time for him to intervene.

"Clearly, the situation changed," he said, his voice carrying easily to the foremost ranks of the assembly.

Vilhardouin's head snapped up, like a lion distracted from her prey. Feeling the heat of her gaze even at a distance, Thraxis frantically reached for all the old defenses that he had used for so long. He unconsciously straightened his back to take full advantage of his height and schooled his face into a look of haughty indifference. Tightening his grip on Arrow's hand, he strolled forward, as if this was some chance meeting in the marketplace. But the crowd parted before him as if by magic, the wizards almost tripping over their robes in their haste to move aside. No one wanted to get between him and Vilhardouin.

They stopped a few feet away from the Black Council. His peripheral vision told him that Arrow held herself confidently, and he felt a surge of pride. All the black robes in the world would not cow her.

"Thraxis," Vilhardouin said slowly, as if his name was something distasteful.

He gave her a bare nod. "Vilhardouin. I hope your journey was pleasant."

"I see that things are sorely amiss here. Was this of your instigating?"

"You give me far too much credit."

"I doubt that." Her silver eyes were flat and cold as coins. "How dare you come before me with this human and this drunkard in tow? If you hoped to avert my wrath from yourself to them, you were sorely mistaken."

Anger was starting to replace nervousness. He narrowed his eyes, and to his surprise he saw Vilhardouin draw back, just a little. "My wife may do as she pleases," he said icily. "As for Viabold, I believe he thought you might want to speak with him. Clearly, he was mistaken in that. Viabold, why don't you go back to your quarters?"

With an audible sigh of relief, Viabold turned to go. A look of fury passed over Vilhardouin's face. "Stop!"

Wincing, Viabold did as he was told.

Thraxis arched a curious brow. "Have you changed your mind, Vilhardouin? You really should make it up one way or the other. Indecisiveness is such a poor quality in a leader."

Someone in the crowd gasped audibly. When she turned back to him, Vilhardouin's face was a

blank mask, and he knew that he had truly enraged her now. “You think that you are clever, Thraxis, but you are mistaken. You think that I will not declare you apostate. Or perhaps you think that you can hide behind this trained animal you call your wife.”

Arrow stiffened sharply, and for a hideous instant Thraxis thought she might draw her sword and run Vilhardouin through on the spot. But she didn't move, perhaps taking her cue from him.

With a thin smile of contempt, Vilhardouin suddenly swept past them, her entourage swirling after. Melilandra paused for an instant, her eyes running up and down Arrow's form. A haughty expression of scorn touched her perfect features, and she let out a low laugh. Then she was gone.

“I will convene a Tribunal immediately,” Vilhardouin snapped at Anarete as she passed by. “And I will have answers!”

Anarete rose to her feet as the Black Council passed, her face white with fear. Glancing over her shoulder at Thraxis, she hissed, “You fool! You've made things worse!” Then she scrambled after her guests.

Thraxis' shoulders slumped as some of the tension left him. He felt as if he had been flogged and then dragged behind a horse over several miles of gravel. Arrow pressed herself against his side, and Viabold put a hand to his shoulder.

“Anarete brought this on herself when she agreed to lie about Thiacene's power,” Viabold pointed out gently.

“Even if it was the right thing to do?” Thraxis asked tiredly.

Arrow was staring after the retreating Athraskani with a look of vague horror. “That...that woman is the one who raised you?”

“More or less.”

“I'm sorry.” She turned her fathomless brown eyes up at him, and he saw an unexpected gleam of tears. “I thought I had things bad, but at least Leaf and Vole loved me.”

He ran his fingertips along the side of her face, and then bent and kissed her gently. “Don't worry, love. It was another lifetime.”

* * * *

A year after he overheard the Black Council, Thraxis was puttering about the library when he found the book .

He had not taken any more walks with Cynixia, even though he knew the girl had been hurt by his sudden apparent indifference to her . But what he had overheard had left him too scared and confused to even talk to her. The only thing he could think of when he looked at her—or at Melilandra, or at just about any other girl—was that the Black Council wanted him to impregnate her. That knowledge made part of him feel oddly dirty, as if he was being asked to do something bad. The other half of him, which was caught in the throes of the change from boy to man, liked the thought of having sex with as many girls as possible. The end result was that confusion and guilt had become his normal state.

He had withdrawn into himself over the months, although truthfully very few had noticed the change . Having been excused from any physical exercise or manual labor, he had long ago made the library his refuge. He loved the maze of interconnected rooms, loved the smell that came from the papyrus books and scrolls, and most of all loved the silence. Most of the time, he would choose something to read, find an out-of-the-way nook, and pass the hours undisturbed by anything more than the footsteps of the librarians.

He had not yet chosen the Search that would define his life, so his reading was highly eclectic . The mythology of cultures studied by the Athraskani over the years, the deciphering of the runes of dead civilizations, the courses of the stars—all these things were joyous to him, and it seemed cruel that he would have to pick one to focus on someday.

One day, he chanced upon an old, neglected, and poorly lit corner in one of the back rooms . Dust had accumulated thickly on shelves and books alike; it had been a long time since anyone had reason to look at the tomes here. Perusing the titles out of curiosity, he saw that most were

obscure poetry. That enticed him even more; he enjoyed poetry and had even tried to write a little himself, although his efforts were not very good even to his own eyes.

Selecting a book at random, he called up more light so that he wouldn't have to squint to make out the title. Natura Amria had been burned into the cloth binding; the author was listed only as Kahven, with no indication as to what rank he had held among the Athraskani. The name seemed vaguely familiar, but Thraxis was unable to place it.

Opening the book, Thraxis at first thought that it was yet another manual about sex. The Athraskani studied and wrote about sexual pleasure and technique with the same objectivity as they wrote about everything else, although for the most part such books wound up in the more popular section of the library. But, as he scanned the first few pages, he realized that it was in fact a book of philosophy—the philosophy of love and relationships.

Intrigued, he sank to the dirty floor and began to read. Hours later, he took the book up to his room, where he sat up long into the night, pouring over Kahven's words. When he finished, he closed it slowly and stared at his hands, trying to absorb it all.

There were things that he knew he probably wouldn't understand for some years to come. But there were other parts that did make sense, that fit with some of the things he'd thought and felt himself. More importantly, it explained the conflicting feelings he'd had since the night in the garden.

The part of him that half-wanted what the Black Council had in store for him was reacting naturally. There was no shame in it. But...

"As we discover the divine within ourselves through meditation," Kahven had written, "so we may discover the divine in others through the act of love making. We must remember that, when properly approached, physical love can become a sacred act."

There was something to that, Thraxis thought. For the first time, he realized exactly what it was about the Black Council's plans that so disturbed him. They looked at him as a thing rather than as a person. He was just a tool, just a means to an end. He could be the most evil bastard in the world, or the best man they'd ever known—it didn't matter to them at all.

Worse, they expected him to look at the girls they mated him with and the offspring that he sired in the same way. As if he was just a stallion that didn't care if his foals were kept or sold away.

And it didn't take a brilliant mind to know that was wrong.

Chapter Seven: By Love Depraved

Vilhardouin's Tribunal was held in the hall normally used for dining. Three chairs were hastily placed with their backs to the great, arched windows that let in light and air. Although everyone who could find an excuse to attend did so, most of the Black Council's entourage was dismissed. A situation that Thraxis, for one, was heartily glad of, because it meant that he didn't have to look at Melilandra for a second longer.

Although he had suggested that Arrow go back to their room and rest, or else go for a ride to cool her anger, she had insisted on accompanying him. That, too, was something for which he was grateful.

"I will attend to first things first," Vilhardouin said once she had settled in the central of the three chairs. "Anarete, you will explain to me why one of your charges is dressed in robes inappropriate to her station."

Anarete paled as she walked to the cleared space in front of the Tribunal. "Wouldn't you like to hear of our progress here, first?" she asked hopefully. "We believe that we have found Xaqqara!"

A murmur of wonder swept through those visitors who had remained to attend the Black Council. Vilhardouin arched a single brow in surprise. "That is an accomplishment, Anarete. But it will not distract me from my question."

With no choice left to her, Anarete reluctantly explained the true circumstances surrounding

Thiacene's birth. When she had finished, an ominous silence filled the room.

"I do not have to tell you what a grave offense this is," Vilhardouin said at last. Anarete shook her head, unable to answer. "You are hereby removed from your office of Prima of this Sanctum." She paused a moment to confer with the other two members of the Black Council. "Further, this Council places you under Writ of Exile. You shall leave this Sanctum no later than dawn tomorrow and never return to any place inhabited by Athraskani. You may take with you only a single robe; all else must remain, as property of the Sanctum."

Anarete moaned softly and glanced over her shoulder at Thraxis, as if begging for help. Clearing his throat, he left Arrow's side and went to stand just behind Anarete. "Vilhardouin, surely the fact that Xaqqara has been found through Anarete's efforts is grounds for some clemency."

Vilhardouin's silver eyes narrowed slightly. "You are in no position to debate with this Tribunal, Thraxis. But, as others may feel the same, I will address your concern. Anarete denied one of our people her rightful station and deceived the Black Council as to her true power. There can be no greater crime."

Thraxis frowned at the harshness of her statement. "Surely that cannot be. At worst, Anarete broke the Rule against lying and her Vow of obedience."

"She also broke her Vow to do no harm."

He bowed slightly, although he knew nothing would make her forgive his words. "It is my belief that she was attempting to keep that Vow."

There were gasps at his audacity. "You will hold your tongue!" Shatrevar exclaimed angrily, his face turning an unbecoming shade of red. But Vilhardouin's expression never wavered.

"Harm against the Athraskani as a whole outweighs any harm against an individual," she said smoothly.

Thraxis felt a chill go up his spine. Did she acknowledge that she knew exactly what she had done to him? Knew, but felt no remorse?

"Does it?" he asked bitterly. "It seems to me that such a statement could be used to excuse any manner of atrocity."

"Be silent!" shouted Shatrevar, rising from his chair. "Impudent whelp! So help me, I will see to it that you never have a seat on the Black Council! Never!"

As if I could wish for such a thing .

"Sit down, Shatrevar," Vilhardouin said calmly. Her lizard's eyes showed no hint of passion, as if nothing Thraxis could ever say or do could reach her. "Cyaraxes and Jumica, you joined Anarete in her conspiracy—or, perhaps, instigated it. As you have shared in her crime, you will share in her punishment."

"No!" shouted Thiacene. She ran to her parents, but they were clinging to one another, Jumica's face hidden in her husband's shoulder. At a loss, Thiacene spun on her heel and spied her brother. "This is your fault!" she cried, pointing an accusing finger at him. "If you hadn't come here, none of this would have happened! I hate you!"

Thraxis let out a sigh as Thiacene fled the room. His heart ached for her. Perhaps she was even right—perhaps he should have stayed away from all things Athraskani, let the years pass by while he hid himself away on the steppes with Arrow.

"As for you, Thraxis," Vilhardouin said, catching his attention back to her, "you will remember your Vow of obedience and cease any heresies you might be spreading." She rose to her feet, and her two companions joined her. "This Tribunal is at an end."

That's it? Thraxis thought, amazed. He had expected a long lecture at the very least. But, as she made her way towards the doors, Vilhardouin paused and cast him a hard look. "I will speak with you in private. Now."

"What do you think she wants?" Viabold asked, coming with Arrow to join Thraxis.

"Nothing good, I'm sure," Thraxis muttered.

One of the young mages who attended the Black Council appeared at his elbow. "I've been sent for you," he said, ducking his head shyly. Eyes that had not entirely lost the bronze tint of youth glanced up at Arrow. "Hello again," he said in broken Skaldai.

A smile of pleasure touched Arrow's face. "My guard. Sakarax, was it?"

He nodded, obviously pleased that she had remembered. Obscurely annoyed, Thraxis cleared his throat and saw the young man jump guiltily. "You were to escort me?" he reminded Sakarax sharply.

"Oh, um, yes, this way." Sakarax bobbed his head at Arrow, then turned and made his way out of the hall. Undoubtedly following magical marks that only he could see, which had been left to guide him in this unfamiliar place, Sakarax led Thraxis back to what had been Anarete's quarters. Already, lower-level mages were busy clearing it out.

Vilhardouin was waiting for him on a balcony much like the one in his own quarters. A steady breeze blew off the river, clicking together the onyx beads bound in her hair. A gilded cup rested on the balustrade by her hand, giving off the faint, rich scent of wine. When he joined her, she waved a hand, and Sakarax scurried up with a second cup, which he proffered to Thraxis.

So, this is how it is going to be—a veneer of civilization to hide the claws of the beast, Thraxis thought sourly as he took a sip from his cup. The wine was, indeed, very good.

"You may not believe this, but I am glad to see you still alive," Vilhardouin said unexpectedly.

He watched her warily. It was nothing but a ploy.

Wasn't it?

Ignoring the hopeful little voice that still clung to the delusion that the woman who had raised him might someday find it in her heart to love him, he said, "You are correct."

"Your hair did not grow back?"

"I have been shaving it. As a reminder of the things I have learned."

"Ah." Vilhardouin took another sip from her cup, and then set it down again. The faint scent of smoke came on the wind, borne from nearby Djoser. Near to the river, something frightened a flock of ibis, making them take to the sky on white wings. A moment later, Thraxis caught sight of a hippopotamus rooting in the shallows.

Vilhardouin sighed and folded her hands together. "The things you have learned," she repeated back to him. "But those are things of the outside world, Thraxis. And the outside world has nothing to do with us. You know this."

"I know we have said that for a long time," he replied, wondering if this conversation could possibly have a pleasant end. "But I question its veracity. I question its morality."

"I know you do." To his surprise, her expression approached one of sympathy. He had never seen such a thing before. "But you are young and impetuous. You have not thought things through; you have looked only at what concerns you, personally, not at the needs of the Athraskani as a whole."

"But you're going to enlighten me."

"It is not easy being the Prima of the Sanctum Majoris, Thraxis. It is not easy leading the Black Council." Her face looked suddenly old, its lines more deeply graven. "We Athraskani are a small people, a dwindling race. We were never great in number to begin with, and that has not changed. Yet all around us, the humans increase their ranks daily."

"What of it?"

"You have been outside, Thraxis. How did the humans view you when you walked among them? Were they happy to see you? Or did they flee in fear?"

He remembered the men who had tried to murder him his first night away from the Sanctum. Remembered the dark looks and the signs against evil directed at him from even casual passers-by so long as he remained in lands where the Athraskani were known. "Perhaps it is because we have hidden from them for so long."

"It is not. They fear any whose power they do not share. So it has always been, and so shall it always be."

"And what has this to do with anything?"

"In the past, we had only to worry about cowering provincial chieftains or petty governors. But the human world is changing. At the moment, the Sanctum Majoris survives only at the whim of the Emperor, and he is not one to be easily intimidated. If he decides that we are an inconvenience, he need not ever even lay eyes on us, only send his armies in his stead. Right now, we are useful to him, so he does not let

his fear get the better of his good sense. But what happens when the balance tips and he sees us as more threatening than useful? What happens when he dies and another man, a superstitious man, takes the throne? In the end, the humans will try to destroy us one way or another.”

Listening to her, Thraxis knew that she believed her words completely. He was not certain that he agreed, but there was some sense in what she said. “And what do you intend to do to prevent that?”

“To survive, we must become powerful enough that no one will dare challenge us. If the Emperor sends armies against us, then we must be able to threaten to destroy those armies—and we must have the power to back that threat. We must make even the Emperor fear. That is why we need more red and black level mages. That is why I approved your Search, even when it led you to the *doyan’si*. That is why I want you to have a child with Melilandra—why you must set aside this human woman and turn your attention back to your own people. I do not ask you these things because I wish you to suffer. I ask them because you are important to our very survival. Surely even you can see that.”

He did not answer her immediately. Until now, he had never been entirely certain what Vilhardouin’s motivation had been in attempting to breed more and more powerful Athraskani. He had always assumed that it had been to gain more personal power among their people. She had ordered him conceived, and he answered to her. From him she would breed more, who again would answer only to her.

But her words held truth, and he realized that she saw herself as a leader of clear vision who had seen the sacrifices that must be made to preserve their race. She said that the humans feared that which they did not understand, but she herself did not understand the world outside the Sanctum’s walls and so feared it in return. He had seen that world and knew that her fear was not entirely unfounded.

The selling of spells to Emperor Darius and his nobles was a practice that Thraxis had always despised, because the Athraskani had no control over how the magic was used once it was out of their hands. He doubted that most of it was put to good use. He had thought that it was allowed out of greed. But now he saw that it was a sop, an attempt to convince the human rulers that the Athraskani were indispensable allies. It was an act of fear.

“Has it occurred to you,” he asked at last, “that if this is the price required for our survival, then perhaps we do not deserve to survive?”

Her eyes narrowed, and for an instant he saw real rage in their depths. “No. Because to even think such a thing would be nothing less than treason.”

Thraxis downed the rest of his wine in a single gulp and set the cup firmly down on the balustrade. “I will help you find Xaqqara. It may be that there are things in the city that will allow you accomplish your goal.”

“And in exchange for your cooperation?”

“Don’t ask me to give up Arrow again, or to touch another woman. The vows I swore to her on our wedding night are as sacred to me as the vows I took when I was initiated. You may think that I am a fool or even a traitor, but I will not change my mind.”

Vilhardouin’s eyes rested on his profile, evaluating. “Very well,” she said at last. Somehow, though, he knew that she was conceding only to a temporary stalemate. The war was not yet over. Perhaps she hoped that, by agreeing today, she would gain time to study him, to discover the changes his journeys had wrought so that she could better manipulate him later.

Good luck to you, he thought as he turned and left the room. *But you will not find what you seek.*

* * * *

Arrow was waiting for him in their room. She sat on the edge of the bed, her hands clasped before her, as if she sought to control their restless energy. As soon as Thraxis opened the door, she came to her feet, eyes anxious. “What did she want?”

“Nothing of any importance.”

Arrow paced away from him, arms folded across her chest. He took her place on the edge of the bed, watching the lithe grace of her walk, the way her leathers fitted her body. “What’s going to happen?” she asked.

“I will help Vilhardouin find Xaqqara, if that will make her happy. And then we will leave.”

“That won’t satisfy her.”

Thraxis sighed. He didn’t want to talk about Vilhardouin any more. He was tired of thinking, tired of worrying. Tired of trying to convince everyone, even his own wife, that he had made his decisions and would stand by them.

When he made no reply, she turned around and looked at him. Their eyes met, pale yellow and dark brown, and he smiled. Gods of truth and light, but she was beautiful. After a moment, an answering smile tugged at her mouth.

“Come to me,” he whispered, holding out his hand. She crossed the space between them, twining her strong, callused fingers with his. He drew her closer so that he could run his fingertips lightly over her face, then pulled her closer still. Her lips were soft, silken, under his, such a contrast to her rough fingers. She was a mix of hard warrior’s muscles and soft feminine parts, and it was such delight to explore them all.

Vilhardouin was mad to believe that he would ever give this up, he thought when Arrow wrapped her long legs around him. He slid his arms around her in return, knowing that she liked the intimacy of his embrace. Her nails dug hard into his buttocks, and she cried out, back arching.

Nothing could make him give this up. Nothing.

* * * *

“Meli! Meli!”

Thraxis glanced up in irritation as the youth burst into the dining hall . Breakfast was just past, but a few scattered groups yet remained in the huge stone chamber. Thraxis sat by himself on one of the long benches, a book in front of him while he picked at the remains of an omelet. A group of girls hovered nearby, clustered around Vilhardouin’s daughter, Melilandra.

The youth—Thraxis tried to place his name and couldn’t—headed straight for the little knot of talking, giggling girls . His face was pale, and his green robe only enhanced its sickly hue. “Meli!” he said again, as if he had no other words.

Melilandra turned her large eyes toward him . At sixteen, she was a stunning beauty, with pale skin and flawless features. As she moved, her robe slipped down slightly, revealing a tantalizing expanse of bare shoulder. Thraxis felt his body respond, and he wondered if Vilhardouin had meant it when she said he would be paired with this goddess.

“What you do want?” Melilandra asked, clearly bored already by the youth’s presence .

“Meli...I...you didn’t reply to my letter,” he said, wringing his hands together . “Didn’t you like the poem...?”

Her lip curled into a sneer . “It was fine, I suppose. If one likes utter drivel.”

The other girls around her giggled . The youth looked as if she had punched him in the gut. “But—but—”

“But—but—” she mocked . “I thought you could at least speak better than you write verse.”

Humiliated, he didn’t say anything, only stood and stared at her as if seeing a stranger . At that moment, another youth entered, a blue-robe by the name of Kyarges whom Thraxis vaguely recognized as being a few years older than himself.

Melilandra’s face bloomed into a smile . “Kyarges!” she sang out happily. He came to her side, bowed, and kissed her hand.

The first youth stared at this scene with an expression of growing hurt . “But—Meli—you and I—” he stammered helplessly.

She cast him a withering glance . ““You and I?” Please. I have better things to do than waste my time with little boys. Besides, you’re only a green robe, after all. What did you expect?”

Kyarges smiled with smug self-satisfaction . The girls giggled. Utterly humiliated, the first youth finally turned and stumbled back the way he had come.

Thraxis sat very still, all his lust gone to ash . Melilandra had played out the entire scene deliberately, he knew, for no other reason than to embarrass the poor fool chasing her. No doubt

in a few weeks Kyarges would find himself on the receiving end of a similar act. Watching the way Melilandra's eyes glittered with predatory interest as Kyarges talked to her, Thraxis realized that there was no love in her, no kindness. She took delight in the pain of others. It probably didn't even matter to her who they were.

Closing his book, he left the hall quickly, feeling sick .

Chapter Eight: On the Other Side

Arrow waited in the predawn darkness outside the Sanctum. The air was chill from the long night, and goose bumps pricked the small hairs on her arms. The smell of smoke from early fires hung in the air, mixed with the scent of damp earth and river water. Birds sang in the trees near the river, greeting the new day that was as yet nothing but a stain of pink along the horizon.

Jumica, Cyaraxes, and Anarete stood at the very border of the Sanctum's land. They wore only plain brown robes and sandals. Anarete's face was hard as the scoured earth of the desert, but despair was etched in every line of her companions' bodies. Where they would go, Arrow could not guess.

Few had come to see them off to their exile, perhaps fearing to fall under the disapproving eyes of the Black Council. The three members of the Council were there, of course, as were Thraxis, Viabold, and Thiacene. Thraxis had been speaking softly with his parents for some time, perhaps giving them advice on how to survive in the outside world. Viabold appeared to be there only for moral support for his friend, for he hung back from the three exiles, unwilling to intrude on the moment. Thiacene clung to her mother, the sound of her sobs carrying on the wind.

As the light in the east grew stronger, Vilhardouin made an imperative motion towards the exiles. Gallinarches nodded and started towards the small group. He was a tall, thin man whose features reminded Arrow uncomfortably of Thraxis'. Her husband had said that they were cousins, although in truth they looked more like brothers, except for the masses of raven dark hair that proudly adorned Gallinarches' head and the darker gold of his eyes.

"It is time," Gallinarches declared, his deep voice without emotion. Thraxis frowned and moved back, but Thiacene remained in place. Gallinarches reached for her, but Thraxis intercepted him by laying a gentle hand on his sister's shoulder. Thiacene hesitated and stepped back.

As she did so, Gallinarches frowned deeply. One lean hand shot out and snatched at Jumica's robe. Thraxis and Thiacene both let out cries of protest, but Gallinarches moved away almost immediately, a small bag in his hand.

"You were forbidden to take anything from here except your robes and sandals," he said ominously.

Jumica wiped tears from her pale face. "It's only images of my children. Please, you can let me keep those, at least."

But of course Gallinarches only turned away with a sneer, the plain bag clutched in his long fingers.

Jumica flinched. Cyaraxes tried to put an arm around his wife, but she shrugged him off, turned, and started away.

Thiacene let out a little cry, spun on her heel, and ran to where Arrow waited a discreet distance away. Surprised, Arrow nonetheless caught the weeping girl to her. She wished that there were some comfort she could offer, but knew that any reassurances she gave would be lies.

"I'll never see them again," Thiacene said, her words muffled against Arrow's shoulder.

Arrow stroked her black hair absently. Thiacene had not bothered with a comb, or with whatever magic she used to style it, and the locks had come loose from their braids. "You don't know that," Arrow said gently. "The world has many surprises in it."

"Why did I have to be born like this? Why couldn't I have been a red robe? Then they wouldn't have had to lie!"

Because that's why your parents were put together to begin with, Arrow reflected grimly. Her thoughts went to the baby growing even now in her womb. What would happen to it, if it survived to be

born?

As far as she could gather, there had been few matings between Athraskani and humans, and most of those had involved lower-level mages such as Balthazar. Most of them had not produced offspring, and those children that had been born were unexceptional in terms of magic. Common wisdom among the Athraskani said that her child would have little power, certainly not enough to make it valuable to the likes of Vilhardouin.

She hoped that was true. But in the end, no one really knew what would happen. Wouldn't, until the baby came alive into the world.

Thraxis approached them, his face thin with weariness. He seemed about to join them, then hesitated, his eyes going to his sister.

"I'll be inside, if you need me," his voice whispered, as though he stood at Arrow's shoulder and leaned into her ear. She nodded and watched as he walked away, Viabold at his side. He had to be wondering whether or not this would have happened if he had never come, she thought. Knowing Thraxis, he had probably concluded that it was entirely his fault.

As if she had spoken aloud, Thiacece pulled back and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I didn't mean what I said to Thraxis yesterday," she said unhappily. "Do you think he'll forgive me? You and he are all I've got left."

Arrow's mouth twitched into a wry smile. "You were angry. You said things that you didn't really mean. Thraxis is the last person who should condemn you for that."

Thiacece blinked tears out of her eyes. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. Did I tell you he once called me an abomination?"

"No! He did? What did you do? Hit him?"

Arrow snorted. "He's lucky I didn't. And he told Balthazar that he shouldn't mourn his human wife because she wasn't Athraskani. That was one of the reasons Balthazar put the death curse on him. I think that, given the circumstances, Thraxis won't hold your words against you."

"I'm glad." Thiacece pulled away, her eyes going to the Sanctum's dun-colored buildings. "I can't go back in there. Not now. Will you...can we go practice?"

Arrow nodded. Perhaps it would help the girl work out some of her anger, or at least let her exhaust herself enough that everything would seem a little more distant. "Let me get Beautiful Girl and the horses."

* * * *

Although he didn't feel like it, Thraxis forced himself to do the morning meditation anyway. He and Viabold found a quiet place beneath a tree in the Sanctum's gardens, where they performed the most complicated *kai'ten* that Thraxis knew. The slow, ordered movements gradually calmed Thraxis' troubled emotions, and he found himself reflecting bitterly on the events that had come to pass. He had journeyed to Gypta in the hopes of reuniting with his parents. Instead, his arrival had cost them their second child, their home, and their place in society. If they ran afoul of the dangers of the world, despite all the warnings he had tried to give, it might cost them their lives.

"Cyaraxes and Jumica made their own choices," Viabold said from behind him. Startled, Thraxis glanced over his shoulder.

"How did you know—"

"It doesn't take magic to guess that you would be feeling guilty," Viabold pointed out. His face was composed, peaceful, as he moved through the graceful forms of the *kai'ten* without pause. "They knew that this could happen—that it most likely *would* happen. Obviously, they decided that raising their daughter was worth the sacrifice. As for what Anarete thought...who knows?"

"But my arrival was the catalyst."

"If it had not been you, it would have been someone else." Viabold dropped out of the form and put his hand to Thraxis' shoulder. "Come inside and eat. You'll feel better."

"I doubt that," Thraxis muttered. Nevertheless, he followed the older man inside.

To his surprise, the dining hall was already crowded. A group of youths clustered near the entrance,

remarkable in the fact that they all had the hoods of their robes drawn up over their heads. Most of the faces he could see belonged to the youths of the Sanctum who had engaged him in philosophical debate over the last few weeks, but he also saw Sakarax among their number. Catching sight of him, Sakarax's eyes lit up, and he shifted slightly as if peering around Thraxis to spy someone else.

Looking for Arrow, Thraxis realized in a flash of annoyance and jealousy. Clenching his hands into fists, he reminded himself that Sakarax was barely old enough to be called a man, and therefore certainly no threat.

Kalika bowed slightly when she caught sight of him. "Thraxis," she said, then reached up and pushed back her hood. Beneath, her head was shaved completely bald.

As Thraxis stood gaping at her, the rest of the youths followed suit. They had also removed their hair. Viabold burst out laughing.

"Shut up, you fool," Thraxis muttered at him. "This isn't funny!"

"We did it to show our support for you," Kalika said, unperturbed by Viabold's reaction. "The Black Council will learn that you do not stand alone."

Thraxis wished that he could close his eyes and will the entire Sanctum to go away. "Kalika...I do appreciate your gesture," he managed at last. "But Vilhardouin...the Black Council...they will censure you for this."

"We know."

"No you don't!" he exclaimed, frustrated. "You've lived your whole lives sheltered here. You don't know anything! You don't know the sort of pressure they can bring to bear!"

Kalika's lips tightened into a thin line. "It doesn't matter."

He sighed and pressed his fingers against his temples in an attempt to dispel a growing headache. "I'm trying to spare you pain."

"We aren't children, Thraxis, or fools. Are you to be the only Athraskani allowed to argue with the Black Council? Are we to ignore our own consciences, while you don't? Cyaraxes and Jumica may have been your parents, but we knew them our entire lives. They shouldn't have had to lie about Thiacene. They shouldn't have been put in that position."

You don't know the half of it, Thraxis thought grimly. But he couldn't argue. Instead, he flung up his arms in a gesture of defeat. "All right! You win. Just remember this when you find yourselves banished to the outer rims of civilization to study the mating habits of field mice."

* * * *

In the end, their punishment was not that severe. Predictably, the Black Council was in a rage. Also predictably, they were convinced that Thraxis was behind the sudden streak of rebelliousness emerging in the Sanctum. However, as he was needed in order to find Xaqqara, Vilhardouin decided that the obvious course would be to discourage his followers. As a result, all were sent to work the fields, with the admonishment that no use of magic would be allowed to make the tasks easier. Although the labor was difficult, no one recanted.

Thiacene and Arrow were away from the Sanctum for most of the day, and Thraxis began to worry that his sister had decided to defy the Black Council by heading out after their parents. But the two women returned that evening, shortly after dinner. Thiacene looked sweaty and exhausted. Ignoring all comments and looks, both sympathetic and hostile, she went straight to her own quarters and locked the door behind her.

Concerned, Thraxis went to Arrow. She stood at the bottom of the stair leading up to Thiacene's quarters, staring up it as if she could still see the girl. To his surprise, she looked almost as tired as Thiacene. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"We went out to the desert. I showed her how to ride." Arrow shrugged, and he saw that her pale shoulders had been burned red by the sun.

"Thank you for being her friend," he said, taking her hands.

She gave him a wan smile. "I like her. She reminds me of you in some ways."

"Poor girl."

“Quite.”

Beautiful Girl wandered in, caught sight of Thraxis, and bounded over with her tail wagging furiously. She really was getting large, Thraxis reflected. How long would it be before he found himself reliving his argument about keeping her, only this time with Vilhardouin instead of Anarete?

“At least someone still has some energy,” Arrow said wryly, scratching the hound behind one of her ears. Beautiful Girl stared up adoringly out of her mismatched eyes. “I think I need to go to bed.”

Thraxis frowned. “Are you feeling well?” He reached out to touch her face, intending to invoke his healing magic, but she pulled away.

“I’m fine,” she said quickly. “Just tired after being in the sun all day. Why don’t you take Beautiful Girl outside, where she can run off some of those high spirits?”

“All right.” He watched her go, worry gnawing at him. It wasn’t like her to be so listless.

“Thraxis?” said a soft, familiar voice from behind him.

Startled out of his worry for Arrow, he turned and saw Cynixia standing alone in the hall behind him. She had grown into a small, delicate woman whose red robes always seemed too large for her frame. Braids failed to tame her explosion of curly hair, giving her a slightly harried appearance. A golden chain hung from her waist, and an array of enchanted lenses dangled from it. Her small hands twisted and plucked nervously at the lenses, as if she wished to use them to examine him the way she examined the movements of her beloved stars and planets.

“Hello, Cynixia,” he said, wondering what she could want. Beautiful Girl padded over and looked at the other Athraskani askance, her ears cocked to the side, as if in confusion.

Cynixia drew back in fright. “Does it bite?”

“No.” Thraxis whistled the dog over. “I was just getting ready to take her outside.”

“May I join you?”

Now his curiosity was truly piqued. *She wants something. But what?* He’d had little to do with her over the last few years and could not imagine where this sudden interest came from. Perhaps Vilhardouin had sent her, remembering their long-ago association.

He kept his suspicions to himself. “Of course. Let’s go into the garden.”

The night air was cooling rapidly. The scents of river water and damp earth filled the wind, and Thraxis breathed deeply, feeling invigorated. The strident song of insects dinned in his ears, accompanied by the far-off bellow of some large creature. Beautiful Girl raced away into the garden, tail wagging furiously as she paused here and there to investigate some interesting smell before dashing off again.

Cynixia slipped her hand into the crook of Thraxis’ arm. He found himself thinking that Arrow would never make such a gesture because it would seem too dependent, and she had been raised from birth to show no signs of weakness. What would it be like to be married to someone like Cynixia instead, who would look to him for support and be content to live in his shadow?

“You look well,” Cynixia said after a brief silence.

“As do you.”

“I wanted to come to you that last night in the Sanctum Majoris, before you left to find Balthazar,” she said unexpectedly.

He thought back to that night, when no one had knocked on his door to wish him well or express regret that they would never see him again. “Why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t have sounded stupid. ‘Sorry you’re dying, Thraxis. Have a nice trip.’”

He chuckled. “I see your point. Think nothing of it, Cynixia.”

She glanced up at him, but he was unable to read the expression in her golden eyes. “Still, I’m sorry.” Her hand tightened on his arm. “But enough of sad things. It’s been a long time since you took me for a walk in a garden. Do you remember that night?”

“My first kiss? Of course I do.” He shook his head in amazement. “We were so young then.”

“Yes.” Her expression grew troubled, and she looked away, seeming to study the stars. “And happy. What happened?”

Thraxis couldn’t remember being particularly happy, then or any other time during his adolescence.

Still, it seemed rude to tell her that, so he simply said, “We grew up.”

“Yes,” she said again, sadly. “Are you happy, Thraxis?”

“Yes.”

“Truly?” She stopped and stared up at him with sudden intensity. “I know that you married that barbarian woman you left the Sanctum with. They say that you did it to escape Melilandra.”

“Damn it! What are we—mages, or a bunch of old fishwives, gossiping in the market? Who said that?”

“I don’t know—several people. But that girl, Kalika, grew angry with them. She said that the barbarian is your *amria*.”

“And did anyone else even know the word?”

“Oh yes. Gallinarches did. He told Kalika that she was too old to believe in such nonsense and said that she should be bred as soon as possible to rid her of such notions.”

Thraxis’ heart went cold. By all that was true, did the Black Council in their paranoia intend to start treating everyone the way they had treated Melilandra and him? “What did she say?”

“She was furious. I thought she might strike him. But then she just turned and left. I think she was afraid that she would jeopardize her Vows if she stayed to argue.” Cynixia waved a dismissive hand. “But that’s not the point. We were talking about you. Surely *you* don’t think that this barbarian is your soul mate.”

“Her name is Arrow,” Thraxis said, letting his irritation show. “And she is.”

Cynixia looked genuinely surprised, as if she had expected him to deny it. “But that can’t be! Thraxis, she has nothing in common with you! She’s crude, she’s uneducated, she’s violent—what could you possibly have to talk about?”

“Clearly, more than you would think.”

“How can you honestly say that such a woman is for you? What about when you discovered the translation that will lead us to Xaqqara—did she share in the joy of your discovery? Was she proud of you? Did she even understand your accomplishment at all?”

Thraxis pulled his arm free of her grasp. The memory of arguing over Kefre instead of celebrating snagged at his heart, but he tried to dismiss it. “I am not having this discussion, Cynixia. Go back to Vilhardouin and tell her this won’t work.”

He marched back towards the Sanctum, anger seething in his belly. Beautiful Girl bounded after him, and he felt a flash of guilt over having forgotten her.

Still fuming, he went straight to the quarters he shared with Arrow. She was deeply asleep, lying on her side with one hand draped across her belly. Thraxis concentrated on walking quietly to the balcony.

The cool breeze drained away some of his rage. Perhaps Vilhardouin had sent Cynixia, as he had accused. If so, then she should realize that such a transparent plan to drive a wedge between him and Arrow would never work.

But perhaps Cynixia had only been asking out of real curiosity—even out of concern for him. Certainly he had asked himself the same questions when he realized that his *amria* was a barbarian.

And, really, what do we have in common? asked a small voice in the back of his mind. *It was one thing when we were traveling together, facing common danger and hardship. But now...*

It was true that their divergent interests had drawn them apart during the days. He had been involved with the effort to discover the lost city of their ancestors, and she had...he was not entirely certain what Arrow had been doing, except for gallivanting around the countryside with Kefre. He frowned at the memory of the handsome man’s flirtation with Arrow—and in front of her husband, no less! If he had dared that to Thraxis’ face, what had he dared when he had her alone for hours?

This is foolish, he told himself. I love Arrow. These doubts are ridiculous.

Still, he did not sleep well when at last he lay down at her side.

* * * *

Thraxis awoke with a start, his heart pounding in his ears. Sweat slicked his body and stuck uncomfortably to the sheets. For a moment he lay in confusion, still half-caught in a dream fog of

images: lips, breasts, and thighs. Then letting out a low moan, he sat up quickly, flinging back the sheets. The pale light of dawn leaked into the room through a narrow window, and he felt glad that there was no point in trying to get back to sleep.

What am I going to do?

When he stood up, his unbound hair brushed the backs of his knees, sending an involuntary shiver through him. It seemed as though any change in the wind sent his blood racing these days. During the daylight hours, he was intensely aware of the young women near him, of the way they smelled, the way their skin looked so soft, the way their breasts molded their robes. During the nights, it seemed that he dreamed incessantly of half-glimpsed expanses of skin, of the touch of hands and bodies.

Stumbling to the small bathing room attached to his cell, he spoke the spell word that caused warm water to tumble free from the mouth of a carved dragon. As he stood beneath the comforting stream, feeling it sluice away sweat and semen, he wondered again what he was going to do.

He might only be sixteen, he thought, but he was not a complete idiot. He had no illusions as to his physical or mental state, which he gathered was in fact normal for someone his age, male or female. He knew that, if the Black Council suddenly decided that now was the time to breed him—and why not get him started while he was young, so he'd have plenty of years of stud service left in him?—then they would succeed. No matter how much he hated Melilandra, if she showed up naked in his bed one night, he would never be able to control his lust. In a few years perhaps, but not now.

So far, he had gambled that the Black Council would still consider him too young. But what if they didn't? Somehow, he didn't think that he would be able to get off that road if they started him down it now.

Closing his eyes, he bowed his head, letting the water run off his skull and hair in a shining curtain. Gods, he had to do something to end this confusion, this pain. There had to be a way to keep them from getting what they wanted. If only he could somehow distance himself from these urges and feelings that gripped him, at least for a few more years.

And...perhaps there was a way.

He grasped eagerly at the seed of an idea. Perhaps...perhaps he could discover a spell that would kill physical desire without actually disrupting any of the necessary changes that were taking place in his body right now. Of course, if the Black Council found out about it, they would accuse him of breaking his Vow of obedience. They would threaten him, try to make him remove the spell. So it would have to be set so that even he couldn't break it.

But if he couldn't break it...then what? He didn't want to spend the rest of his life like a eunuch. He wanted—very badly—to find a woman who cared for him for his own sake, someone he could trust, someone with whom he could explore all the delights life had to offer. Perhaps he could set the spell so that it would break on some external signal, then.

Kahven's writings came back to him, and he smiled in sudden triumph. He would set the spell to break in the presence of his amria. That way there would be no mistakes, no uncertainties.

She would be a beautiful Athraskani witch, he thought dreamily, with dark hair and delicate hands. As he didn't know anyone that he would want to spend the rest of his life with, she must come from one of the minor Sanctum. She would be a red robe, most likely, confident in her own power but aware that he could—and would—do anything to protect her. During the day they would sit in the library and discuss the workings of magic, or the translations of ancient tongues, or the secret names of the wind—everything. And at night they would make love until the sun came up.

His body responded to the thought. Frowning a little, he ordered the water to stop and conjured a warm wind to dry him. What would be the effect of suddenly regaining the ability to feel desire after shutting it away for...how long? Why, it could be as long as two or three years before he met his one true love! Perhaps it would be best to make certain that the spell loosened

its hold only gradually, just to be safe. After all, he didn't want to offend her, whoever she was, by suddenly finding himself overcome by months of pent-up desire. Yes, a slow dissolution of the spell would be best. It would give them time to become friends first. That would be good.

Pulling his black robe over his head, Thraxis began to plan .

Chapter Nine: Order in the Pack

Vilhardouin wasted no time in mounting the search for Xaqqara. Now that the Sanctum was completely under her control, she immediately diverted all resources to the expedition. By the next morning, a caravan of carts waited in the courtyard, packed with every kind of food and supplies imaginable. Oxen shifted in their traces, while anxious novices held the reins of the great animals. No fewer than thirty mages had been ordered to present themselves for the journey, and their robes formed a dazzling rainbow as they wove in and out between the carts.

Vilhardouin stood on the steps, her arms folded as she surveyed the activity below. Arrow cast the old witch a nervous glance as she led her horses around to the courtyard, Beautiful Girl trotting at her heels. Although she had not been commanded to appear, Arrow hoped that the Athraskani leaders would not object to her presence, either. And if they did...well, she had no intention of letting Thraxis go anywhere with that nest of vipers without someone to watch his back.

"I don't see why I had to come," Viabold grouched. He had abandoned the Athraskani braids this morning in favor of a simple tail, and his demeanor and red-rimmed eyes made her think that he had been up far too late saying goodbye to both the wine cellar and the petite herbalist.

"Because the gods hate you," Arrow suggested.

"Thank you, my dear, that is of great comfort."

"Anything for a friend."

Thraxis appeared at the head of the stairs leading to the court. His hood was drawn up against the morning sun, but the tip of his long nose protruded from the shadows. His mouth was set in a tight line, and he held himself stiffly, arms folded across his chest. Arrow remembered that look well from their first travels together, when he had been convinced that she would seize upon any mistake or shortcoming as proof that he was an idiot. It occurred to her that this journey was predicated on his ability to translate the writing on an old pottery fragment. If he mistranslated, or if the landmarks had changed sufficiently in the last several hundred years, then he would have inconvenienced the entire Sanctum, dragged thirty mages across the desert, and generally made himself look like a fool. For Thraxis, it would be the ultimate humiliation. No wonder he looked defensive.

At some signal she was not privy to, the caravan suddenly began to order itself. Mages climbed into their covered carts, drivers—including Kefre—took up their reins, and onlookers moved back. Vilhardouin went to the lead cart. After an almost imperceptible hesitation, Thraxis followed her.

The caravan made its slow way to the nearby ruins, which would serve as their starting point. From there, they curved back around towards the river; apparently, the ancients had also clung close to the strip of fertile land between water and desert. All day, they continued south, passing countless fields and towns. Men and women paused in working the fields, some of them pointing excitedly. Two children tried to run alongside, until their mothers snatched them up and rushed off in the opposite direction, perhaps fearful that the wizards would steal their young.

Beautiful Girl kept pace easily with the slow carts, and Arrow found herself envying the dog's energy. The sun beat down until her head ached, despite the protective burnoose she wore. Viabold hovered nearby, urging water on her at every opportunity, and she suspected that he would have advised her against making this journey if he'd thought she might listen.

Her suspicions were confirmed when they halted at midday to eat and allow the Athraskani time to meditate. When Arrow went down to the river to splash water on her face, Viabold followed on her heels. Glancing about to make sure that they were alone, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

She shrugged. "Tired."

“Any nausea?”

“No—your tea helped with that.”

When the troubled look didn't leave his gold eyes, she sighed. “I'm not an invalid, Viabold.”

“I don't like you taking jaunts across the desert in your condition.”

“You make it sound as though I have some deadly illness.”

“I'm just concerned for the baby.”

Arrow ran a hand through her sweat-soaked hair. “She's Skald. We don't stop moving every time a woman gets pregnant.”

“That's because your people normally don't have an option. But *you* do.”

She looked at him steadily. “Do you really think there's something wrong, or are you just worrying?”

He hesitated, then sighed and sat down by her. “As far as I can tell, you're both healthy as can be. I just don't want anything to change that.”

She patted his shoulder. “I do appreciate you looking out for us.”

“I'd feel a lot better about it if Thraxis was looking out for you too.”

Arrow stiffened. “I said I would tell him in my own time.”

“But—”

“No! Leave me alone to deal with this!” She stood up quickly, heart beating hard, and started back towards the caravan. Viabold followed on her heels.

* * * *

In the weeds by the river, power rippled. Gallinarches appeared by a low palm tree, frightening away a flock of birds who had thought the space unoccupied. As he watched Arrow and Viabold leave, a slow, cruel smile touched his lips.

He knew a secret.

* * * *

That evening, they pitched camp in a place where the river was interrupted by a long, low island. As the Athraskani set up tents that magically unfolded from small squares of cloth, Arrow went in search of her husband. She caught sight of him standing on the bank, holding up his shard of pottery and staring at the island. Beside him stood Vilhardouin and the Beautiful Melilandra.

“As you can see, the writer mentions an island shaped like the blade of a spear. As this is the only large island that comes close to the description, it isn't unreasonable to conclude that this is the one he wrote of,” Thraxis was saying. “He mentions some sort of shrine on it where they stopped to make an offering.”

“We can look for that later,” Vilhardouin decided. “How much farther to Xaqqara?”

“Assuming that we are not travelling much slower than the writer was, then two more days should be sufficient.”

The head of the Black Council nodded shortly, turned, and walked away without further conversation. But Melilandra leaned in a little closer to Thraxis. “Excellent work,” she said.

He looked at her as if she had sprouted a second head. “What?”

She shrugged, the movement an elegant ripple. “We may have had our differences in the past, but surely I can congratulate you on this. Neither of us are fools—I can appreciate the skill it took to decipher the map, such as it is.”

His black brows drew together slightly, but he only said, “Thank you, Melilandra.”

Unreasoning jealousy sent a twinge through Arrow's heart. She knew intellectually that Thraxis had no interest in Melilandra, had in fact always hated the woman. But her gut only understood that Melilandra was perfect in all the ways that men—in Arrow's belief, anyway—appreciated. Clenching her hands into fists, she strode over to them.

Melilandra glanced at her, and Arrow saw nothing but contempt in her eyes. Then the Athraskani woman turned and sauntered away.

“Perhaps I should ask Cynixia to check the sky for portents,” Thraxis mused.

Shooting one last glare at Melilandra’s back, Arrow folded her arms across her chest and looked out across the river. “Why is that?”

“Melilandra was actually civil to me. I expect next that we shall see the sun fall from the sky, or rivers run uphill, or cows devour lions.”

Arrow grinned in spite of herself. Thraxis slipped an arm around her and they watched the sun go down together.

* * * *

After dinner, Thraxis went off to discuss matters further with Vilhardouin and the human drivers. Arrow crouched outside their tent, watching the stars and looking for familiar patterns. Everything was calm and silent, until Beautiful Girl suddenly raised her head and growled.

Startled at the uncharacteristic sound—the hound was one of the quietest she had ever known—Arrow rose to her feet, her hand going to rest on her sword hilt. A tinkling laugh sounded out of the night, making her want to growl herself.

“Silly human,” Melilandra said, amused. She was nothing but a shadow in the darkness, but Arrow heard her words as if they had been standing at arm’s length. “You and that hideous dog are well-matched, aren’t you? Both ugly, both begging for scraps, both tagging after your master’s steps.”

Instinct urged Arrow to respond with violence. Instead, she forced herself to take a deep breath. “Leave,” she said levelly.

“Do you really think that you can keep him interested? Ignorant child. You have nothing to offer him, either in or out of bed. They say that none can give pleasure like the Athraskani—as I’m sure you know for yourself. Such a shame that you lack the reciprocal magic that could make things *really* interesting. In time, he’ll grow tired of an imbecile who can be no more than a half-measure in the blankets.”

“Go away,” Arrow grated between clenched teeth.

The laughter came again, but the shadow had disappeared. Swearing mentally, trying not to appear as though the cruel words had affected her, Arrow beat a hasty retreat into the tent. But as she lay there alone, waiting for her husband to return, she began to wonder. Were there things she could not give him that an Athraskani woman could? Was he aware of it—and did he ever ask himself what he might be missing?

* * * *

At dawn the next day, the caravan turned away from the river and headed out into the desert.

Without the river’s life-giving water, the lands at first seemed utterly abandoned by all creatures. Line after line of monotonous dunes, broken only occasionally by high escarpments of weathered stone, stretched as far as the eye could see. The dry air held no scent except that of dust.

But as time went on, Arrow began to realize that there was life in the desert after all. Rabbits, lizards, owls, and other creatures made their home here, although they seldom ventured out save at dusk or dawn. The sight of their spoor amazed her, for she would not have believed that anything could have survived in this barren land, which burned by day and froze by night.

Tempers grew short, even among the Athraskani. The narrow wheels of the carts were unsuited for travel over the sand, so spells had to be cast to cause them to ride atop the shifting ground. These spells, which were considered drudgery beneath the notice of the greater powers, had to be constantly maintained, and the drain quickly wore the spell-casters thin. Arguments broke out here and there among the carts, like dangerous sparks near dry tinder. Remembering the scenes of destruction on the ancient ruins, Arrow wondered if the Athraskani had indeed changed from their ancestors, or if their violent impulses were simply held in check by the Vows and the Black Council.

By day, she rode near the back with Viabold, trying to avoid Melilandra. That did not prove difficult, as the exquisite mage remained in the lead cart with Thraxis and Vilhardouin. Noticing the glower that sometimes felt like Arrow’s permanent expression, Viabold tried to cheer her up, but after a day of the unrelenting desert heat even his good spirits failed.

By night, Arrow retreated into the tent she shared with Thraxis. The journey had exhausted her more than she had thought it would, and it was often hard to stay awake through dinner. Perhaps fortunately, it wore on Thraxis as well, and any amorous feelings were restricted to cuddling under the blankets. Although she tried to forget Melilandra's hateful words, the last thing Arrow wondered every night before sleep claimed her was whether there was not some truth in them.

As the third day of their journey came to a close, the carts rolled up a hill and came to a sudden halt. Curious, Arrow urged Nightwing to the front of the line. An odd silence fell over the Athraskani, and she felt trepidation grip her as the horse crested the dune.

Before them lay a vast escarpment, its weathered rock dyed red as blood in the setting sun. It curved around like a pair of protective arms, forming a valley sheltered from the wind on three sides. The ground within looked to be rocky hardpan rather than shifting dune.

And there, embraced by stone, lay ruins that dwarfed anything she had seen before. Even from a distance, she could glimpse colossal statues, buildings as large as hills, and worked stones bigger than a yurt.

Even ruined, it was awe-inspiring. And terrifying.

"Xaqqara," whispered Thraxis, standing up in the cart and almost putting his head through the canopy. He didn't seem to notice, though, his pale yellow eyes fixed on the scene before them. Eagerness lit his face from within, and a smile of anticipation stretched his lips.

But it is an evil place! Arrow wanted to scream. She could *feel* it, like worms crawling in her belly, like a dead hand on her lips. But, looking at the awe and joy on the faces of the Athraskani around her, she knew that they would never listen.

What do I know? she thought bitterly. *I'm just an ignorant barbarian, after all.*

But she knew. She knew.

* * * *

Almost two weeks passed before Thraxis was at last ready to put his plan into action . He had spent all of his free time researching everything he thought he would need to know to craft his spell, and then had gone over it again and again in his mind, trying to be sure of every detail.

Even so, the night he finally gathered together everything he would require, he could still feel fear and doubt gnawing at his heart . No book referenced any spell like the one he would attempt tonight—what if it didn't work? Or what if he had made some mistake? What if the spell never broke? Or what if that part worked as planned, but he nonetheless erred and effected his development as a man?

At least my voice has already changed, he thought wryly. And at least eunuchs grow taller, not shorter, than other men.

In the end, though, he almost could not go through with it . The self-doubt that had plagued him for so many years filled his chest with ice and made his hands shake. What if he was doing the wrong thing? He was breaking his Vow of obedience, wasn't he? What if something went awry with the spell? What if someone found out?

The memory of Vilhardouin's words, spoken two years ago in the garden, came back to him forcefully . If he relented and had children with Melilandra and the other women that the Black Council selected for him, he would never be allowed to be a father to them. They would all be raised by the Black Council, just as he and Melilandra had been. And, yes, Melilandra might be Vilhardouin's natural daughter, but he honestly didn't think that she had received any more affection from the woman than he had. Would a grandchild be any different?

Knowing that his courage would break if he thought about it any longer, he quickly pulled a table to the center of his small room and set up the components and herbs he needed for the spell, including a small bowl of his own blood and semen . Once everything was in place, he removed his clothing, conjured a veil around himself and the table to contain the magic within, and descended into a light trance.

The enchantment was a hybrid, cobbled together from healing spells, veils, and more arcane

magics . Concentrating to the utmost, he spoke the ritual words precisely and invoked his power with exactitude . Despite his nervousness, his hand did not shake when he used the contents of the bowl to draw runes on his body.

The final word fell from his lips, and his hand stilled . For an instant, he thought nothing had happened.

Searing pain smote him, exploding in his groin and spreading out, sending tendrils of agony into his arms and legs . His body arched helplessly, and he heard himself scream just before blackness took him.

Chapter Ten: Xaqqara

The next morning, the expedition made its way into Xaqqara.

Beautiful Girl whined softly as Arrow pulled on her burnoose against the stronger sunlight that would come later in the day. Glancing at Vilhardouin and the others assembled for the exploration of the ancient city, Arrow reluctantly decided that the dog's presence would not be welcome. "Stay," she ordered firmly.

Beautiful Girl's head drooped, her mismatched eyes staring dolefully up. "I'll watch her," Kefre offered from where he was sorting through the supplies on one of the carts.

"Thanks," said Arrow, silently wishing that she could stay as well. The foreboding she had felt on first seeing the ruined city had not dissipated. If anything, it had only increased, until her stomach was tight and her muscles tense. She had not experienced such trepidation since her first few Challenges.

Why am I feeling this way? she wondered as she joined the wizards who would go into the city. I've never been given to premonitions, so is it just paranoia and nothing more?

I've never had premonitions before—but I've never been pregnant with a wizard child before, either .

The early light of the sun turned the sky an odd golden-blue as they approached the enormous ruins. Arrow craned her head back to see the tops of the weathered stones, feeling like an insect crawling across some vast plain. It would take years, perhaps decades, to explore every structure in the city, and she hoped that Thraxis intended only to view a few of the outermost.

Closer up, it was easier to see the magnitude of the destruction wrought on the city. Ancient flames had blackened many of the stones, and some had been scattered over a wide distance, as if flung by a giant hand. Although inscriptions and carvings covered every available surface, a few appeared deliberately effaced, the stone itself melted by some great power.

Two colossi flanked the entrance to the valley; despite centuries of wind and sand, their features were still fresh and sharp. A man and a woman, they stood facing outward, each with a hand lifted as if to halt intruders. Their hair was long and straight, their features forbidding. The man wore only a simple kilt and the woman a plain dress, much like the humans of Djoser. Some titanic power had cracked the head of the man, so that sunlight showed through a seam down the center of his face.

As they passed by the colossi, Arrow felt her legs try to slow, as if she walked through mud. Her heart began to beat faster, distorting her perceptions further. Dread pooled in her heart like cold water, and her hands began to shake.

"Are you all right?" Viabold whispered, startling her. Although the rest of the Athraskani were too intent on the city to pay attention, he stared fixedly at her face. "You look pale—maybe you should go back to the carts and stay there."

"N-no," she managed to say. "I'm fine. I just...I don't like it here."

The look of concern did not leave his face. Clearly not believing her reassuring words, he reached for her wrist, no doubt intending to use his magic to check on her health. But before he could touch her, a low grinding noise sounded behind them.

Startled, Arrow turned around and discovered that the sound came from the colossi. Even as she watched, they twisted slowly, until they no longer faced outwards but instead in towards the city. Then

the male slowly lifted a foot, the stone of his body flowing and shifting as easily as muscle.

The movement broke her from her paralysis. "Look out!" she shouted.

The hindmost Athraskani saw the danger and broke into a run, save for one youth, who stood gaping at the colossus, a wet stain spreading across the front of his robes. As the foot descended, he held up his hands, and a faint flash of fire bloomed against the indifferent stone. A moment later, the foot struck the ground with titanic force, shaking the earth so that small stones skittered across it, obliterating the trapped youth into nothing more than a bloody smear.

"By all that's true," Viabold whispered, his face gone white.

The main body of the Athraskani had come to a halt and turned to face the danger. Vilhardouin's face was pale, but determination deepened the lines around her mouth. "Stop that thing!" she ordered. As one, she and the other five black-robed mages fell into a line. Arrow felt the hair on her arms rise as the air filled with chants and words of power. Grabbing Viabold by the arm, she dragged him bodily after her, intent on putting as much distance between them and the battle as possible.

The efforts of the mages failed. The colossi never faltered—rather, their footfalls *increased* in speed, as if they had just awakened from long sleep and were still shaking the feeling back into their legs. Ignoring the flares of powers around it, the male bent over and snatched up a fleeing figure, crushing it into pulp between huge fingers.

Whatever discipline the Athraskani had maintained disappeared after that. Suddenly the street was full of running mages. One man outstripped the rest—and then suddenly vanished in a blaze of fire that enveloped him in a concussive blast.

Arrow was flung hard to the side by the explosion, striking first Viabold and then a nearby wall. She rolled to her feet fast, heart pounding and sword in her hand. Nothing remained of the incinerated man but a charred skeleton, and screams filled the air as the panicking wizards either froze in their tracks or fled back towards the colossi. A few darted off into side streets, and Arrow heard more muffled explosions.

Two dark figures ran towards her. Thraxis grabbed her arm, while Thiacene helped Viabold to his feet.

"Are you all right?" Thraxis demanded.

She managed to nod, unable to speak well as her body tried to speed past normal human limits. "Come on," Thraxis said grimly, and led them all into a side street. He stepped carefully, apparently scanning the air in front of him for something, then suddenly stopped. "Everyone flatten yourselves against the east wall for the next ten paces," he instructed. "There is another trap in front of us."

They did as he said. Arrow felt her skin prickle as she passed by the unseen trap, and she closed her eyes, wishing that she had insisted they never come here. As soon as they were past, Thraxis ducked into a dark hole that had once been a doorway. Tumbled masonry prevented them from going more than a few steps into the ruined building, but at least they were out of sight of the colossi.

"What's going on?" Thiacene demanded as soon as they had come to a halt. "Who set these traps for us?"

Thraxis shook his head. The run had winded him, and he paused to wipe sweat out of his eyes. "I doubt they were set for us at all. Remember, the city was abandoned during the middle of a war. My guess is that both sides littered the place with pockets of lethal magic, hoping to destroy as many of their unwary enemies as they could."

"Wonderful," snapped Viabold. Blood trickled from a shallow cut on his forehead. "And couldn't at least one of you great scholars have thought of this *before* you led the lot of us into a death trap?"

"I didn't think any of the old magic would linger after all this time."

"And never considered that you might be wrong? I hope you remember this conversation when Arrow or I get blown to pieces, or squashed by some damned walking statue!"

Thraxis' face went pale with a mixture of anger and fear. "Why are you blaming *me* for this? I didn't ask either of you to come here!"

"Stop arguing," Arrow snapped. She pulled her gaze from the street outside to glare at them both. "Laying blame won't help anything now. And I'm sorry if you don't want Viabold and me here, Thraxis,

but we can't exactly leave at the moment."

"That isn't what I meant."

"We'll argue about it later." She listened intently, feeling the throb of the approaching colossi through the soles of her feet. There came a tremendous crash, and she caught sight of a stone block the size of a barge flying through the air. "It sounds as if the colossi are ripping apart the city to get to us. We can't stay here."

"What about the others?" Thiacene asked uncertainly.

Arrow shook her head. "For now, we're going to have enough trouble keeping ourselves alive. We have to get out of this city."

"How?" Viabold asked. "The colossi are blocking the only way out. Unless you can fly over the escarpment. As high as it is, I think even Thraxis would have trouble with that."

"Viabold's right," Thraxis admitted reluctantly. "There must be some way of stopping the colossi, though. Someone put the activating spell on them—it stands to reason that they must have had some way of deactivating them as well."

"Unless it was a spell of last resort, and they didn't care what happened after," Viabold pointed out.

"I don't think so. The traps in the street are one thing—small magics that could have been set by one or two people. But the colossi are different. I wonder if they weren't originally intended to protect the city."

The crash of falling masonry shook the ground under them. "If so, they're not doing a very good job of it," Thiacene muttered as sand sifted down from the ceiling.

"If they were part of a public work instead of a personal vendetta," Thraxis went on, "there would have to be some way of controlling them."

"And how on earth are we going to find it?" Viabold demanded. The ground shuddered again, nearly knocking him from his feet.

"How about we look for a building that seems important? The inscriptions at the outpost suggested that there was a centralized building where the rulers lived called the 'House of Light.' That would be a logical place to start."

Arrow took a step back as a shadow darkened the end of the little street. "Then we'd better start now," she warned.

His face grim, Thraxis slid past her into the open. "Follow me."

They ran as fast as they were able. Fallen masonry littered the street, tripping them, and twice they had to slow to maneuver past the deadly traps. Behind them, the female colossus towered up, her blank stone eyes sweeping the ruins for movement. Catching sight of them, she began to move their way.

"Quick!" Thraxis said, voice short from exertion. "We need to find an alley too small for her to fit through!"

The colossus picked up the pace now that she had focused on them. The ground shook with every footfall, and a wall to their left suddenly collapsed from the vibrations. Thiacene shrieked as stone blocks rained down around her. Without thought, Arrow leapt towards the cowering girl, grabbing her around the waist and shoving her out of the way. A block caught Arrow's shoulder painfully, spinning her around and flinging her to the ground.

Thraxis turned and ran back towards her, but Viabold was there first, pulling her to her feet even as the colossus' sandal slammed down only a few paces away. The older wizard shoved her in Thraxis' direction, and all four of them ducked into the narrow slot of an alley.

"Are you all right?" Thraxis demanded, grabbing her hand.

"I'm fine! Just run!"

They pelted headlong down the alley, not stopping to look back when the crash of falling stone sounded close behind them. It quickly grew more distant, however, as the narrow slot between buildings foiled the colossus. Although she knew the respite was only temporary, Arrow felt some of the tension and fear drain from her body.

Fire bloomed in the narrow alley, accompanied by a crash that blotted out all other sound, leaving

her momentarily deafened. For an instant she saw Thraxis silhouetted against flames; then, the bluish aura of a protective veil snapped into place. Even so, Thraxis was flung back into Thiacene, knocking them both to the ground.

“Damn it!” Thraxis swore, propping himself up on his elbows. The smell of scorched hair filled the air, and Arrow saw that his eyebrows and lashes looked decidedly singed. The front of his robe smoldered, and he cursed again and beat it out with his hands.

“Be careful, lad,” Viabold said, rather unnecessarily in Arrow’s opinion. “You almost got us all turned to charcoal!”

“Shut up, you old fool, unless you want to lead instead.” Thraxis rose unsteadily, and Arrow caught him by the elbow. Their eyes met briefly, and he offered her a wry smile. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s all right.” She tightened her grip on his arm, then let go. “We’ve been in worse places than this, remember.”

“I haven’t,” Thiacene muttered.

“Then you’re with the right people,” Thraxis told her. “Disaster follows us like our shadows. Now, unless Viabold wants to go first, I suggest we continue on.”

This time, Thraxis held them to a slower pace. Fortunately, no more traps presented themselves. They followed the alley to its end, then wove their way through a maze of narrow streets, until Arrow began to wonder whether Thraxis had some destination in mind or was simply taking them in circles. The far-off sounds of falling stone and giant’s steps continued, punctuated every now and then by a scream or cry for help. Thiacene’s face went pale at the sounds, but she said nothing.

Eventually, the alleyway they were in came to an end. Beyond stretched an open plaza lined with columns supporting nothing but sky. At the south end of the plaza towered a building that was large even by Xaqqara’s standards. Even from a distance, Arrow could make out the ornate bas-reliefs that decorated the walls.

“That must be the House of Light,” Thraxis murmured, staring at the structure thoughtfully.

Viabold squinted in the harsh sunlight, making the lines around his eyes even deeper. “So how are we supposed to get there without *them* noticing?” he asked, pointing at the northern end of the plaza.

The two colossi were there, Arrow saw with a sinking heart. The female was busy tearing the roof off a house, no doubt in search of cowering interlopers, but the male was staring about watchfully. The crack in his head made his appearance even more ghastly, and Arrow shivered as she imagined his gaze falling on her.

“We’ll have to run for it,” she said.

“Easy for you to say,” Viabold muttered.

She drew her sword, although what good it would possibly do she didn’t know. “Thiacene, you and Viabold go first,” she said calmly. “Thraxis and I will distract them if necessary.”

“No.” Viabold seized her arm urgently. Startled, she looked into his golden eyes and saw his concern. Although he didn’t violate her wishes by speaking his worry aloud, she knew that he wasn’t going to let a pregnant woman play decoy for his safety.

“We’ll be fine,” she said gently. Let the others think she referred to Thraxis with that “we.”

“I can’t let you do this.”

“No one else *can* do it. Don’t worry—I’m fast enough not to get stepped on. Besides, you have to look out for Thiacene, right?”

Thiacene looked indignant, but Viabold winced. “I...suppose,” he said reluctantly.

Arrow stepped up beside Thraxis, and together they watched the colossi. She could feel the tension radiating from his body and knew that he could feel it from hers. The male colossus turned his head slowly, sweeping his stony gaze across the plaza, down through the smaller buildings, and back towards the entrance to the city.

“Now,” Thraxis whispered.

Thiacene set off across the dusty plaza at a dead run, black robes flying behind her. But Viabold hesitated.

“Arrow—” he started.

“Now, damn you!” she shouted, turning on him. His face blanched, but then he glanced over her shoulder towards the colossi. Mouth tightening sharply, he spun on his heel and followed Thiacene.

Too late.

A deep rumbling sound came from the male colossus as it spied Viabold’s fleeing figure. The sound caught the attention of the female, who stopped her destruction of the house and turned towards the plaza. In eerie concert, the two began to stride forward, their enormous legs making nothing of the space between.

“Damn Viabold,” Arrow muttered and launched herself into the open as well.

The colossi glanced at her, then back at Viabold, their attention divided. “Here!” shouted Arrow, waving her sword wildly so that sunlight glanced off the bronze blade. “I am the Arrow that Flies the Farthest, Champion of the Red Feather Clan! I am not afraid of two piles of rock! I am the wind that will wear you away; I am the rain that will carry you off!”

Even if the colossi were capable of understanding human speech, Arrow doubted their creators had endowed them with knowledge of Skaldai. But either her shouting, the sunlight off her blade, or the fact that she was making no attempt to hide was enough to draw their attention away from Viabold and onto her.

With a casualness that made Arrow’s blood run cold, the female colossus scooped up an obelisk many times larger than a man and flung it at her.

Time seemed to slow to the crawling of an ant as Arrow’s body finally gave itself over to the berserker nature that Balthazar had given her. She had time to leisurely watch the gradual lifting of a gigantic foot, the ripple of a stone arm. The obelisk drew a graceful arc through the air, flipping end over end, and she sprang to one side, knowing that it would miss her easily. Even so, she caught sight of a glimmer of power, the flash of a protective veil against the sun-washed sky, and a moment later the obelisk was slapped aside in the opposite direction of the one she took. Her husband, it seemed, was not taking any chances.

They led the colossi in elaborate dance, all the while retreating across the broad plaza towards the House of Light. Arrow sped in and out of the legs of the stone giants, even scoring a gash across the stone with the edge of her bronze blade. The statues began to fling more parts of the city in frustration, but Thraxis slapped the missiles aside each time, sending them careening away harmlessly. Even so, he and Arrow dropped back towards the relative safety of the building as quickly as they could, for neither of them could keep up such a defense indefinitely. At last, Arrow broke away from the two colossi, crossing the final few yards to the portico in a final burst of speed. Thraxis was already there; he grabbed her about the waist and hauled her inside, even as the female colossus stamped her foot down inches from their refuge.

As Arrow’s heart returned to its normal pace, she found herself shaking with reaction. Viabold seized her wrists, glaring at her, but she pulled free. “I’m fine,” she managed.

Thraxis pressed a flask of waxed linen into her hands, and she took a long drink from it. The flask was enchanted to draw on the well back at the Sanctum, and so never ran low. Once she had drunk her fill, she felt a little better, and passed it back to Thraxis. Taking a deep breath of the painfully dry air, she looked around.

It took a few moments for her sun-blinded eyes to adjust to the shadows. Her first impression was of a truly enormous room lined with columns so wide that it would take three men to measure their circumference with out-stretched arms. Bas-reliefs, many still retaining bright flecks of paint, covered the walls in scenes of opulence and destruction. The cool stone floor was bare for the most part, but here and there odd lumps of what looked like desiccated leather or linen had been scattered about. Curious, Arrow crossed over to the nearest one and went down on her knees to look at it more closely.

Skin cured to leather by the dry air stretched tight over bone. The nose and eyes had collapsed, and the mouth was stretched unnaturally wide, as if in an unending scream, but it was clear what the huddled shape had once been. The great room was filled not with discarded lumps of clothing, but with dead bodies.

* * * *

When Thraxis regained consciousness, the pale light of dawn was already streaming in through the windows of his cell . His head ached, and his muscles were stiff from a night spent on a cold stone floor. Apparently, no one had heard his scream. Or else they just didn't care enough to investigate its cause.

Climbing to his feet, he stumbled blindly into the small water closet and washed the spell runes from his skin . Once he felt clean again, he went back into his room and either removed or destroyed all evidence of what he had done the night before.

By the time he went down to breakfast, nervousness had started to knot in his gut once again . How could he be certain that the spell had worked as intended? As usual, he found a lone seat away from everyone else, not even sparing a nod to the human servant who put food before him. Others began to drift in as he picked at his breakfast, and he deliberately turned his eyes to the young women, particularly Cynixia and Melilandra.

They were pleasant to look at, he decided, just as a fine piece of art might be pleasant to view . But that was all.

Emboldened by success, he pictured them naked, fantasized about touching them . Nothing. The spell had worked.

When Vilhardouin and the rest of the Black Council came in, it was all Thraxis could do not to laugh in triumph .

Chapter Eleven: The Binding Spell

Arrow sprang back with a scream, her sword smashing down on the ancient corpse. A cloud of brown dust puffed up as the body partially disintegrated, and she cried out again in horror and disgust as some of it settled on her arms. Her heart thudding in her chest, she dropped into a crouch, waiting for the attack to begin.

“Arrow! What is it?” Thraxis asked breathlessly, appearing almost instantly by her side. His yellow eyes scanned the room in alarm. “What happened?”

She swallowed, her mouth dry from more than the desert air. “Those shapes...they are bodies,” she managed to whisper.

Thiacene strode over and nudged the nearest corpse with her toe. “So? They’ve been dead a long time—centuries, I’d guess. It’s not like they’re going to stand up and attack us.”

“Be silent,” Thraxis snapped. When his sister gave him a hurt look, he relented a little. “You haven’t seen the things we have, Thiacene.”

“It’s just like the kurgan,” Arrow said against the invisible fist that threatened to squeeze shut her throat. Memories flooded her mind: the stench of decay, the dead warriors who ignored the wounds her sword made in them, the resurrected boy whose death she held herself responsible for. Cold and terror and guilt. And at the end of it all, Thraxis coughing blood, his life eaten away by the spell it took to put the dead to rest once again.

“I don’t feel any magic here,” Thraxis said calmly. His hand stroked her arm rhythmically, soothing. “It won’t be like the kurgan.”

Arrow shook her head in denial, knowing that her terror was irrational but unable to react otherwise.

“Well, then, if it is, we defeated them, didn’t we? Stood back to back and held them off? So if these dead know what’s good for them, they’ll stay nice and quiet.”

“You almost died.”

“Arrow, dearheart, that describes our entire journey.”

Arrow laughed shakily, even though it wasn’t very funny. Thraxis put his arm around her shoulders and drew her against him. “It’s going to be all right. We’re going to walk out of this room and deeper into

the building. Just don't look at them."

He led her across the room to a small door set in the opposite wall. Arrow kept her attention focused on the door, but her hand gripped her sword so hard that her fingers ached. She had the feeling that Thiacene was investigating the corpses further, but decided not to look.

Eventually, they reached the sanctuary of the door. A narrow hall ran back a short way, then opened up into a room that seemed small in comparison to the vast space they had just been in. Arrow closed her eyes and slumped against a wall, willing her breathing to slow and the trembling in her limbs to stop. Viabold came up beside her, a look of concern stamped on his face, and she managed a shaky smile for him. "I'm fine. I just need a moment."

"You didn't say anything about being attacked by the dead before," Thiacene said accusingly.

Arrow looked up to find Thiacene glaring at Thraxis. The girl held a small ebony wand the length of her forearm in one hand. A small figurine of a griffin topped the wand.

Thraxis' attention was also drawn to the wand. "What do you have there?"

"I don't know—I found it on the floor by one of the bodies. Stop avoiding my question."

"You didn't ask a question," he pointed out, annoyance putting an edge on his deep voice. "I hardly intend on sharing every detail of my life with you, at any rate."

"I wouldn't call that a detail. Why didn't you mention it before, when you were supposedly telling us all how you went up to the steppes and defeated Balthazar?"

Thraxis flung up his arms in exasperation. "Because I didn't want to worry Cyaraxes and Jumica. Because it was terrible and frightening. Because everyone wanted to hear something entertaining, not about being afraid and cold and in pain all the time. What does it matter?"

Thiacene's expression had turned oddly solemn, and Arrow realized that she was seeing her brother in a new light. "Did you really stand back-to-back with Arrow and hold off the dead?"

"More or less." He turned brusquely away and went to contemplate the three doors leading from the room they were in. "And if we don't stop wasting our breath and try to find a way through this maze, we'll be joining the dead ourselves."

"Perhaps—but the colossi aren't attacking this building," Viabold pointed out.

Startled, Arrow listened intently for any sign of their enemy. Although she could hear a muffled banging and crashing, it sounded far away and was certainly not directed towards the House of Light.

Thraxis' lips thinned as he considered. "I don't know if that supports my theory that the way to stop them is here or not," he admitted finally. "But at least we don't have to worry about them bringing the roof down on our heads while we look about."

"Let's hurry, then, before we're the only ones left alive," Viabold suggested.

The doorway opened onto a long, confusing series of corridors and rooms. Many of them still contained the desiccated remnants of furniture: chairs inlaid with ivory and precious stones, broken and burned tables, and alabaster jugs. The ancient Athraskani had obviously been a people who loved decoration, and in that way Arrow felt closer to them than to their modern descendants. Every room was a work of art in itself, with even the floors and ceilings painted with stylized depictions of sky or river. The walls were also covered with scenes, some carved and others only painted. Many were domestic: a couple sitting with their children, a field full of workers harvesting grain, and dancers entertaining at a feast. But, as with the other works Arrow had seen, the images of war or violence were just as prevalent as those of peace.

"They ate animals," Thiacene said in disgust, staring at the feast scene.

"They did a lot of things we don't do," Viabold replied grimly.

"Including building structures that don't make any sense." Thraxis stopped and glared at the several corridors branching away in front of them. "The inscriptions aren't any help, either."

"How rude of them. You'd think they'd at least put up a sign saying 'this way if you're being pursued by giant statues.'"

Thraxis ignored Viabold's comment. "I think we should try the middle corridor," he decided at last.

Lead plaques, each engraved with a hieroglyph, decorated the walls of the corridor every few feet. Thraxis glanced at them with a puzzled frown, but did not stop to decipher their meaning. Not far down

the hallway, they came upon evidence of a battle. The walls looked as if the claws of some terrible beast had scored them. Two swords, one broken, lay on the floor, accompanied by a tall, bronze staff in the shape of a cobra. Only a few feet past, the hall came to an abrupt end.

“Good guess,” Viabold told Thraxis.

Arrow ignored their bickering, suddenly tense. There was something wrong here, she thought. Why would anyone build a corridor that didn’t lead anywhere? Unless it had originally gone somewhere, but had been walled off later. The only reasons to seal the end would be to conceal or protect whatever was there...or to make the hall itself into a trap.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” she said.

At that instant, Thraxis and Thiacene both cried out. Thiacene stumbled into the wall, grabbing at one of the lead plaques for support, while Thraxis sank to his knees. Viabold turned pale and looked about frantically, as if searching for something.

“What is it?” Arrow demanded, her heart starting to race again.

“I can’t—I can’t use my magic,” Viabold managed to say. He shook his head violently. “Feels like my head is stuffed with cotton.”

“What are you saying? That something’s happened to your power?”

Thraxis climbed to his feet. His face looked drawn, and sweat stood out across his brow. “Exactly. I think...I think it might be another trap.”

A low growling came from the end of the corridor, blocking their escape. Startled, Arrow whipped out her sword and put herself in front of the disabled wizards. From the shadows at the end of the hall, she could see glowing eyes and the flash of curved claws. Then, suddenly, there came the whistle of air through feathers, and a dark shape hurtled at her.

Time slowed as her body sped. She caught sight of a creature that looked part vulture and part lion. Its eyes glowed with a brilliant blue light, and an overwhelming stench of decay hung about it in a cloud. Then it was on her, and her sword curved up to meet it.

Its wings fanned out hard, and it swerved away from her before she could touch it. Even as it retreated, distracting her for a moment, two others came up on the side, their claws and rending beaks ready. Swearing silently, she caught one on her blade, cutting it deeply across the shoulder, but the other slipped past her guard.

The bronze staff that had lain on the floor came up between her and creature, blocking it. Arrow risked a glance over her shoulder and saw Thraxis clutching the staff with a grim look on his face. She dropped back to stand beside him, blocking the corridor and protecting the other two Athraskani.

The creatures returned in a swarm of wings and legs. Thraxis grunted as they rebounded off the snake staff, and Arrow remembered that he had not practiced such a defense since recovering from the death curse. Her sword pierced the throat of one of the creatures, and it fell to the ground, shrinking it on itself until it was nothing more than a small ebony figurine, similar to the one on the wand Thiacene had found.

Thraxis stumbled against her, buffeted by enormous, stinking wings. As he struggled to regain his footing, another slipped past him, headed for Thiacene and Viabold. “Look out!” he shouted, turning his back on the third creature in a desperate attempt to help his sister and friend.

The monster let out a startled shriek. Dropping back, Arrow glanced over her shoulder to see Thiacene in a crouch, the point of one of the fallen swords sticking through the creature’s chest and out its back. A moment later, it turned into a small figurine like the first.

Lifting the sword, Thiacene charged past Thraxis to meet their final attacker head-on. Arrow thought that the young Athraskani did surprisingly well for someone who had never before faced an opponent who actually intended to kill her. While Thraxis protected Viabold, the two women came together to slay the final creature—if “slay” was the right term for something that simply turned into a statuette when dealt what should have been a mortal blow.

Silence fell in the corridor. As her heart slowed back to normal, Arrow took assessment of their injuries. Thraxis had a line of scratches across his face, and probably some bruises under his robe, but nothing serious. Thiacene’s robe was torn at the shoulder, and blood leaked out of a nasty bite on her

upper arm. Viabold had wisely remained behind the fighters and escaped any harm.

“Come on,” Thraxis said at last. “Let’s get out of here before anything else shows up to kill us.”

As they walked back down the corridor, Thiacene’s face lit up. “My magic is back!”

Thraxis nodded. “There must be a spell on the corridor that blocked us from using it.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Viabold said. He shook his head, looking suddenly old. “I don’t like it. I don’t like to imagine such a thing in the hands of the Black Council.”

When they returned to the intersection, they stopped to rest for a few moments. As they passed the water flask around, Thraxis turned an angry look on Thiacene. “It seems I’m not the only one who hasn’t told everything,” he said.

She shrugged, suddenly looking everywhere but at him. “You won’t tell the Black Council, will you?”

“Where did you learn to use the sword?”

Thiacene’s lower lip took on a stubborn jut, her silence eloquent. Although she appreciated Thiacene’s loyalty, Arrow couldn’t let her shoulder all of the guilt. “Where do you think?” she asked.

Thraxis stared at her in genuine, if naïve, shock. “What? Why would you do such a thing? How could you?”

“I asked her,” Thiacene objected.

Thraxis ignored her in favor of his tirade against Arrow. “You know what our beliefs are, Arrow! By teaching her these things, you’ve led to her breaking her Vows!”

“That’s open to interpretation,” Arrow said, struggling to maintain a calm tone. “And Thiacene isn’t a child, Thraxis—she can make her own choices.”

His hands curled into fists. “She *is* a child. And now, thanks to you, she’s apostate!”

“Damn you!” Thiacene shouted suddenly. She flung the sword that she still clutched onto the ground, sending up a hellish racket. “*You’re* the one who’s apostate, Thraxis! You’re the one who won’t obey the Black Council! If you were a blue robe like Viabold, they would have thrown you out in the desert a long time ago! Worse—you’ve been spreading your heresy to Kalika and the rest. And yet you still have the *gall* to accuse *me* of breaking my Vows?”

Fire flashed in Thraxis’ yellow eyes. “That is an entirely different situation.”

“No, it isn’t! You’re just too damned self-righteous to see it! You think that your way is the only way, and everyone else should just shut up and fall in line. You’re no different than Vilhardouin.”

Thraxis’ mouth opened, then closed with a snap. Arrow wasn’t sure whether he was too outraged to speak, or if he saw something of the truth in Thiacene’s accusation. After a moment, he grabbed up the bronze staff and stalked angrily off towards the left-hand corridor, leaving the rest of them to follow or stay behind as they chose. With a sigh, Arrow hurried to catch up with him.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly once she had drawn abreast of him. “Thiacene needed a friend, and she wanted something to take her mind off her troubles. She was still reeling from the news that her parents had lied to her about her power. Losing them so soon after, when she still hadn’t forgiven them, was hard. The lessons gave her an opportunity to channel her anger and hurt.”

“I understand that,” Thraxis said after a pause. “But, by all that’s true, couldn’t you have found some other way? Something that didn’t fly in the face of everything we believe in?”

“It’s the only thing I know, Thraxis.” She sighed and caught his gaze for a moment. “Are you really angry because it goes against the Vows, or because it goes against what you, personally, believe? Would you have cared as much if it was, say, Kefre and Sakarax instead of *your* wife and sister?”

He started to answer, then stopped. “Probably not,” he admitted at last. He was silent for a moment, the slap of sandals and boots against stone the only sound. “Do you...do you think I am much like Vilhardouin?”

His voice was tentative and more than a little afraid. Arrow reached out and caught his hand in her own. “No. I don’t.”

He flashed her a grateful grin. “I’m sorry I shouted at you.”

“Well, I didn’t marry you for your placid disposition.”

They paused a moment to share a kiss. “For the gods’ sakes!” Viabold said from behind them.

“Can’t this wait until a more appropriate time? When we aren’t in danger of our lives, for instance?”

“Your jealousy is so obvious,” Thraxis replied, unperturbed. “Come along, then.”

At length, the corridor they were in came to an end, opening out into a large, octagonal room. Three of the other walls had doorways set into them. For once, the walls of the room were severely plain, except for hieroglyphs above each door. As they spread out into the room, Thraxis read each inscription. “Hall of Pleasure. That doesn’t sound like anything we need at the moment. Hall of Knowledge. A possibility. Hall of Reflections.”

“What do you think that means?” Arrow asked, trying to peer through the final door he had indicated. Beyond, all was dark.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “It could be something useful. Or not.”

Arrow shrugged. “Only one way to find out,” she said, and stepped through the doorway.

* * * *

Thraxis gripped a scroll to his chest, trying to lock away his nervousness behind a facade of haughty certainty . If anyone else saw his true feelings, he knew that they would be taken as a sign of weakness, and he would have to put up with weeks of snide remarks and subtle attacks. Worse, word might get back to Vilhardouin, and she might decide to reject his proposal and assign him to a Search of her choosing.

The rustle of robes and the scrape of sandals filled the air of the small antechamber he waited in . Everyone in his age group was here, most of them holding scrolls as he was. Today was the day in which they would present their proposals for their individual Searches for Knowledge to the Black Council. The Search chosen by each would define the goal of their studies for the rest of their lives. If, he amended, the proposed Search met the approval of the Black Council.

Looking about, he saw that most of the faces around him betrayed nervousness, although a few appeared utterly unconcerned . He wondered if they truly were unafraid, or if they were just pretending like him. Uneasy chatter filled the air as groups of friends clustered together, trying to draw courage from one another. As always, he stood alone, listening to the talk of others.

Finally, the door to the Council Chamber swung silently open . All eyes fixed on Thraxis, who would be first in this as in all else. Swallowing hard against his fear, he strode through the doors, trying not to notice when they swung closed again behind him.

The Council sat in three stone chairs arranged around an open space where petitioners stood . Thraxis bowed to them slowly, then turned and bowed to the symbol of Truth hanging on the wall opposite them. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the petitioner’s circle. A cold, white light spilled down over him, making it impossible to see anything beyond the three figures.

“Initiate Thraxis,” Vilhardouin said formally, “it is time to declare what form your Search for Knowledge will take .” The bright light shone off of her silver hair and glittered in the obsidian beads woven into her braids.

“I wish to Search for a way to make the Athraskani more powerful,” he said .

Vilhardouin’s brow shot up curiously . “Explain.”

“I would like to discover a way to enhance the power of individuals . To raise a green robe to the level of a black, for instance.”

“Ah .” Interest glittered in her eyes—in all their eyes. “Leave your proposal with us for review. We will summon you once we have considered it.”

He bowed again and walked out, passing Melilandra as she headed in . She gave him a condescending sneer, as if to say that she highly doubted any proposal of his would ever be approved by anyone.

Well, he didn’t care what she thought . Not much, anyway.

Because he had finally found a way out .

As the day slipped away, he sat in the antechamber and considered his proposal . Vilhardouin would love it, he felt sure. In the garden four years ago, she had admitted her ambition to create more powerful Athraskani. The fact that Thraxis’ power was so great was the sole reason she had

any interest in him at all. It was the only reason he had been singled out, again and again.

But if he could find a way to make anyone become like him, then he would no longer be special. Vilhardouin wouldn't care what happened to him. Wouldn't care who he slept with, or what he did with his free time. He would finally be out from under her scrutiny. And if he wanted to devote his time to writing love poetry, or puttering about in the herb garden with Xertrevar, then no one would deny it to him.

He would finally be free.

At length, Vilhardouin's voice sounded in his ear, summoning him back. When he stood before them again and saw the greed in their eyes, he knew that they would give him what he wanted.

Chapter Twelve: Walking Goddess

The air around Arrow glittered, as though filled with stars and fireflies. It felt warm and thick against her skin, like syrup or blood. The world slowed, taking on a dream-like quality, with everything at one remove. Disconcerted, Arrow turned, intending to step back the way she had come, but the corridor stretched behind her an infinite distance with no end in sight.

"You can only go back by going forward," a husky voice advised her, whether from within her own head or from outside she could not tell.

Moving like a sleepwalker, she turned again and obeyed the voice. The drifting motes lit the corridor fitfully, revealing the familiar bas-reliefs on the walls. After a while, she realized that they depicted scenes from her own life. Priestesses dressed in the manner of the Skald stood over a baby, declaring her fate. A girl-child trained with a bow, under the tutelage of an old man. Further down the hall, she stood over her fallen enemies, their scalps in her hands.

A shape materialized out of the thick, glowing air, and Arrow stopped walking. At first, her impression was simply that of a woman, dressed in the plain linen gown worn by most Gyptoans. But as the woman drew closer, Arrow saw that her head was that of a lioness. Amber eyes gazed deep into Arrow's soul, and a pungent, animal smell filled the air.

"Lady of Beasts," Arrow whispered. Although the Skald did not depict her this way, Arrow knew that she was in the presence of the goddess. Without thought, she dropped to her knees, her head bowed and her hands flat on the floor.

"Stand up, daughter," said the goddess, and Arrow thought she heard amusement in the deep, rough voice.

Arrow did as ordered. The goddess' black lip curled slightly, revealing sharp teeth. "Walk with me, oath-breaker."

The air swirled around them, and the events of Arrow's life continued to play out on the walls to either side. "How should I address you?" Arrow asked uncertainly.

The goddess made a growling noise that might have passed for a laugh. "The ancient ones who built this place called me the Devouring Lady. They called upon me to protect them in war, Champion."

"Did you?"

"Only so long as they were strong enough that they did not need my protection, kin slayer."

Arrow nodded, understanding. The strong survived and the weak perished. The Lady of Beasts had no mercy.

"What is this place, Devouring Lady?"

"The Hall of Reflections. It does as its name suggests—it reflects all that one brings into it. Past. Future. Potential. It is said that if you walk far enough, you will see your entire life played out in all its infinite possibilities, little mother."

Arrow gradually became aware that there was another figure walking beside them. Still feeling as though she was trapped in a dream, she turned and saw a second woman, although this one seemed

entirely human. She was the same height as Arrow and dressed in what at first seemed to be the garb of the Skald priestesses. But the long coat, skirt, and trousers were all black, overlaid by black appliqués. Her long hair was also black, and worn braided about her head. Her face was square and strong, with a very long nose and eyes as yellow as clear wine.

“What are you?” Arrow asked.

The woman glanced at her and smiled, her eyes glinting with warmth and humor. A sigil marking her as a Skald priestess was tattooed on her left cheek. “Nothing at the moment. Possibility. Potential.”

“Who are you?”

“Raven’s Daughter.”

As they walked farther, the woman’s form shifted. Or, rather, she remained the same, but her garb altered. Now she wore a long, black robe such as that favored by the Athraskani. Her hair trailed to the floor, even in braids. Now when she looked at Arrow, her eyes were cold and cruel. For the first time, Arrow noticed the carvings on the wall closest to the woman. They showed nothing but death: skulls piled in great heaps, buildings reduced to rubble, the sun blotted out by the smoke of burning. A figure that looked startlingly like Melilandra hung from a wooden frame, her body in tatters yet still horribly alive.

“Who are you?” Arrow whispered in horror.

The woman tipped her head to one side and smiled a razor smile. “The Empress of the World.”

“I don’t understand.”

“*Possibilities, sister,*” said the goddess. “*These are the two most likely. Which way the balance falls depends on events in the months to come.*”

Arrow grasped at hope. “So the Empress of the World can be avoided?”

“*Of course, warrior . If those who would bring her about can be thwarted.*”

“But why would anyone do such a thing?”

The goddess snorted, a deep, animal sound. “*Because they will not see what they have created until it is too late.*”

And between one step and the next, the corridor came to an end.

* * * *

Arrow staggered forward, her body suddenly released from the lassitude of the Hall of Reflections. She would have fallen had Thraxis not caught her in his arms. Seeing the concern on his face and feeling the familiar touch of his hands undid her. With a little sound of despair, she wrapped her arms around him and clung to his strength.

“Arrow? What’s wrong?” he asked, obviously bewildered.

“How—how long was I gone?”

“Gone?” He drew back and frowned at her. “What do you mean? You took a step into the shadows, then turned around and came back. You didn’t go anywhere.”

“But I did! I saw—” she stopped abruptly. What would she tell him? That she had seen a vision of their daughter, and that it held hope and horror in equal measure? He didn’t even know that she was pregnant. “Never mind.”

He frowned. “Tell me.”

“No. I can’t.” She pulled away, wrapping her arms protectively around her belly. “It was a vision. I just...I don’t want to talk about it yet.”

“Arrow—”

“You wouldn’t tell me what the oracle said to you last spring,” she reminded him.

“That’s because she said you were going to die before spring turned to summer!”

Thiacene looked over from where she stood peering into the shadows of another doorway. “Not much of an oracle, then.”

Coldness touched Arrow, like the breath of a *v’juga*. “No. She was right. I did die.”

Confusion touched Thiacene’s face. “But you’re alive.”

“It wasn’t for long.” Arrow glanced over at Thraxis and saw that he had turned his face away. It

was probably not a memory he wanted to revisit either.

Viabold cleared his throat, breaking the uncomfortable silence that followed. "Well, then, we can rule out this 'Hall of Reflections' for the time being. The 'Hall of Knowledge,' then?"

"That seems to be our only possibility," Thraxis agreed, grasping eagerly at the distraction.

This time, there was no dizzy sensation or glowing air when they passed through the doorway. The Hall of Knowledge was, in fact, the most prosaic room they had yet come across. As they might have guessed earlier from the name, the huge hall appeared to be a library. Thousands of papyrus scrolls packed shelves, overflowed out of enormous jars, and littered the floor. Although there were signs of the destruction that had visited the rest of the city, for the most part the scrolls appeared remarkably undamaged, and looked as new as if they had been inked yesterday.

Thraxis' eyes lit up, and he came to a halt, staring about with a look of awe. "This...this is incredible," he managed to say at last. His voice was low, reverent, as if he stood in the presence of the gods themselves. "Think of the spells, the knowledge, that must be in here."

Arrow felt a touch of dread. "You...you won't have to look through all these to find out how to stop the colossi, will you?"

"Let us hope not," Thraxis said with a wry quirk of his lips. "It might take weeks just to decipher what order these scrolls are stored in."

Thiacene picked up one of the half-burned scrolls on the floor, peered at it, then tossed it aside. Reaching for another, she stopped suddenly. "Look! These drawings look like the wand I picked up."

Intent on his own translations, Thraxis wandered off. But Viabold drew near, peering over Thiacene's shoulder. "Can you read it?"

"Not well. A word or two." Thiacene made a face. "But the I think the illustrations are supposed to demonstrate how to use the wand." She fished the ebony stick out of her pocket and copied the stance of one of the figures on the scroll. "*Kef nekher qat!*" she said and made a casting motion with the wand.

The figurine on the end flew off and struck the wall. "Damnation!" Thiacene muttered, and Arrow found herself suppressing a laugh. She walked over to where the figurine had struck, intending to find it and return it to Thiacene.

Something dark uncurled from the base of the wall, like a chick unfolding itself from an egg. Arrow got a confused glimpse of a leonine body coupled with the wings and head of an eagle. Then, in a rush, the griffin that had been part of the wand came to its feet and lunged at her with an ear-splitting roar.

Thiacene's scream stretched into infinity as Arrow's body sped, distorting time. She leapt back, clearing a cluster of storage jars and landing on top of a low table. Her sword was in her hands the instant she had firm footing, and the bronze blade arced up to meet the griffin's rush.

And clanged harmlessly off its ebony skin.

Uh oh .

The griffin, now swollen to the size of a horse, took a swipe at her, and she jumped back, lost her footing, and fell heavily to the ground. Thraxis appeared in her peripheral vision, making slow movements with his hands and saying something she could not hear. Whatever spell he was trying to cast, it had no affect on the griffin that she could see. Rolling to her feet, she grabbed a handful of his robe and hauled him back just as the griffin leapt over the table at them.

"Run!" she managed to shout.

They ran, robes flying and sandals slapping on the stone floor. Arrow brought up the rear, flinging anything that came to hand at their pursuer: loose scrolls, storage jars, broken bits of chairs. It swatted them aside irritably, then caught a chair leg in its massive beak and snapped it in half. Its wings struck the ceiling, and Arrow thanked the Lady of Beasts that the creature was too big to fly in this enclosed space, or else they would all be doomed.

Somehow, they stayed ahead of it all the way down the long hall. Risking a glance ahead, Arrow saw that Viabold had found a small door and was busy hauling it open. He disappeared through it, followed by Thiacene. Thraxis stopped, turning back for Arrow.

Wind smote her back an instant before the griffin's paw swiped her. Her body impacted hard with a shelf, knocking the breath out of her. Moving purely on instincts that had been honed over a lifetime of

training, she rolled onto her back and punched as hard as she could, striking the griffin in the side of the head even as it bent down to rend her with its beak.

Agony traveled down her arm, as if she had hit a stone wall. Still, the blow knocked the griffin's head aside, giving her a few more precious moments. She scrambled back and away, felt a hand close on her injured arm, hauling her up. Half-stumbling and half-falling, she and Thraxis tumbled together through the small door.

Thiacene slammed the door shut the instant they were through, and Viabold shoved a heavy, gold-incrusted chair against it, followed by a table.

Arrow cradled her arm tight against her, feeling bones grind against one another. Thraxis reached for her, but she shook her head. "It will wait. Help them!"

Even as she spoke, the griffin struck the door with tremendous force. Despite the weight of both Thiacene, Viabold, and several pieces of furniture, the door came open several inches. Thraxis swore furiously and gestured at the door; it slammed shut once again. He added his weight to the pile, glaring at Thiacene.

"By all that was true, what were you thinking?"

Thiacene's face was white, her eyes huge, and she looked suddenly young. "I didn't know this would happen!"

If the world came to an end, the Athraskani would spend their last breaths quarreling over whose fault it was, Arrow thought. While the wizards guarded the door, she turned her attention to the room. Perhaps there was something that could aid them against the rampaging griffin.

Even a cursory glance revealed that this room had belonged to someone important. The bas-reliefs on the walls still glowed with color, the furnishing were gilded and covered with jewels, and even the floor was inlaid with precious stones. In the center of the room stood a strange, rectangular box, literally covered with gold, rubies, and emeralds. It was slightly shorter than a man, and almost as wide as it was tall. One side looked as if it was made to swing outwards.

Dragging her eyes away from the mysterious box, Arrow searched the rest of the room. Tables and shelves were crowded with what might have been magical implements, but which meant nothing at all to her. Cursing her own ignorance, she started to turn from her fruitless search, but found her eye caught by two statues on a shelf. Side-by-side, they looked crude amidst the finery of the room, carved from simple stone and unadorned by any gilding. It took her a moment to realize why they seemed so familiar; they were exact replicas of the two colossi currently destroying the city.

"Look!" she shouted, snatching up one in her good hand and displaying it to the three mages.

The door shook hard under yet another assault from the griffin. The Athraskani had piled up every loose piece of furniture in reach, and all three appeared to be doing something magical to hold shut the door. Nevertheless, it did not seem as though it would stop the griffin for long.

Thraxis spared a glance at her cry. His face was pale and tense, and Arrow felt a sudden frisson of fear. "Destroy them!" he shouted.

"What?"

"The statues—smash them!"

Arrow hurled the one in her hand as hard as she could against the nearest wall. She had to throw with her off hand, but even so the force was enough that the small statue cracked into several pieces.

"Good!" Thraxis shouted encouragingly. "Now the other one!"

She did as he told her, the female statue following the male to its demise. "Now what?"

"That should have stopped them. These things work by what is known as sympathetic magic, and—"

At that instant, the door exploded inward. Bodies, furniture, and shattered wood flew into the room, propelled by the enraged griffin. As luck would have it, Thiacene and Viabold were hurled to one side, but Thraxis fell directly in front of the creature's feet. Arrow screamed his name and leapt forward, but not even her inhuman speed could cross the distance in time. The griffin raised its head, then slashed down, intending to rend Thraxis to pieces.

"*Nek sit ma luk!*"

For an instant, the griffin froze, all movement arrested. Then, like a flower closing for the night, it curled up on itself, shrinking as it did so. A moment later, only the small, ebony figurine remained.

Silence fell over the small room. A moment later, Melilandra stepped through the ruined doorway, a scroll clutched in one small hand. Arrow thought it might have been the same text that Thiacene had read from to awaken the beast.

“Well,” Melilandra said, observing the ruin in front of her, “it would appear that I arrived just in time.”

* * * *

“Must I do this?” Thraxis demanded irritably . “I’m in the middle of my research.”

He sat in his favorite chair in the library, surrounded by books . Although spring had come outside, no breath of fresh air stirred the dusty atmosphere of the library. There were times when it became difficult for him to remember what the season was, as if the outside world had nothing to do with him at all.

And that is as it should be, he told himself firmly.

Vilhardouin’s voice spoke to him from a small flame hanging above the table . “This visitor is important, Thraxis. He is married to Emperor Darius’ sister. I will not entrust his request to anyone but the best.”

Nor stoop to doing it yourself, Thraxis thought sourly. “Oh, very well,” he said aloud, realizing that the sooner he acquiesced the sooner he could get back to his books.

The flame winked out . Aiming dark thoughts in Vilhardouin’s direction, Thraxis marked his page and stood up. As his body slowed its growth upwards, it was beginning to head outwards, and it took some navigation to get out of the chair.

There was a man puttering about the shelves, Thraxis noted—a brown robe, who doubtless had no useful function except to make sure the books were in order . Thraxis tried to remember his name. Baltha-something. Well, it hardly mattered.

“Make certain no one disturbs these,” Thraxis ordered imperiously, pointing at the books strewn across his table . Then, without waiting for agreement, he strode out of the room.

The Emperor’s brother-in-law awaited him in one of the small receiving chambers, the only rooms in which outsiders were customarily allowed . He sat on a soft cushion, eating fruit and sipping wine—a courtesy not usually offered guests. A white toga embroidered with a red design around the edges draped a healthy, fit body that contrasted rather sharply with Thraxis’ own.

He did not rise when Thraxis entered, only nodded an acknowledgement in his direction . Not wanting to lever his bulk up and down off the cushions in front of this man, Thraxis stood uncomfortably. Why had Vilhardouin picked him for this? Surely she could have found someone who liked dealing with humans. He’d even heard some Athraskani—all low-level mages, of course—had married them.

Thraxis repressed a shudder at the thought . He didn’t like humans. Well, to be honest, he really didn’t know much about them at all. The only contact he ever had with them came in the form of the occasional servant. They didn’t have magic, which meant that they really ought to be beneath his notice...which made him uneasy because he had never quite reconciled himself with ignoring them altogether.

“I am told that you have a request,” Thraxis said . It wasn’t the most civil opening, but it was the best he could do.

The human looked at him . His eyes, Thraxis noted, were brown. How disgusting.

“Indeed,” said the man, his voice smooth and vaguely oily . “I need something that will allow me to hear the words spoken in a certain room.”

Thraxis frowned, not liking the notion . “Why?”

The human seemed surprised by the question; then, his brows drew down in annoyance . “That is none of your concern.”

“It is my concern,” Thraxis disagreed . “I have taken a Vow to do no harm. I have to know

that you won't be using this spell for any purpose that would violate that."

The human's face flushed dark red, and he rose abruptly to his feet, spilling wine and fruit onto the floor. "Now see here, you fat toad," he said, his tone suddenly deadly, "you will do what you're told, or I will report to the Emperor that you refused to cooperate."

Thraxis eyed the man's clinched fists and felt a sudden tingle of fear. Surely this...this animal wasn't going to resort to violence? Taking advantage of his considerable height, Thraxis stared down his long nose, adopting his most haughty look.

"It is of no concern to me what you tell the Emperor," he said coldly. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have other things to attend to." And so saying, he turned and left, hastily shutting the door between them.

Chapter Thirteen: The Reliquary

Arrow sat in the shade of one of the carts, cradling her broken wrist. In the confusion surrounding the destruction of the colossi and their rescue by Melilandra, she had managed to slip away before Thraxis had the opportunity to see to her injuries. It had been a long walk out of the ancient city, passing by clusters of Athraskani headed in the other direction, summoned to the House of Light by the Black Council. No doubt they would spend the next few days swarming over the city like ants, ransacking the Hall of Knowledge and carting off anything they thought might be worth their while. Arrow wondered how many would stumble into the Hall of Reflections and what they would behold while there.

A shadow fell across her face, and Arrow looked up to see Thiacene standing before her. The girl's robe was torn, dust smeared her features, and her face was pale. Truthfully, she looked on the verge of collapse. But then her black brows quirked together in an expression startlingly reminiscent of Thraxis, and some life came back to her eyes.

"You're hurt," she said, making the statement into an accusation.

Arrow shrugged. "Broken wrist. A few bruises. Nothing I haven't lived through before."

"Why did you walk all the way out here? Why didn't you ask Thraxis to heal you?"

Arrow sighed, trying to think of a plausible explanation. "He was busy helping Viabold," she said truthfully. Viabold had been struck in the head by flying bits of broken furniture, some of which had considerable mass due to their heavy ornamentation of gold and jewels. "And after that, he and Melilandra started trying to open that...whatever it is."

"Some kind of reliquary, they think." Thiacene shrugged. "They still haven't figured out how to open it. And to be honest, at this point I don't care what's inside. I've had enough of this city."

"Me too," Arrow agreed with feeling.

Thiacene crouched down and reached for her wrist. "Here. Let me."

"No! That is, I can wait for Viabold."

A frown creased the younger woman's face. "Why? I'm here now. Is something wrong?"

Arrow hesitated, then realized that Thiacene would most likely not leave her be until she got an answer. Without speaking, she extended her wrist. Fingers that were just starting to develop good sword calluses curled gently around the broken bones. Soothing warmth took the place of pain, and then both faded. Like any of the Athraskani trained to heal, Thiacene then went farther, looking for other injuries her patient was too stubborn to admit to. When she was done, she sat back, her eyes wide with surprise.

"You're—"

Arrow put a finger over her lips. "Don't say it."

"But..." Thiacene trailed off in confusion. "Doesn't...I mean, haven't you told...?"

"No. Viabold knows, but that's it for now. You have to swear to me that you won't tell anyone."

"But why not?"

Arrow sighed wearily. "A lot of reasons. Until today, I wasn't even sure a baby could survive inside me if something happened to push me into berserker mode."

“But...gods, Arrow, you could have been killed today! The way that griffin threw you around, you’re lucky you didn’t lose the baby!”

“I’m Skald, Thiacene. Our lives are hard. If an infant can’t survive in its mother, it isn’t going to survive later.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Arrow stood up abruptly. “I’m tired of hearing that from you people. You Athraskani think that your way is the only way, don’t you? And if anyone disagrees, or even does things differently, then the only explanation is that they’re an ignorant barbarian.”

Thiacene stared at her in shock. “Don’t be mad,” she pleaded, extending a hand. “I’m sorry. But if Thraxis knew, he would never have let you do some of the things you did today.”

“Thraxis doesn’t control me.”

“But doesn’t he have the right to have some say in the matter? It’s his child, too, after all.”

Arrow sat down again, resting her head in her hands. Lady of Beasts, she was tired. “You’re starting to sound just like Viabold. Just...give me time. Both of you.”

Thiacene put a hand on her shoulder, and then shifted it to gently rub at tense muscles. “It’s your decision. But you don’t have much longer, Arrow. Thraxis is going to start wondering when you can’t fit into your trousers anymore.”

Arrow looked up, staring past Thiacene at the city crouched within its outcropping of rock. The sun was starting to go down, and purple shadows gathered in Xaqqara, like the ghosts of those long dead. “With all of this to distract him?” Arrow asked bitterly. “I’ll be lucky if he notices me at all.”

A faint smile touched Thiacene’s lips. “We Athraskani can be single-minded sometimes, can’t we?” she asked wryly. Then she sighed, and her fingers stilled on Arrow’s back. “Do you...do you think he’ll tell the Black Council about me?”

Arrow glanced up to see real fear in Thiacene’s yellow eyes. She slid an arm around her sister-in-law, pulling the girl against her shoulder in a gesture of comfort. “No. Thraxis is the last person to go bearing tales to the Black Council.”

“But he was really angry—he really thinks badly of me.”

“The problem between the two of you is that you’re too much alike. Thraxis is just frustrated to finally encounter someone as stubborn as he is.”

Thiacene grinned at that, but her mirth died quickly. “You’re all I have left, Arrow. You and Thraxis.”

Then may the Lady of Beasts help you, little one, Arrow thought. But she did not speak the thought aloud, only hugged Thiacene closer.

* * * *

Cynixia took a tentative step into the Hall of Pleasure.

She could feel a blush heat her cheeks as she glanced around, trying not to let her gaze linger too long on the bas-reliefs or statues, most of which depicted nude people in a variety of exotic poses, all of them sexual. Athraskani were supposed to view physical love with the same clinical detachment as any other subject, but she had never quite managed to reach that level of objectivity. She remembered being acutely embarrassed the one time she had come into the library of the Sanctum Majoris to find Thraxis casually pouring over one of the more explicit texts. Although “casual” was perhaps not the word—he had been studying it with the air of a student preparing for an exam.

And the truth of the matter was not so much that she had been embarrassed by the text or his reaction—he had in fact not paid the slightest attention to her presence—but to the wild thoughts that had occupied her own mind later that night. No one had ever admitted to sleeping with Thraxis, so she had let herself speculate that he might—just might—have arranged the incident to let her know that he had an interest in her.

But nothing had come of it. Thraxis had continued on as usual, apparently celibate, apparently unaware of Cynixia’s existence. Until the death curse.

Until he returned from wherever he had gone with a human wife in tow.

I shouldn't be in here, Cynixia thought as she inspected the room. One of the other mages had mentioned the Hall and its contents to her earlier, sparking an idea that was as yet only half-formed. *I should be in the Hall of Knowledge, looking for star charts and the ancients' notations on planetary movements.*

She remembered Thraxis' anger, the night they had been reunited in the Sanctum Minoris. He had thought her a spy for Vilhardouin, and so had insisted that the wild-woman he had bound himself to was indeed his soul mate.

Ridiculous. Others might believe his words, but not her. Under the onus of the death curse, Thraxis might have even convinced himself of it, clinging to whatever shreds of imagined comfort he could get in his final days. And now that the curse was removed, he believed himself to be stuck with the woman. His honor—his *pride*—would not let him admit that he had made a terrible mistake.

But I will show him. I will free him.

Gripping that thought like a weapon, she began to search the room. At length, she found a cache of scrolls stored in obscenely-shaped jars. Her mastery of the ancient symbols was poor, but she laboriously deciphered the first few words of each scroll.

Many of the scrolls seemed to be spells for enhancing pleasure—or pain. But at last, Cynixia found what she was looking for. Casting a nervous glance around, afraid that someone had snuck up on her while she read, she thrust the scroll into a pocket deep inside her robes. When no one materialized from thin air to denounce her, she scurried out of the Hall, certain that her guilt must be stamped on her face for all to see.

* * * *

“This is incredible!” Thraxis enthused when he returned from the ruins that night. Dust streaked his bald head, but his robes were enchanted to keep themselves clean, and nothing marred the black cloth. His yellow eyes were bright with excitement as he sat down by Arrow outside their tent. Beautiful Girl wandered over and lay down by him, putting her big head in his lap. He scratched her ears automatically, but clearly his thoughts were still on the city he had just left.

“Is it?” Arrow asked quietly. *He didn't even ask if anyone healed me*, she thought resentfully. *The only thing he can think about is this damned city.*

“Yes,” he said, oblivious to her smoldering anger. “It will take years just to examine everything in the Hall of Knowledge. But what is really exciting is the reliquary.”

“The box in that last room?”

“Yes. It has a very complicated locking spell on it. Melilandra and I spent the entire afternoon examining the inscriptions, and we're certain that it can be opened eventually. But the instructions appear to be in the form of a riddle of some sort. It will take some time to decipher.”

“Are you taking it back to the Sanctum, then?” she asked without much hope.

“It won't budge from the floor,” he admitted with a rueful grin. “And none of us have even a clue as to how to get it unstuck. But that's of no matter—we have made a copy of it in illusion. That way we can have the inscriptions to hand, but still use the resources of the library at the Sanctum Minoris.”

Arrow supposed she ought to be grateful that he didn't intend to stay at Xaqqara. “So you are going to work on this...riddle.”

He nodded, gaze distant, as if his mind was still busy at work on the reliquary. “With Melilandra's help, yes.”

She winced. “I'm sorry. You must not be happy about that.”

“Well...a week ago I wouldn't have been. But, really, she hasn't been her usual obnoxious self lately. Perhaps being away from the Sanctum Majoris has allowed her to let down her guard and put aside her old ways.”

“Oh.” Remembering Melilandra's hateful words, Arrow looked away. Beautiful Girl whined softly and thumped her tail, as if in commiseration. “What do you think is in the box?”

“I don't know—yet.” Thraxis rubbed his hands together. “So far, all we've been able to decipher is that it is something referred to as ‘the Forbidden.’”

“What?” Arrow came to her feet and stared down at him in shock. “Are you Athraskani out of your collective minds?” She pointed accusingly at the ruins; although she couldn’t see them in the gathering dusk, she could feel their presence like a dreadful lodestone. “Those people—your ancestors—would stoop to anything. Murder, torture, spells to bind a wizard’s power—anything. If even they thought something was too awful to handle, surely the best thing to do would be to bury it in the sand or drown it in the sea! Surely you aren’t so stupid as to *use* it!”

That got his full attention at last. His black brows drew down into a scowl, and anger flashed in the depths of his yellow eyes. “‘Forbidden’ does not necessarily mean dangerous,” he said, the words brittle as ice. “Sacred things may also be forbidden. What would be ‘stupid’ would be to automatically assume that everything is a weapon. But I suppose some of us can’t help that.”

Arrow’s hands curled into fists, but she forced herself to keep her voice level. “You’re right. I can’t help being what I am. But I know that city is evil. I know that anything your monstrous ancestors wanted to forbid would have to be terrible indeed. And I know that some of your folk today can barely restrain themselves from rushing headlong into destruction.”

Confusion mingled with the glower on his face. “What do you mean by that?”

She thought of her vision, remembered the ruin of the world, the broken bodies of the Athraskani. Melilandra had been singled out for especial torture by the Empress of the World—did that not, then, indicate a terrible familiarity? Perhaps because Melilandra’s actions had directly brought events about?

“Don’t do this, Thraxis,” Arrow said quietly. “I have never begged for anything in all my life. But I will go down on my knees now if it will help to convince you. Please, do not do this. Leave this thing alone.”

His expression softened, and he reached for her hands. “I know that this all seems incomprehensible to you,” he said gently. “And it is natural to fear what you don’t understand.”

Coldness touched her heart. “That’s what you think this is about?” She pulled her hands free from his grasp. “I thought that you knew me better than that, *husband*. Apparently I was wrong.”

Without giving him the chance to respond, she went into their tent and lay down. It was some hours before he finally joined her, and she wondered where he had spent them. But pride stilled her tongue, and their bed was cold and silent that night.

* * * *

Only a few hours after his abortive meeting with the Emperor’s brother-in-law, Thraxis received a summons from the Black Council . Wondering how many more interruptions he would be expected to tolerate, he reluctantly went to the chamber and presented himself in the petitioner’s circle.

As soon as he saw their faces, he knew that this was no ordinary summons . Vilhardouin’s expression gave nothing away, except for the tightness of her mouth, which he recognized as a sign of her displeasure. But Gallinarches made no effort to conceal his fury, nor Shatrevar his fear

“Thraxis,” Vilhardouin said in a cold, flat voice . “Have you an explanation for your actions?”

Keeping his expression carefully neutral, Thraxis frantically searched his memory, trying to identify what he might have done to earn her wrath . When nothing presented itself, he remained silent, unwilling to admit that he didn’t know what she wanted from him.

Shatrevar lacked the patience to let the silence continue for long . Instead, he leaned forward in his chair, his small eyes frantic. “You insulted the Emperor’s brother-in-law! By all that’s true, what were you thinking, man?”

So that’s what this was about . Confidence returned to Thraxis—clearly, the human had given them a distorted version of events. He would simply explain the truth to them, and the Black Council would see the correctness of his actions. “He wanted me to create a spell to allow him to overhear the conversations of others without their knowledge. There are many ways in which this spell could be used to do harm, so I asked him what he intended to do with it. When he refused to

answer, I naturally explained that I could be of no further help to him.”

The three mages stared at him as if he had sprouted a second head. Feeling suddenly uneasy, he cleared his throat and added, “You see that I had no choice.”

Vilhardouin’s silver eyes were hard and cold as winter. “I will explain this to you only once, Thraxis,” she said with false calm. “Does the spell he requested, in and of itself, do harm?”

He frowned, struggling with uncertainty. “It could easily be used to—”

“Does the spell he requested, in and of itself, do harm?”

“If it was used to spy on political rivals, I can see that—”

“Does the spell he requested, in and of itself, do harm?”

Thraxis stared at her, feeling as though ice collected in his gut. “No,” he said at last, his voice little more than a whisper.

Satisfied, she nodded. “Then there is no problem.”

“But—”

“No.” She lifted an imperious hand. “The spell is not innately harmful. Therefore, it does not violate your Vow. Your objection is groundless.”

Even knowing that it would do no good, he tried a final time. “But what if the human takes it home and uses it against those he believes to be his enemies?”

Shatrevar scowled at him. “That is none of our concern, Thraxis. We exist apart from the world. Its affairs are not ours.”

Thraxis felt as though he stood on the edge of a precipice. Every time it seemed that the Black Council could do nothing to lower his opinion of them, they surpassed his previous imaginings.

Technically, he supposed that they were even right. But his heart insisted otherwise. To deny all responsibility for a spell after it left their hands was to obey the letter of the Vows by destroying their spirit.

But what can I do? he asked himself bitterly. The most powerful of the Athraskani, and he was helpless to change anything.

“I expect you to have the spell ready by tomorrow,” Vilhardouin told him in a tone that clearly said he was to leave with no more argument.

Not knowing what else to do, he obeyed them. When he returned to his cell, he found a matching pair of small statuettes waiting for him. Carved from pale pink marble, they depicted twin women dressed in diaphanous dresses that exposed one breast. These were the objects that the spell was to be tied to; certainly either would look innocuous enough in the Emperor’s palace.

The spell was not difficult. Whatever touched the ears of one statue would be spoken through the lips of the second when the proper word of command was given. But although he finished long before midnight, Thraxis sat and stared at his handiwork until dawn showed in his window. Whose secrets would be heard and relayed through these statues? What political maneuverings would they inspire? Whose lives would be ruined because they carelessly spoke the wrong word at the wrong time?

None of my affair, he told himself desperately. But when a novice came to take the statues away, he felt as though the blood of innocents stained his hands.

Chapter Fourteen: All I Ever

Thraxis arose and performed his morning ablutions with a sense of anticipation. The journey back from Xaqqara had been a long, tedious one, he thought as he hurriedly shaved the fine growth of hair from his head. The mirror that reflected his face also captured Arrow’s sleeping form, and he paused a moment, feeling an ache in his heart. She had not relented in her anger on their journey—if anything, she had seemed to grow more convinced that he was making some sort of terrible mistake that would doom them all.

He sighed and set his razor carefully aside, idly dusting the shorn hair off the table. He loved Arrow, he reminded himself, but this was one of the times when the gulf between them seemed especially wide. Nothing he said could convince her that there was no harm in studying the reliquary. If it had been up to her, they would have abandoned Xaqqara altogether and left its mysteries to rot away into the sand.

Instead, they had returned in triumph to the Sanctum Minoris, riding in carts laden with scrolls and supplies taken from the House of Light. Other caravans would return to the ruins on a regular basis, for the recovery of the mysteries of the ancients would be a task that encompassed decades, if not lifetimes. Even Kalika, Sakarax, and the others who termed themselves his followers had been delighted at the discoveries. Everyone congratulated him; everyone was happy.

Except for Arrow.

Well, she would come around soon enough, he decided as he rose and quietly made his way out of their room so as not to disturb her. As soon as she saw that there was nothing to fear, she would relent in her opposition. Arrow might be superstitious, but she was also very intelligent, and he knew that he could eventually convince her to share in his enthusiasm.

A small workroom had been set aside for the study of the reliquary. The illusion that he and Melilandra had so painstakingly shaped dominated the room, perfectly recreating the original golden housing. Stacks of books had already been brought up from the library below, dealing with every topic from ancient myths to hieroglyphic interpretations. The answer to solving the mystery of the reliquary lay within these texts, he felt certain of it. They had only to unravel it, and the reliquary's tantalizing secrets would be theirs. Even the Black Council would have to be pleased, then. Perhaps, he thought hopefully, they would even relent and allow him to leave the Sanctum with Arrow unchallenged. At the least, perhaps he could forge a lasting peace with them and set aside their old war.

To his surprise, Melilandra was already present in the workroom. He remembered of old her habit of sleeping late, taunting those around her with speculation as to whether she lingered abed because there was another with her. But today she sat hunched over one of the books, a serious look on her delicate features.

She glanced up as he entered, brushing her raven-black hair back from her face. Her robe showed off one creamy white shoulder, which he primly ignored. "Good morning," he said stiffly.

Melilandra only nodded absently before going back to her reading. Wondering at her behavior—he had never known her to refrain from sniping and sneering when the opportunity presented itself—he settled in across from her. Perhaps, he thought as he turned his attention to an ancient scroll, she was only biding her time.

But, much to his shock, the day passed in total civility, if not exactly friendliness. The few times they spoke, Melilandra refrained from making even a single acid comment. If he had not known better, he would even have thought that they might work well together.

Perhaps what I told Arrow was correct, he speculated, glancing at Melilandra under the pretext of stretching a kink out of his back. *Perhaps she has truly changed, after all.*

* * * *

Cynixia stared in despair at the scroll in front of her. The night air blew in off her balcony, and her beloved stars called to her, but she found herself lacking the will to move away from the table on which she had spread the ancient papyrus. Her knowledge of the old hieroglyphs was not great enough to decipher the spell as accurately as was needed—that alone was a fatal stumbling block to her plans.

That...and the spell itself.

The few lines that she had been able to decipher were enough to send shivers up her spine. She had expected the spell to be...well...*nice*. Something of pretty words, that required flowers or pleasant incense for the ingredients. Instead, what she had managed to translate struck her as...evil. Deranged. Sick.

"No," she said, standing abruptly and pushing the scroll away from her. "I can't do it."

"That's right," said a smooth, beautiful voice.

Startled, Cynixia spun about and saw Melilandra standing on the balcony, her perfect form framed in

moonlight. Fear constricted her gut—if anyone found her with this filthy scroll, there would be questions, ones that she might not be able to answer. “M-Meli,” she managed to say in what she hoped sounded like a friendly tone of voice. “You startled me.”

“Don’t try to dissemble.” Melilandra strolled inside, straight to the table, and picked up the scroll. A slow, satisfied smile spread across her lips as she scanned the papyrus.

Cynixia clenched her hands, trying to still her racing heart. “It isn’t what it looks like. I was just studying, that’s all. I didn’t know what the scroll was about until I started to read. I’m not going to actually cast the spell or anything.”

“No.” Melilandra barely spared her a glance, her golden eyes fixed on the words before her. “No, you aren’t. You’re going to help me do it.”

Shock almost robbed Cynixia of the power of speech. “Y-You?”

Anger flashed suddenly in Melilandra’s eyes. “Yes, me, you simpering little fool.”

“But the scroll...the things it says...they’re evil...” Cynixia protested feebly.

Melilandra gave her a scornful glare. “Stupid cow. Magic is above such petty concerns as good and evil.” She took a menacing step towards Cynixia, forcing her back. “And if you have any qualms about helping me, I suggest you forget them now. If you refuse me, if you tell anyone what I plan, then I will turn you over to the Black Council. And you know that they will believe my word over that of a lowly red robe.”

Cynixia wanted to protest, wanted to stand up to Melilandra. But, looking into the other woman’s cold, beautiful face, she felt her heart sink.

“Very well,” she said, defeated. “I will help you.”

* * * *

Once she had made her decision, Melilandra wasted no time putting her plans into motion. Over the next few days, Cynixia busied herself gathering the components called for by the spell, trying not to consider the use they would be put to. She felt helpless and angry, but what could she do? What could any of the lesser powers do, once the black robes had made up their minds?

They cast the spell in the dark of the moon, on a night when a cold wind blew off the desert, scouring the walls with sand. While Cynixia crouched in a corner of the room, wishing that she could be elsewhere, Melilandra drew a protective circle on the floor with a slender sickle of hippopotamus ivory. On the worktable before her was a crude wooden figure, carved in the shape of a kneeling man with his hands bound behind his back. Fine black hairs had been glued to its head, to bind it to the man it was intended to represent.

Having demarcated a protected area around her, Melilandra laid aside the ivory sickle and picked up a small stone hammer and the first of thirteen bronze nails. The nail flashed in the light as she placed its tip against the top of the kneeling figure’s head. A cruel smile marred her perfect features, and her tongue touched her lip in a gesture of anticipation that turned Cynixia’s stomach.

Melilandra spoke the opening words of the spell, her high, child-like voice oddly chilling. And, with a single blow, she drove the nail deep into the wooden statue, piercing its head.

The ritual was repeated with each of the twelve remaining nails, each on a different body part. When the final nail struck home, Melilandra stepped back for a moment and admired her handiwork. The nails stuck out obscenely, and the wood of the figure looked oddly dark, as if it had been coated in blood.

“And should this spell fail,” she said, drawing a symbol in the air before the figure, “may madness come upon you, may your eyes be blinded, may you run homeless in the desert and be devoured by jackals.”

She lifted an ugly lead tablet inscribed with the names of gods and demons alike, and tied it to the wooden figure with a knotted cord. “All the powers of the upper world and the underworld take heed and do my bidding,” she concluded. Sweat slicked her brow and stuck her hair to her skin, but her eyes were jubilant and her cheeks flushed.

Cynixia closed her eyes and looked away, feeling sick. There was no reason for her presence, save that Melilandra wanted a witness, wanted to flaunt her power in front of another.

Melilandra's sweet voice broke into Cynixia's thoughts. "Come on," she said impatiently. She had already dismantled the protective circle, Cynixia saw, and now clutched the wooden figure, all spiky with nails and bound to the lead tablet, in her small hands.

They left the Sanctum, heading out across the cold sands. After a time, they came to the scattering of low tombs where the humans of Djoser buried their dead. In the dark of the moon, the only illumination came from the stars and the wizard light that Cynixia had conjured. The tombs huddled in the sand, looking disturbingly like the shadows of crouching giants. A shadow moved suddenly, making Cynixia jump, and she caught the gleam of animal eyes before the creature raced away from their intrusion. *Jackal*, she thought with a shudder.

"You found an appropriate burial?" asked Cynixia in an attempt to soothe her frayed nerves with talk. She did not have much hope that Melilandra would have failed at something so simple.

"Of course." The two women came to a halt in front of a low tomb on the outskirts of the necropolis. Its rough-hewn slabs of stone looked disturbingly fresh, as yet unworn by the incessant wind. Melilandra reached out one hand and caressed the cold granite like a lover. "The girl who was buried here died last year. According to Kefre, she was only sixteen when it happened. She was raped, strangled, and dismembered by her neighbor, a long-time friend of the family, who nonetheless managed to escape justice. Perfect for the spell."

Magic burrowed a long hole through the sand, slanting under the stones until the hollow chamber underneath had been breached. Still smiling, Melilandra gently floated the wooden figure down the hole, until it nestled against the cloth-wrapped body of the murdered girl. Then she erased the small tunnel, hiding all traces.

"The spell is complete," she said with satisfaction, apparently undisturbed by any of the actions she had undertaken that night. "Within a week, perhaps two, I will have what I want. Vilhardouin will be so pleased."

"And what after that?" Cynixia asked uncertainly. "The spell...it could turn dangerous, couldn't it? If something goes wrong?"

Melilandra shrugged impatiently. "Nothing will go wrong. And after...well, that hardly matters to me, does it?"

As they walked back to the Sanctum, Cynixia found herself looking back over her shoulder in the direction of the necropolis, as if she feared its shadows would follow them back. The sharp barks of jackals sounded on the wind, mocking her. She might not have a great understanding of the ancient tongue, but she had read enough to know that dangerous forces could be unleashed if a spell such as this went wrong. Even breaking one could have vicious and unexpected results, at least temporarily.

If only there was something she could do.

But there isn't . I'm only a red robe. There's nothing I can do.

Nothing .

* * * *

Thraxis awoke from troubled dreams. Sunlight streamed in from the wide balcony, and he rubbed his eyes from the glare, feeling as though he had sand under his lids. His sleep had been restless at best, broken by dreams that slipped away now that he tried to catch them. With a shake of his head, he rolled out of bed, searching for his robe.

He felt oddly detached as he dressed, as if he watched events from one remove. Arrow's sleeping form caught his gaze, and he found himself staring at her dispassionately, as if at a stranger. Her skin was browned from the sun and roughened from the wind, he realized. It seemed an unpleasant contrast to the creamy, pale skin of Athraskani women who spent their lives indoors.

As if aware of his gaze, Arrow sat up, stretched, and smiled at him. When he didn't smile back, her brows drew together and her expression became troubled. "Thraxis? Is something wrong?"

He turned away, not wanting to look at her face anymore. The blue line of her Champion's tattoo seemed to stand out like a brand, an ugly reminder of the violent creature that she was. He frowned in annoyance as he remembered that she was trying to spread her uncouth ways to his own sister.

“Nothing,” he replied shortly, pulling on his sandals. “I’m late.” Without giving her another glance, he strode from the room, glad to be headed for the workroom. At least Melilandra was easy to look at.

* * * *

In his heart, Thraxis had always known that he could not evade the Black Council forever, that it was only a matter of time before they finally tired of waiting and issued their decree . But as the years passed and nothing came of the conversation he had overheard in the garden, he allowed himself to believe that they might forget about their plans for him. Perhaps he believed that the declaration of his Search was behind their patience—surely, if he succeeded, then there would be no need for him to produce a powerful child.

Or, perhaps, some part of the child he had once been believed that Vilhardouin had realized that she cared for him too much to do such a thing .

His comfortable illusions came to an end one night when he sat in the library, pouring over a text so old that the preservation spells on it had started to fail, causing the pages to crumble at the edges . It was said that the ancients had known spells lost to their descendants, and it was on these that Thraxis had pinned his hopes. He couldn’t be the first person to ever consider whether there was a way to transfer power to Athraskani who had been born without it. There must be something, somewhere, which would give him a clue as to how to proceed.

The library door opened suddenly, distracting him . Glancing up through his lashes, he saw the Beautiful Melilandra enter; his heart sank and his gut clenched with nervousness and dislike. Hoping that she would leave him alone if he pretended not to notice her, he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the book before him.

Unfortunately, his hopes were for naught . Melilandra sauntered across the room, her hips swinging in an invitation he could not respond to. As soon as she reached the table, she leaned across it and slammed his book shut. “Put that away,” she commanded in her high, sweet voice that nevertheless sounded like a dagger being unsheathed to him.

Irritation seized him—wasn’t it bad enough that he had to put up with her at meals and the Sanctum’s communal meetings? Didn’t he deserve one refuge from her unpleasantness? “I am studying, Melilandra,” he said with what he thought was admirable restraint .

Her eyes narrowed, staring at him, and he saw disgust in their depths . “The Council has given you to me,” she said without preamble.

Something died inside of him . Hope, perhaps, that the Black Council might really care about him for reasons other than his magic.

But what did I expect? He asked himself bitterly. Melilandra is Vilhardouin’s own daughter, for the gods’ sakes. If they have no pity for her, why should they have any for me?

It took all his effort to feign indifference . “Have they?”

He didn’t know if it was his apparent indifference or her revulsion at the idea of mating with him that turned her gaze to acid . “I am constrained by my Vow of obedience,” she hissed, giving him a look normally reserved for worms. “Know that I would never touch you otherwise. I suppose I had best be on top so that you don’t crush me.”

Logically, her words should not have wounded . He had no interest in Melilandra—what did it matter if she thought he was fat and ugly? But even so, he felt flayed by them, and shame tightened around his heart.

Clinging to pride, he gave her a long, assessing look, as if considering the possibilities . “Really, I do think this could wait until some other time,” he said at last, as if coming to the conclusion that she could not possibly be worth his while.

His reaction took her by surprise . Probably she had never before encountered a man who wouldn’t jump at the chance to have her. “You should be groveling in front of the Black Council, thanking them for this opportunity. You should be on your knees, apologizing to me for being a fat, hideous slug.”

Hate flared in his heart, but he knew from long experience that matching her in insults was a

losing game . Indifference was the only way to reach her. “I have important studies to attend to, Melilandra,” he said, as if addressing a wayward child. “Please go away.”

Anger drained all color from her face, and he knew that his tactic had worked . “What game are you playing?”

“No game . I merely have work.”

She ran one hand over her breast, as if to remind him of her beauty, her erotic potential . “You think to gain advantage by pretending that you don’t want me—that you are doing me a favor by consenting to touch me with that pallid white pudding you call a body. Then suffer your desire—I will decide when and where to grant you relief.”

“Excellent . Just make certain that it’s at least a few months from now—I really do think I’ll be busy for some time. Perhaps you can check back next summer.” Turning his gaze from her, he reopened his book to a random page and bent over it, as if he had already forgotten her presence.

For a moment, the heat of her rage scalded him, and he wondered if he had pushed her too far . Then, she abruptly drew herself up and marched away, slamming the door behind her so hard that a book fell from a nearby shelf.

Thraxis sat very, very still, feeling that he might shatter if he moved . He had won, he told himself—had tricked Melilandra into working against the Black Council for him. That should bring him a reprieve of months at the least.

Except that it wasn’t over . It might never be over. And there was no escape. He was trapped here in the Sanctum Majoris, alone, surrounded by people who saw him as nothing more than a tool. He would never leave, and neither would they, and it would go on and on until he died.

Or he found and married his amria. Even the Black Council would have to respect his marriage vows.

Except...what if he was wrong? What if she didn’t exist? What if Kahven had been the fool everyone said he was, and the philosophy was nothing more than a bunch of pretty lies?

He had been so certain at sixteen . But six long, lonely years had passed since then, with no sign that his amria even existed, let alone would ever find him.

He surged to his feet with a low moan, sending his chair tumbling unheeded to the floor . Desperation burned his heart, and he stumbled to a nearby shelf where he had concealed Kahven’s book so that it would be near at hand. The book fell open to a page he had marked, and he read the words aloud, willing the act to give him strength. “For the reign of the tyrant shall last but a moon, but love shall endure, even unto the sundering of the world.”

Words. It’s just words.

Desolation filled him, and he slammed the book blindly down on the table, covering his face with his hands . “It’s not true,” he whispered. His only hope, and it wasn’t true, it was just words. Tears stung his eyes, and he struggled to cling to his faith. “Oh, gods, please let it be true, please. Don’t do this to me.”

It was the darkest moment of his life .

The door opened a second time . Thraxis looked up, terrified of seeing Melilandra’s mocking face. Instead, he beheld the brown robe who tended the library. Balthazar.

Unreasoning rage touched Thraxis at the intrusion . Damn the man for just walking in on him at a time like this! Never mind that all Athraskani had a right to go into the library anytime they pleased—this was his refuge, curse it all!

Pulling together the tatters of his pride, Thraxis forced himself to stand erect . “What are you doing here, disturbing my studies?” he demanded.

Balthazar stared at him blankly . There was pain in his eyes, but Thraxis ignored it. “I’m sorry,” the other man whispered at last. “I thought no one would be in here this time of night. I needed to be alone. Phaedra...she’s dead.”

The name meant nothing to Thraxis . “Who?”

“My wife! She was killed today—some barrels fell off a cart onto the road, just as it was

passing her—”

Thraxis stared at Balthazar, feeling as though madness stood at his shoulder . His own pain was almost too great for him to deal with—and now here was this...this brown robe. This brown robe who'd had something that even Thraxis, with all his power, would never get.

But no, wait a moment—Balthazar's wife had not even been Athraskani . “Oh, yes—the human woman,” he said, feeling unaccountably relieved.

Balthazar looked at him as if he had indeed taken leave of his senses . “I loved her,” he insisted, and now there was rage as well as grief in his words.

Love . Thraxis stared at Kahven's book, which seemed to mock him from the table. None of it was true. He was in pain, and he would inflict that pain on anyone else who crossed his path, force them to see the betrayal of the universe. “You mean you liked getting between her legs,” Thraxis said viciously. “That's what people really mean when they talk about love, isn't it?”

Balthazar had no way of knowing that the words were meant more to wound Thraxis than himself . “I shouldn't have expected you to understand. I heard about the Council's decision—you and Melilandra will be perfect together.”

Thraxis stood very still, feeling his heart beat . He had loathed Melilandra all his life—and now he was just like her? How dare anyone say such a thing to him? Desperate to deny the accusation, he grabbed at the first rebuttal that came to mind. “At least she's Athraskani. I don't see why you bother mourning Phaedra. After all, she was only human.”

The door slammed as Balthazar left, making Thraxis jump . As he stood alone in silence, Thraxis felt his rage drain away to be replaced by remorse. He had been wrong to say such cruel things to Balthazar—to anyone. A dog didn't deserve such treatment.

Tears gathered again in his eyes, and Thraxis wiped them away . “No. No, I'm sorry, Balthazar,” he said to the empty room. “I'm sorry.”

Chapter Fifteen: Soul Mate Bled

Over the next week, Thraxis and Melilandra continued their work on unraveling the spell that would open the reliquary and reveal its contents. Despite the fact that he continued to feel oddly detached from events around him, as though he merely viewed the actions of another, Thraxis felt that they were making real progress. They broke the cipher on the first half of the spell and used what they had learned to attack the second half of the puzzle with renewed vigor. Within a few days, Thraxis found himself rising before the sun to get to the workroom and lingering there until long after most of the Sanctum had gone to bed. Part of the reason was his very real eagerness to solve the riddle and discover the contents of the reliquary.

The other part was that it gave him an excuse to spend more time in Melilandra's company.

They had never truly worked together before, and it amazed him how well they meshed now. She was brilliant, he thought in admiration. How could he have failed to appreciate her fine intellect?

More and more, he found himself watching her in secret admiration of things other than her mind. Her pale skin was without scar or freckle; her soft hair was like shadow, and he longed to run his fingers through it. What would her full lips taste like? What would it feel like, to have thighs that weren't corded with muscle wrap around his waist? What would it be like to gaze into eyes that were golden, not brown as an animal's?

And then, on the seventh night, she caught him staring. It was late, and silence hung over the Sanctum. She was bent over a book, her delicate brows drawn together in a slight frown as she concentrated on unraveling the double meanings of the names of the ancient gods, which seemed to be a key part of the cipher. Her long hair tumbled about her smooth, rounded shoulders, and her robe clung to the swells of her full breasts. Distracted from his work, Thraxis wondered suddenly what she would do if he tried to kiss her.

She looked up then, her golden eyes slightly sleepy, and the breath caught in his throat. A small smile

curved her luscious lips, making him ache with desire. His hands shook hard, and he closed the book in front of him with a snap.

“Is something wrong?” she asked in her sweet, child-like voice.

Thraxis swallowed quickly and looked away, fighting desire. That he had once despised the woman before him seemed a meaningless thing, the faint dreams of another life. “No,” he managed to say. He stood up quickly, hoping that the loose folds of his robe would hide his lust. “It’s late. We should go.”

She stretched like a cat, and he couldn’t help but follow the motion with hungry eyes. “Of course. Tomorrow, then.”

Somehow, she made the words sound like a promise. Only half-aware of what he was doing, he stumbled off down the hall, making his way for the door. The cool night air cleared his head a little, and by the time he had reached his quarters his breathing had relaxed to normal.

The room was brightly lit, by lamps rather than magic. There was a small amphora on the table, wafting out the faint scent of wine, and two alabaster goblets, so thin that they were nearly translucent. Beside all of this was a small jug of honey.

Beautiful Girl looked up as he entered, thumped her tail once, but did not get up to greet him as she normally did. Had he been paying attention, he would almost have said that he puzzled the hound in some way. But the setting on the table distracted him. “What’s this?” he asked. His voice sounded short and impatient, but he did not care, as if nothing he did or said had any more consequence than the actions undertaken in a dream.

Arrow rose from where she had been sitting on their bed. Rather than her normal barbaric leathers, she was clad in a thin linen dress. Her copper-colored hair lay soft and loose around her shoulders. The smile she gave him was welcoming, seductive. “You’ve been working very hard lately,” she said, coming towards him. “I thought you might like something to relax you tonight.”

“What would you know about it?” he snapped.

Arrow stopped abruptly, her brown eyes going wide with surprise. “What do you mean?”

Annoyance surged in him at her obtuseness. “How would you know what difficulties I face? You can’t even read, let alone comprehend what it would take to unravel a puzzle such as I have been set.”

“Well...yes...I suppose that’s true. But I can tell that you’re tired. I thought—”

“I doubt that.”

Her mouth fell open in shock, but no words came out.

Striding over to the table, Thraxis scornfully swept its setting off into the floor. The amphora of wine broke with a crash, making Arrow jump. “You thought—if we can call it that—that the answer to every problem is rutting like an animal,” he said with a sneer. “But some of us have more sophisticated needs.”

Arrow did not move, just stared at him as if she had never seen him before. Tears gathered in her eyes, but they meant nothing to him. Instead, he pushed past her, as if she was no more account to him than Beautiful Girl. And, really, wasn’t she more like the dog than like him? How had he ever allowed himself to be tricked into marrying such a creature?

“Clean that up,” he ordered off-handedly. “I’m going to bed.”

* * * *

That night, Thraxis dreamed. It was the same dream as he had been having every night since the dark of the moon, although he never remembered it upon waking. He was buried deep somewhere in the darkness, struggling frantically to get out. His hands clawed at sand, shoving it aside even as it rained down on him. There was sand in his eyes, sand in his mouth, but he didn’t care about that. The need to escape overwhelmed all other concerns.

After a while, he became aware that he was not alone in the darkness. There was something else with him, something that clutched at him with skeletal fingers, seeking to draw him back into the eternal, underground night with it. He tried to ignore it, as he had done every other night, but its heavy drag slowed his progress to almost nothing. At last, frustrated, he gave off digging and turned to face it.

To one without his power, she might have seemed a fearsome opponent indeed. Her eyes were missing, with only bloody sockets remaining, and her arms and legs ended in ragged stumps. Her mouth

opened fearsomely wide, revealing sharp teeth, and disembodied hands with knife-like nails slashed at his face. Her rage was like a living thing, and he could feel it beating against him. She hated all that lived, all that had not suffered as she had. She would make him pay for what had been done to her.

She was terrible to behold, a monstrous specter that railed against her unjust fate. But she was also a young girl who had suffered horribly. Pity rather than fear touched Thraxis' heart. Shielding himself from the blows of her bony fingers, he drew her gently against him.

"I'm sorry," he said truthfully. "I would undo what happened to you if I could."

She stilled, turning blind eyes to his face. He kissed her brow gently even as he severed the bonds of rage holding her to the earth. "Go now, little one, and be at peace," he whispered.

When she was gone, he turned back to his task. Although freeing her had tired him, the digging was easier without her constant attacks, and he began to make real progress. But as the sun rose over the world above, his searching fingers encountered the smoothness of stone.

No, he thought, furious that he should come so far and be thwarted at the last. Gathering all his strength, he flung a spear of power at the stone. Although the obstacle should have shattered, only the smallest crack appeared.

Frustration and despair threatened to overwhelm him. Telling himself that he couldn't give in, that he had to escape this prison, he began to resolutely attack the stone again and again and again.

* * * *

Thraxis awoke suddenly, heart pounding. Unable to remember his dream—unable to hear the small voice deep inside that was fighting to catch his attention—he rolled out of bed and struggled into his robes. Arrow didn't move, which was just as well.

As he reached for his sandals, a low growl startled him. Beautiful Girl had been sleeping at the foot of the bed, but now she backed away from him. The fur stood up on her spine, her ears lay flat against her head, and her tail was tucked tight between her legs. Fear and confusion showed in her mismatched eyes.

Thraxis frowned impatiently—what was wrong with the creature? Vaguely, he recalled that he had saved her life and cared for her since puppy-hood, but that fact seemed far away and unimportant. It occurred to him that Melilandra would probably not approve of the mutt. Best that he get rid of her soon. Kefre could probably find a place for her in the village. And the driver had seemed interested in Arrow—perhaps he would take her off of Thraxis' hands as well.

Pleased with his plan, Thraxis smoothed his robes and hurried off to the workroom.

* * * *

Arrow lay still, pretending to sleep while Thraxis dressed and left. In truth, she had not slept at all the night before, instead passing the silent hours in misery, huddled on her side of the bed. Tears leaked out from her eyes, and she wiped them away, cursing herself. A Champion never cried, no matter the provocation. Not even if the man she loved now despised her.

Once she was sure that Thraxis was gone, she sat up. She was still wearing the dress she had put on for him the night before; with a sudden burst of rage, she ripped it off, tearing the fine linen into rags. Beautiful Girl whined softly, came over, and licked the remains of tears from her face.

Depressed, Arrow slowly put on her old leathers. The trousers wouldn't lace up properly anymore, she saw with a sudden flare of panic. Her pregnancy was starting to show; soon, there would be no more hiding it from Thraxis.

Desperately in need of advice, she sought out Viabold in the great hall, where he was finishing breakfast. When he caught sight of Arrow, he smiled and lifted his glass to her. "Good morning, Arrow! Try the porridge, it really is..."

The look in her eyes stopped his words. "I need to talk to you. Alone," she said.

Abandoning the remains of his breakfast, he took her arm and led her out into the gardens and thence to the herbalist's workshop that they had used before. Beautiful Girl padded after them, seeming to sense her mistress's dark mood.

As soon as they were alone, all of Arrow's grief, fear, and hurt came rushing out. She told Viabold everything—the distance that had been growing between her and Thraxis despite her best efforts, the indifference with which he had begun to treat her, and finally the hurtful words that he had spoken the night before. When she was done, she felt drained and sat with her head hanging in weariness.

Viabold patted her hand absently, a deep frown on his face. "That doesn't sound like Thraxis," he said at last.

"No." Arrow swallowed hard against the grief that tightened her throat. "I guess neither of us knew him as well as we thought, huh?"

Viabold gently brushed a tear from her cheek. "Don't give up on him yet. As I said, that doesn't sound like him. Perhaps he has been reacting to the distance he's sensed in you."

Startled, she looked up and met his silver-streaked eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you've been keeping a big secret from him lately. Maybe that has put a distance between you that you weren't aware of, but that he was. And when he couldn't breach that distance, perhaps he started to lash out in anger, just to get you to react to him again. Not that it justifies what he said to you last night, of course. But it could be one explanation."

"I suppose." Hope touched her, and she straightened her back unconsciously. "That could be it."

"You need to talk to him. Now. Tell him about the baby."

She bit her lip hard, nervousness flooding her belly. But it was impossible to deny that Viabold was correct. She had put it off as long as she could, and possibly damaged her marriage because of it. Now time had run out—she had to tell Thraxis, and either mend their relationship or end it forever.

No, not that . I refuse to believe that we can't work this out.

Clinging to all the courage that she could summon, she nodded firmly. "You're right. I'll go find him now."

* * * *

Thraxis paced wildly back and forth in the workroom. He had intended to busy himself with the cipher until Melilandra arrived but found that he could not concentrate. Where *was* she? Half a dozen times, he started for the door, intending to seek her out, only to force himself back. No. He would look like a fool, searching for her at breakfast or the morning meditation. He had only to wait—she would be there soon enough.

Even so, it felt like several eternities before the door opened at last. Thraxis stopped his pacing and stared at her, his heart pounding and his body aching with desire. She was the most beautiful woman who had ever lived, he realized in awe. He had known her for his entire life, yet somehow had never seen what was right in front of his eyes all along. *This* woman, *this* was his *amria*, his soul mate, his one and only love.

She must have seen something in his eyes, because she paused by the table and gave him a seductive smile. Her eyes were sleepy, half-lidded, but he caught the flash of excitement beneath her lashes. Her plump lips parted, begging to be kissed. Then she lifted one white hand, and he felt her fingers touch him beneath his robe from across the room.

Letting out an animal groan of lust, he crossed the space between them and kissed her. Her mouth parted under his and he thrust his tongue between her lips, pulling her body hard against his. Thought disappeared utterly in a blinding maelstrom of urgent desire—nothing mattered, nothing, except that he take her as soon as possible.

She laughed as he bit her neck, but no alarm sounded in the conscious part of his mind. He grabbed her hips and lifted her onto the table, sliding her robe up to expose her white thighs. But as he reached for his own robe, fingers clumsy on the fastenings, some small sound intruded onto his awareness. Startled, he looked up, towards the door they had forgotten to close.

Arrow stood there, her expression one of such utter devastation that it finally reached him through the fog that had seemed to exist between him and the world. For an instant, they stared at one another, until the tears gathering in her brown eyes spilled over. Then, with a muffled sob, she turned and ran.

"Forget about her," Melilandra said, as if from a great distance.

Something shifted, like the cracking of a heavy stone. Slowly, Thraxis felt his hands curl into fists, and he turned his gaze back to Melilandra's face. Two things penetrated the haze about him: that he had hurt Arrow, and that somehow, somehow, Melilandra had been responsible.

With a sudden shout of rage, he drew back his fist and punched it hard into Melilandra's face.

He felt the lips that he had just kissed spread and split against the hardness of teeth. A wild surge of power went through him, stronger than he had ever felt in his life, and he heard himself laughing like a madman as he struck her again and again.

Melilandra could have flung him off with magic. But even the concept of violence was alien to her; she had never faced anything like a physical assault in her life, and as a result was too terrified and confused to do anything but fling up her arms. With a howl of rage, he knocked her feeble defense aside and locked his hands around her neck, squeezing with all his strength. He saw her golden eyes bulge from their sockets, felt her nails tearing frantically at his face, but it was all distant, all unreal.

Then, suddenly, there were hands on him, dragging him off of her. A male voice shouted for help, and within minutes the room was filled with horrified Athraskani. As rage drained away like dirty water, Thraxis realized that Viabold gripped his robe and was shaking him with both hands. The expression on his friend's face was like nothing Thraxis had ever seen before.

"What are you doing?" Viabold shouted.

In the necropolis at the edge of the desert, the stones of a tomb suddenly cracked, exploding outwards. A whirl of dust rose up, and then settled slowly about the resting place of a murdered girl.

On some level, Thraxis felt it break. Suddenly, there was no distance between him and the world anymore; his surroundings were abruptly, frighteningly *real*. Shocked, he looked around, saw the blood streaming down Melilandra's face, the purple bruises forming on her throat. Kalika knelt next to the older woman, and as Thraxis turned, she looked up, her expression one of betrayal and accusation.

Just as Arrow's had been.

Arrow . Oh, gods, Arrow! What have I done?

He tried to jerk away from Viabold. "Arrow! I have to talk to Arrow!"

Then there was a wall of darkness between him and the door. Startled, he stopped his struggling and watched as Vilhardouin and Shatrevar entered the room. Vilhardouin observed Melilandra dispassionately for a moment, and then met Thraxis' gaze. For the first time in his life, he found that he couldn't look at her, so he dropped his eyes to the floor.

"Thraxis," she said, her voice cold as the desert at night, "you have broken the First and the Last Vow, the Vow to do no harm. I am invoking the Council's power as Tribunal, and I place you under arrest."

* * * *

At the sight of Thraxis and Melilandra groping passionately at one another, something died inside of Arrow. For an instant, she stood transfixed, part of her mind frantically denying the reality of what she saw. Then, her heart breaking, she spun and ran blindly down the hall, desperate to get away from them.

At the top of the stair, she collided with Viabold, nearly sending him sprawling. "Arrow?" he demanded, grabbing wildly at her arms. Cursing all Athraskani with a furious oath, she shoved him away from her. A glint of gold caught her eye, and she tore her wedding ring from her finger, flinging it as hard as she could down the hall. Then, half-blinded by tears, she leapt down the stairs three at a time. Viabold did not follow.

She had to leave, had to get out of there. The thought of ever seeing Thraxis' face again was too painful to contemplate. For an instant, she considered going back to their chambers and collecting her things, then dismissed the thought. She was Skald; she had no need of anything save for herself, her weapons, and her horses.

As she turned her footsteps towards the corral, she realized that there was one other thing she would take with her. Beautiful Girl had been running behind her the entire time, anxiously staring up at her mistress as if trying to find some clue as to what they were doing. Dashing away her tears, Arrow awkwardly patted the dog's narrow head. "Don't worry, girl—I won't leave you here with *them*," she

muttered fiercely.

People stared as she jogged past them, but Arrow no longer cared what any Athraskani thought of her. Lady of Beasts, but she wished she'd never seen any of their kind. Nightwing and Stalker came to the edge of the corral at her whistle, and she pulled their tack from a small storage shed and had them ready to go with a speed that could only be achieved by someone who had spent most of her life on horseback.

"We're leaving this place, cousins," she said to them. "Going back to where people are sane. Back to where they don't tell you pretty lies, and make you believe them, and..." Tears threatened again, so she swallowed back her words. Balthazar had once told her that Thraxis wasn't worth the tears of a Champion. How right he had been.

The horses set a rapid pace away from the Sanctum, Beautiful Girl loping easily alongside. How they would get back to the steppes and the Skald, Arrow did not know, and for the moment was incapable of considering. Distance was imperative; she knew only that she had to get as far away as she could from the lying bastard who had used then discarded her.

She had not gone far, however, before she became aware of someone following. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw a chariot driven by Kefre, who appeared to be alone. For a moment she considered trying to outrun him, but she didn't want to leave Beautiful Girl behind, so instead she slowed her horses and let him catch up.

"Where are you going, pretty lady?" Kefre asked when he drew abreast. Dust covered his face, and he licked his lips nervously.

"Away." She forced herself to sit straight in the saddle, as if she had not been humiliated in front of everyone in the Sanctum. "I'm leaving. For good."

"But what about your husband?"

"My *former* husband may be devoured by crocodiles for all I care."

Bizarrely, Kefre glanced behind him, as if he carried a hidden rider he wanted to ask for advice. Then he said, "But you can't. I mean, why not give it a few days? I know a place you could stay while you reconsider. After all, you don't want to endanger the baby, do you?"

Cold touched her heart. "How do you know I'm pregnant?"

Kefre looked shocked. But, before he could formulate an explanation to cover his lapse, the space behind him was suddenly filled. For a terrible instant, Arrow thought that Kefre's passenger was Thraxis, come to chase her down. Then she realized that it was Thraxis' cousin, Gallinarches.

Gallinarches of the Black Council.

Struck by a premonition of danger, Arrow dug her heels hard into Nightwing's flanks. The horse leapt forwards—then collapsed onto the sand, flinging her off his back. She rolled and came to her feet, reaching for her sword in a gesture that she knew was futile. Then her own legs went nerveless, and she fell helplessly to the ground.

Gallinarches climbed out of the chariot and strolled towards her. His golden eyes were bright and cruel as those of an eagle. "You know we can't allow you to leave," he said conversationally. "Not while you are in possession of our property."

"I don't have anything of yours!"

"Of course you do. The baby growing in your womb belongs to us." He smiled suddenly, like a crocodile getting ready to bite. "She is the key to our greatness. She is the one who will restore the Athraskani to the power they once had."

Arrow's heart pounded in fear. "You went into the Hall of Reflections."

He looked surprised that she knew. "Yes. For centuries, rules and vows have bound the Athraskani, hiding us from ourselves, denying our power out of fear. We've wasted our lives scraping and groveling before the likes of the Emperor, because we rendered ourselves impotent against him. But no more. She will lead us into a new era. She will be the Empress of the World."

"No! It won't happen that way." Arrow pushed herself up on her hands, cursing the spell that kept the lower half of her body immobile. "I saw it, too. But what I saw was the outcome. If you take her—if you twist her—she will destroy everything, including you."

His eyes narrowed in contempt. "Pathetic creature, too small-minded to understand what you see. You are nothing but a vessel."

He reached towards her, as if he would touch her face. At that instant, Beautiful Girl flung herself at him, snarling furiously. With a startled oath, Gallinarches made a short motion. The hound went flying back, striking the ground with tremendous impact. Whining, she struggled to stand, but Arrow could see that at least one of her legs was shattered.

"You break your Vows!" she accused, praying that enough of the old ways were left in him for the act to disturb Gallinarches. But he only smiled.

"What is one lowly beast, compared to the greatness I have seen?" he asked. Then he touched her face, and all became darkness.

* * * *

Thraxis sat pouring over the words on the page before him, unable to believe that they said what he thought . After so many years of searching, he had begun to give up hope that he would ever find what he sought. And yet, here on this ancient scrap of papyrus, half-obliterated by time and mold, were words he could not deny.

"The doyan'si: a device to create power for the wizard," he read slowly, feeling his heart beat faster. Strengthening the light about him so that he could better see, he leaned close to the page, deciphering the old list of spell ingredients. A jewel of some kind was needed to collect and store the power; it had to be at least the size of a child's heart and without flaw. Well, that he should be able to procure without too much difficulty; the Athraskani didn't have ties to the Emperor for nothing. The list of enchanted words to speak over the jewel stretched for yards, and there were runes to draw and oils the jewel must be anointed with, but it was all well within his ability.

Then he saw where its power came from .

"To charge the jewel, place it upon the forehead of a human just as his throat is cut . At that time, his soul will be absorbed within and changed into power that the mage can draw upon at will."

Shocked, Thraxis read the passage again, then again . What horror was this? Who would dream up such a monstrous thing? Cursing furiously, he flung the scroll away from him. For the first time in years, he had gotten his hopes up—only to have them dashed yet again.

He should put the scroll back where he had found it, in the oldest part of the library where the few records that survived from ancient times were stored . This doyan'si was an abomination that should never see the light of day. Certainly it was of no use to him.

But as the days passed, he found his thoughts turning back to the scroll again and again . In all his searching, he had not come upon anything even close to his goal. Surely it would not hurt just to study the spell. Perhaps in that way he might come to understand the theory behind it and adapt the spell so that it drew its power from some other, more benign source.

And so he took the scroll out once again and poured over it day and night, searching for some clue as to how he might modify the spell . Unfortunately, nothing presented itself. Simply reading about the spell was not enough, he realized. In order to truly understand it, he would have to perform it.

To create such an abomination as the doyan'si was to run a grave risk. If the Black Council learned of his activities, would they look upon them as harmless research, or as something more sinister? Or would they care at all? Perhaps all of his worry had less to do with them and more to do with the queasy feeling in his own stomach. Could he create such a thing, even if he had no intention of ever using it?

There's no other way, he decided at last. But it will be all right. I know what I'm doing. Nothing will go wrong.

Chapter Sixteen: To Fill This Place

Thraxis sat in silent misery in his makeshift prison, staring at his hands. The room they had locked him in had once been an underground storage cellar, its walls of smooth, cool stone. The only illumination came from a small window high above his head, on a level with the ground outside. Before locking him away, the Black Council had mounted a series of familiar lead plaques on the walls.

As the hours passed, he sat and numbly watched a small square of sunlight crawl across the floor, his thought chaotic. At last, however, the door opened. He looked up and saw Viabold standing at the head of the stairs leading down to the sunken level of the cellar's floor. Viabold stepped inside; then, a sudden shiver ran over him, and he cursed loudly. The door clanged behind him, denying his discomfort.

"So," Viabold said darkly, "they figured out the spell that locks away a wizard's power, did they?"

Thraxis returned his gaze to his hands. They lay limply in his lap, like a pair of dead insects, their legs curled inward. "So it would seem," he answered.

Muttering to himself—the spell was not a comfortable one—Viabold stumped the rest of the way down the stairs and stood looking at Thraxis. Thraxis did not return the courtesy. Silence stretched between them, until at last his already-frayed nerves could take no more. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Yes. I want an explanation. I want to know what happened."

"I don't know what happened."

"That isn't an answer."

"It's all I have to give." Thraxis sighed and covered his face with his hands. "Don't you think I've been asking myself the same thing all day? Gods! I kissed Melilandra, I destroyed my marriage, and I broke the most important of my Vows...if I could tell you why any of those things seemed like a good idea at the time, I would. But I can't. It just...it feels like they were things done by a stranger. Someone else."

"But it wasn't someone else," Viabold pointed out harshly.

Thraxis dropped his hands back to his lap. "No. It wasn't."

"Kalika, Sakarax, the rest of your followers—they've all renounced you."

"As well they should."

When Viabold didn't say anything further, he chanced a quick glance up, saw that the older man stood frowning at him. "You don't have much fight left in you," Viabold observed.

"What is there to fight?" Thraxis' voice broke, and he had to pause a moment to get control over his emotions again. "I can't deny what happened—you saw it yourself. Kalika and the rest shouldn't follow me—they should forget I ever existed. And as for Arrow...I don't know what I'm going to say to her."

"Nothing, I would guess."

Thraxis winced, imagining her hurt and rage. "I don't blame her for not wanting to talk to me yet."

"She's gone."

Startled, he looked up, saw Viabold watching him with an odd look of compassion. "Gone? I...I don't understand."

"She left, Thraxis. She took her horses and the dog and left. Kefre saw that she was upset and followed her a little ways. She was going to Djosser to buy passage on the next barge headed down river. Going back to the Skald, apparently."

It hurt, worse than anything he'd ever imagined before. If he had ever doubted his love for Arrow, then all doubts were erased forever at that moment. A future without her wasn't a future worth living.

Of course, he'd *had* a future with her and thrown it away...and for what? A woman he hated? None of it made sense to him anymore. What could he have been thinking? His own actions were incomprehensible. How could he, even for the most fleeting of moments, have thought that Melilandra was not only desirable but also his love?

Clinging to the tatters of his composure, he managed to nod. "Thank you for letting me know."

Viabold hesitated, then crossed the room to him. Kneeling down, he pressed something into Thraxis' hand. Uncurling his fingers reluctantly, Thraxis saw a simple gold band set with onyx. Arrow's wedding ring.

"She threw it at me," Viabold said ruefully.

Struggling with tears, Thraxis slipped it onto his smallest finger. It was the only thing he had left of her, he realized bitterly. No doubt it was more than he deserved. "Th-thank you. I think I'd like to be alone, now."

Viabold put a hand to his shoulder. "I don't like this, lad," he said, lowering his voice as if he feared someone might overhear them. Thraxis wondered why Viabold thought that anyone would possibly care enough to spy. "This...none of this was like you. Arrow came to me this morning and told me that you had been acting out of character lately. And now you don't have an explanation as to why you did the things you did...it doesn't seem right."

"Of course I have an explanation," Thraxis said. "I am a fool, an idiot, the worst imbecile ever created. I had everything I could ever want, and I threw it all away, and now I don't even know why I did it."

Viabold's mouth quirked. "I don't understand what's happening here, but there's more to it than the fact that you're a fool. Which I'm not disputing, by the way."

"Thank you. Your friendship is truly the rock that supports me."

"That's more like it." Viabold clapped him on the shoulder and rose to his feet. "You're supposed to go on trial tomorrow. I don't have to tell you that the evidence looks damning."

Thraxis shrugged. "I'm guilty, Viabold. Don't expect me to say otherwise."

Viabold's look grew troubled. "This worries me."

"So you've already said." Thraxis sighed and closed his eyes wearily. "The Black Council will find me guilty of breaking my Vows, Viabold. And I'll be sentenced to exile. To be honest, I don't find that I care."

* * * *

When Arrow awoke, she was lying on a small bed in a cool, shady room. Startled, she sat up and looked around her. The bed was the only piece of furniture in the room besides a small chamber pot; otherwise, it was a tiny, barren cell with a single door and window. Although everything else was in place, all of her weapons were gone.

Gallinarches. He must have put a sleep spell on her. Viabold had tried something similar once before, but he lacked Gallinarches' power, and it had only partially worked. This time, she had been transported to an unfamiliar place, deeply unconscious the entire time.

She went immediately to the window, intending to climb out, but found that an invisible barrier prevented her from passing through it. Cursing, she tried the door, but discovered that it was locked by more conventional means. Gallinarches and that snake Kefre had trapped her here.

Breathing deeply to calm herself, she went to sit on the bed. They couldn't just leave her here alone. Someone would have to come eventually, if only to bring her food and water. After all, they wanted her healthy...at least until the baby was delivered.

She put one hand protectively on her belly. Gallinarches wanted to steal her daughter for the Black Council to raise. And, if her vision in the Hall of Reflections was any clue, they would do such a good job of it that the girl would grow into a madwoman lacking even the concept of remorse.

And as for Arrow...no doubt they would kill her as soon as she had delivered.

A few weeks, even a few days, ago, she would not have believed it. But it was clear to her through Gallinarches' words and actions that he at least had abandoned the Vows that had heretofore restrained him. Whether the Hall of Reflections had done something to his mind, or whether Xaqqara itself had influenced him somehow, she did not know. It did not, in the end, matter.

If only we had not gone to that damned city . If only Thraxis had listened to me.

Pain went through her at the thought of Thraxis, like a fish hook snagged deep in her heart. Did he know about Gallinarches' scheme? Had he learned of her pregnancy through his magic? Did he believe

that she had used him, had lied to him about being unable to conceive so that she could bear a powerful child? Had that been the motive behind his actions with Melilandra?

But no—despite her deep disappointment in him, she could not believe that Thraxis would ever do anything that would lead either to her death or to their child being raised by the Black Council. Even if he believed that Gallinarches was going to let her go once she had delivered, he would never hand over their baby to anyone else. No doubt Thraxis was utterly ignorant in the matters of her capture and Gallinarches' plans for their daughter.

So don't expect a rescue, she thought sourly. Somehow, she would simply have to escape on her own.

* * * *

Thraxis went on trial the next day.

When the door to the cellar opened, he looked up, expecting Viabold. Instead, Kefre and several other human men stood there, all of them appearing distinctly nervous. Clearing his throat, Kefre held up a skein of rope. The rope had been woven from strands of different colors, and lead seals hung all along its length.

“By order of the Black Council, your power is to be bound when you come before them, to prevent you from doing further harm,” Kefre said nervously, sounding like a man reciting something from memory.

Thraxis only nodded, unable to summon even a flash of anger. And why should he be angry? He had proved himself a monster by attacking Melilandra. The memory of the shameful rush of pleasure that had overcome him when he struck her came back, making him flinch. The Black Council was right to be afraid of what he might do.

His body aching from a night spent on the hard floor, he stood up and extended his wrists passively. Kefre and another man came to bind him, while their companions stood at the door with drawn bows, ready to shoot should Thraxis make some unexpected move. He let them do as they wished, not even complaining when they knotted the rope tightly enough to cut off feeling to his hands. Once he was bound, they took him by either arm and led him between them up the stairs and out of the storage room.

The light outside was painfully bright. Thraxis automatically invoked a spell to shield his eyes, but of course nothing happened. The power was locked away in him, farther beyond his reach than it had ever been before.

The Black Council held their Tribunal in the great hall, just as they had on the day they judged Anarete, Jumica, and Cyaraxes. As he entered between his guards, Thraxis felt a hot wave of shame sweep over him, and he stared at the ground, not willing to meet the accusing glares of the other Athraskani. The room was utterly silent as he was led to stand before the Black Council.

When his guards let go of him and stepped back, Thraxis dared to glance up at Vilhardouin's face. Her expression was closed to him, so he looked back down at his feet.

“Initiate Thraxis,” she said coldly, “you have been brought before us today in the gravest of circumstances. The charges leveled against you are the most severe that can be brought against one of our kind.”

A faint murmur ran around the room. From the number of voices, Thraxis guessed that the entire Sanctum was here to behold his shame.

Vilhardouin waited until the whispers died down. “You are accused of breaking your Vow to do no harm. Yesterday morning, when Initiate Melilandra reported to the workroom you shared, you attempted to rape her.”

A thrill of sick horror ran through him, and he looked up quickly. Vilhardouin's austere face betrayed no expression, but Gallinarches appeared smug and Shatrevar disgusted. At the edge of the crowd, he saw Kalika, looking as though she might vomit.

“No, I—” he began, then stopped. Melilandra had reciprocated his advances.

Hadn't she?

The state of his own mind at that time seemed so alien to him now that he couldn't say for sure that

his perceptions represented reality. What if he had somehow managed to confuse things—what if she hadn't wanted his attentions at all?

When he made no move to finish his protest, Vilhardouin went on. "When your attempt was interrupted by the human, Arrow, you then attacked Melilandra in anger and tried to kill her. She has graciously refused healing so that all here can see the savagery of your actions."

Gasps of horror filled the room. Feeling faint, Thraxis forced himself to raise his eyes as Melilandra approached the Black Council.

She looked horrible. Her lips were swollen and scabbed over where the flesh had split between his knuckles and her teeth. Bruises ringed both eyes, sealing one nearly shut. And around the pale column of her throat was the clear imprint of two hands.

Again, he remembered that moment of pleasure and power. What sort of monster was he? Despair and self-loathing filled him like acid, and he looked down at the floor again, unable to bear the sight of what he had done.

Melilandra's appearance was all the evidence needed, he was sure. But Vilhardouin followed the strict formalities, asking her daughter to relate what had happened in the workroom. Melilandra's child-like voice had gone hoarse from the swelling of her throat, making her story all that much more poignant. Slowly, hesitantly, she described how they had worked together to unravel the cipher on the reliquary over the last two weeks—and how, as time passed, she caught him staring at her more and more. His stares had begun to unnerve her, but she had told herself that it was nothing—until at last he attacked her. Only Arrow's timely appearance had prevented him from raping her; once Arrow fled, his lust had turned to pure rage. Viabold's arrival had been the only thing to keep Thraxis from killing her.

When Melilandra was done, Viabold was called to tell what he had seen. He tried to shoot Thraxis an apologetic look as he came forward, but Thraxis turned his gaze away. Viabold certainly didn't need to apologize for telling the truth.

The older mage explained what he had seen upon entering the workroom, and that he had pulled Thraxis away from Melilandra. But when he tried to continue, adding that Thraxis seemed strangely confused and befuddled, Vilhardouin cut him off.

"Thank you," she said crisply. "But you need only report actions, not interpretations of Thraxis' state of mind."

Viabold made a small sound of protest, but turned and shuffled away when she fixed him with a quelling glare. Satisfied, Vilhardouin turned her attention back to Thraxis. "Initiate Thraxis," she said, "do you have any words to say in your defense?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Kalika staring at him, as if begging him to denounce it all. If only he could. "No," he said, his voice so low it was nearly inaudible. "I do not."

Another anxious murmur swept around the room, but Vilhardouin silenced it by holding up her hand. "Very well, then."

Gallinarches shifted in his chair and glanced significantly at his colleagues. "I do not see any reason for us to debate this matter."

Shatrevar nodded his agreement, and Vilhardouin smiled a thin smile that sent a shiver of fear up Thraxis' back. "I agree," she said, and there was an oddly satisfied note in her voice.

But what could she possibly have to be happy about?

Vilhardouin rose slowly to her feet, her hands clasped behind her back. "I want all of you to look upon Initiate Thraxis closely," she said to the spectators. "This is what comes when one allows the outside world to influence one's actions. *This* is the result of the heresy that we should mingle with the world around us rather than keeping to ourselves. I trust that everyone here can see this clearly, and no longer clings to the mistaken belief that Thraxis' heresy was anything but evil."

Silence fell. Vilhardouin let it linger, patient as always, until at last Kalika's nerve broke. "We see," the young woman said quietly, her head bowed. "And I pray that the Black Council will forgive us for our errors."

"The mistakes of youth are not uncommon. What is important is that we learn from them," Vilhardouin said with a satisfied smile. Then she turned her attention back to Thraxis. "Initiate Thraxis, I

declare you heretic and apostate. I sentence you to have your powers stripped from you, so that you will no longer be Athraskani. You will be returned to your cell, to be held there until such time as it is possible to transfer your power to another.”

What? Her words made no sense. Confused, he looked up at her, even as the room around them burst into an uproar. But his guards grabbed his arms hard, dragging him roughly out of the room. He only had time to see Cynixia bury her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

“What was Vilhardouin talking about?” Thraxis demanded as his guards hustled him to his cell. “Stripped of my power? Transfer it to another? I don’t understand.”

“That’s none of our business,” said Kefre, jerking him to a halt just inside the door to the cell. He untied the spell cords around Thraxis’ wrists, tucking them into his pocket.

“But—”

Kefre shoved him in the chest, sending him tumbling down the stairs. Lying at the bottom of the stair, his head ringing, Thraxis watched dumbly as the men slammed and locked the door behind them.

Nothing made sense anymore.

* * * *

The sounds of yelling and running feet woke Thraxis out of a deep sleep . He had been up most of the night, performing the long, complicated, and demanding spell to create the doyan’si. Once done, he’d had just enough energy to put things back into place in the workroom and stagger to his bed.

Someone was pounding on his door . Muttering angrily, Thraxis heaved himself out of bed and pulled on a robe. When he went to release the locking spell on the door, he realized with annoyance that he had been so tired the night before that he had forgotten to set it in the first place.

“Come in!” he shouted irritably .

The door swung open instantly, revealing Sakarax . The youth looked frightened—terrified, almost.

“Thraxis,” he gasped frantically . “I’ve been trying to wake you! Were you asleep all this time?”

Thraxis put a hand to his head, trying to dissipate the beginnings of a severe migraine . Gods of truth, but that spell had taken a lot out of him last night if he had slept through all the carrying-on outside his door. “Whatever for?” he asked grumpily. “What on earth is going on? Why does it sound like everyone is running around in the corridors?”

“The Black Council sent me to summon you when they couldn’t wake you otherwise . Thraxis, it’s...it’s horrible. All the servants...all the humans in the Sanctum...they’re dead. Murdered.”

“What?” Thraxis frowned . “You must be mistaken.”

“I’m not! The Black Council has called a meeting of everyone in the Sanctum . We’ll have to hurry if we want to get there in time.”

“Oh, very well,” Thraxis snapped . Clearly some exaggerated rumor had made the rounds, and now everyone in the Sanctum was panicking over an invented murderer. No doubt some poor human had fallen down the stairs and broken his neck, nothing more. The Black Council would set things to rights.

By the time they reached the gathering, the huge hall was almost filled with fearful Athraskani . The air was full of terrified murmurs and the nervous rustling of robes. Disdaining to look at the silly sheep around him, Thraxis swept down the central corridor and took his place with the other black robes at the head of the gathering. Melilandra started a little when he came up, but quickly replaced her fearful expression with one of hauteur. Thraxis sneered at her to let her know that he had caught her slip, and was rewarded by a glare that could have burned stone.

Vilhardouin rose to her feet, and silence instantly fell as hundreds of frightened eyes focused on her . “By now you have all heard what has happened,” she said gravely. “This morning, it was

discovered that those human servants who live in the Sanctum were slaughtered.”

Shock formed a cold lump in Thraxis’ chest . This wasn’t the way things were supposed to go. “How did they die?” he asked, hoping for some other explanation.

Gallinarches brought one of the bodies in, floating it along beside him at waist level . A white sheet covered it from head to toe. Once the body was in position, Gallinarches made a small gesture, and the sheet flipped back to chest-level.

The man looked pale and hard in death . His eyes were open, staring at some sight that had obviously terrified him. A sharp instrument had sliced into his throat, cutting it so deeply that the faint gleam of bone could be seen.

Thraxis felt his stomach contract . When the coppery stink of spilled blood came to him, he turned away, struggling to control his nausea. There was no denying that the servant had been anything but murdered.

“How did this happen?” someone asked .

“The gate guards did not see anyone enter or leave from sundown to sunrise,” Vilhardouin said . “The only way anyone could have gotten in or out past them would have been by magic stronger than theirs. So either the murderer was Athraskani...or he is still here.”

The hall filled with panicked voices . Vilhardouin tried to continue, but no one was paying any attention. At last, she gestured angrily at Thraxis, making a silencing motion towards the crowd. Glad to have something to focus on other than the corpse, he immediately cast a muffling spell over the gathering, reducing everyone’s voice to a whisper. Startled by the tactic, the wizards fell silent.

“The first thing we must do is make certain that we are all accounted for,” Vilhardouin said calmly into the silence . “That is one of the reasons we have gathered everyone here. Shatrevar will go over the lists and make certain that everyone in the Sanctum is safe and accounted for.”

They waited while Shatrevar slowly read down the lists, naming every Athraskani who should be present, beginning with the black robed mages . As he continued down through the levels of power, everyone answered when their name was spoken. Until, that is, he reached the last name of all.

Balthazar .

Chapter Seventeen: These Chains

It was several hours before the door to Thraxis’ prison opened again. Viabold entered, a covered tray and a jug of water in his hands. The smell of the food should have set Thraxis’ stomach to rumbling after so long without, but instead it only made him feel vaguely sick, and he turned his face aside when Viabold set it on the floor in front of him.

“That’s a nasty bruise,” the older man said, reaching a hand towards Thraxis’ temple in concern.

Thraxis waved him away irritably. “It doesn’t matter. Viabold, please, what’s happening? What did Vilhardouin mean when she said that I’d be stripped of my powers?”

Viabold hesitated, stroking nervously at his beard. “They didn’t tell you?”

“Clearly not, if I’m asking you.”

“Sorry, sorry. Well...it seems that someone—Vilhardouin, I think—was pouring over the scrolls we brought back from Xaqqara and discovered a reference to the ‘Forbidden.’”

“The contents of the reliquary?”

“I’m afraid so. It seems that it’s some sort of spell meant to be used only in the most extreme circumstances—so extreme that the ancients didn’t even invoke it when their war was tearing their civilization apart.”

Thraxis slumped back against the wall. “Arrow tried to warn me,” he said numbly. “But I wouldn’t listen. I was so caught up by the challenge that the reliquary represented that I didn’t want to hear her when she said that it housed something dangerous. Oh, gods, why was I such a fool?”

Viabold's mouth quirked. "I could list all sorts of reasons. Shall I?"

Thraxis scowled at him. "No. So this 'Forbidden' is a spell that somehow takes the magic from an Athraskani?"

"And gives it to another. Yes." Viabold paused uncomfortably. "The thing is, it seems that the process is...fatal...to the donor."

Oh yes. Yes, that was a spell that Vilhardouin would like very much indeed. Breeding programs took so long. With this spell, only a few weeks would suffice to strip the power from those who didn't see things her way and create super-strong mages from her followers. There was only one obstacle. "The Vows. No one will follow the Black Council if they start using a spell that kills other Athraskani."

Viabold's expression was grave. "They are saying that the good of the whole outweighs the good of one individual. As far as everyone else is concerned, Thraxis, you're a dangerous madman. They'll accept any excuse just to get rid of you."

Thraxis closed his eyes in despair. They were right, of course. He was dangerous. "But they haven't discovered how to open the reliquary yet, correct?"

"Based on the work that you and Melilandra have done, Vilhardouin estimates that it will be only a matter of days."

"Well, then. I suppose that's it."

"What?" Viabold stared at him in shock. "Thraxis, you aren't just going to accept this, are you? You aren't just going to let them kill you?"

"I'm *guilty*, Viabold! If you hadn't come along when you did, I would have *murdered* Melilandra."

"You're depressed. That's natural, but you can't just give up."

"I'm not giving up. I'm accepting my fate." Thraxis' shoulders slumped hopelessly. "I thought I was so righteous, Viabold. I stood up to Anarete over Beautiful Girl, I criticized the Black Council for adhering to the letter of the Vows rather than their intent, I told anyone who would listen to me that I had a better way." A bitter laugh escaped him. "But it turns out that I was nothing more than the worst kind of hypocrite imaginable. Balthazar was right in his judgement when he cast the death curse on me. I should have stayed home and let it take me to the grave. Instead, I dragged Arrow into my life, only so that I could break her heart. The woman I'd been waiting my whole life to find. I wish I had died before we ever met."

"I won't listen to this." Viabold rose sharply to his feet, looking unusually wrathful. "I'll come back when you're done wallowing in self pity."

At that moment, the door swung open again. Vilhardouin appeared at the top of the stair, her face like a storm. "Where is she?"

Thraxis blinked in confusion. "Where is who?"

"Thiacene." Vilhardouin stalked halfway down the stair, then stopped again, her hands clenched at her sides. "Where is she?"

"How would I know? Except for the trial, I've been locked in here since yesterday." Sudden fear touched him. "Is she missing?"

Vilhardouin's cold, silver eyes held his gaze for a moment, as if assessing his truthfulness. "Thiacene is gone," she admitted at last. "Along with an enchanted water jug and a traveling robe. Clearly, your heresy has spread to your sister. Tell me where she is, and I might be lenient with her due to her young age. Otherwise, she will receive the same sentence as you."

Thraxis came to his feet, heart pounding. "You can't do that! Even if she ran away, can you blame her? She's probably humiliated to be related to me at all! You can't kill her for wanting to get away from the Sanctum for a few days!"

"I can and will do whatever is needed to protect the Athraskani from your heresies," Vilhardouin replied harshly. "Kalika and the others who heeded your words have recanted and grown back their hair, but they are still under my watchful gaze, make no mistake. But as your sister, Thiacene may see herself as your heir. If she has truly gone into hiding, then it can only be because she intends to return in a few years to pollute our people with your teachings once again."

Thraxis balled his hands into fists, then forced himself to relax. "Vilhardouin, please, listen to me for

once in your life. Thiacene and I never saw eye-to-eye on anything. If she has left, it is because she is ashamed of me, not because she would ever want to emulate me. You must believe that.”

“No. I must not.” And with that she turned and started away, pausing only to give Viabold a withering glance. “As for you, you had best consider how this meeting might look to others.”

When the door had shut behind her, Viabold turned to Thraxis, his face pale. “Don’t you see? This isn’t just about you, Thraxis. She’s threatening Thiacene; she’s threatening Kalika; she’s threatening me. You have to fight.”

Weariness settled over Thraxis like a great weight, and he sank back down to the floor. “What do you want me to do, Viabold? Deny my guilt? I can’t.” He made a vague gesture. “My powers are bound, and I would not use them even if I could. Once...once I am gone, things will be easier.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

He could feel Viabold’s gaze on him, but he refused to make any further response. His friend didn’t understand, couldn’t understand. After what seemed like an interminably long time, Viabold eventually gave up and left Thraxis to contemplate his fate in silence.

* * * *

Arrow had spent the last several days wracking her brain for any means of escape, but so far nothing had presented itself. In that time, she had seen only Kefre, who came once a day to make certain that she was all right. On the first day, he had brought her an enchanted satchel which never ran out of food and an amphora that remained filled to the brim no matter how much she drank, so that her physical needs were certain to be met.

Each time he appeared, she tried to talk to him, but he refused to respond to either threats or pleadings. The doorframe was enchanted so that she could not move beyond it; Kefre stood just on the other side, looking at her sadly, before locking her away once again. Still, there had to be a way to escape, she felt certain of it.

Only, if she was going to get away, she had better do it soon, before the growing baby swelled her belly much further.

On the morning of the third day, Kefre appeared as usual. The door opened, revealing his dark-skinned face. This time, Arrow had decided to try a new tactic.

“Come to gloat?” she asked, not bothering to move from her seat on the bed. “Is this how they do things in the Land of the Bow, Kefre? Kidnap and bully pregnant women? What a land of great warriors it must be.”

Shame flickered in his dark eyes. “We do what we have to,” he said shortly.

Behind him, in the shadows of the outer room of the building, Arrow saw a sudden, furtive movement. What it heralded, she didn’t know, but decided that anyone who didn’t want to be seen by Kefre must be a friend to her. “So you rely on excuses rather than honor,” she said, distracting her captor.

His beautiful mouth thinned sharply. “The wizards say that your baby is important, Arrow. I don’t pretend to understand these things myself. But I perform my duty as I am told.” He took a step back, reaching for the door. “And that’s the only thing—”

Unseen, a figure rose up behind him. Kefre stiffened sharply—then collapsed limply to the floor. Grinning broadly, his attacker stepped into the light.

“Thiacene!” exclaimed Arrow, leaping up. Thiacene’s young face was smeared with dust and her hair was tangled from the desert wind, but Arrow thought she had never seen a more beautiful sight.

“He’ll sleep for a while,” Thiacene said, stepping around Kefre. “Come on, we have to get you out of here. When he doesn’t go back to the Sanctum soon, they’ll start wondering what happened.”

“I can’t get past the door,” Arrow said anxiously.

“Not a problem.” Thiacene ran her hands along the doorframe slowly, then took a step back. “Try it now.”

To her vast relief, Arrow passed easily through the doorway. She went briefly back inside to collect

the food satchel and amphora, then rejoined Thiacene. Questions boiled up inside her, but she put them aside firmly. There would be time to ask them later, once they had put some distance between them and this place.

The building appeared to have been a house, and judging by its condition it had been only recently abandoned. A few disused bits of furniture stood around, and a heavy curtain of leather sealed the only window against the desert sand, as if the owner intended to return someday. Arrow paused only long enough to pull down the curtain, ignoring Thiacene's curious look.

Once outside, Arrow got a second surprise. Beautiful Girl came racing up, her tail wagging furiously. Jumping up, she rested her paws on Arrow's shoulders, licking her mistress' face ecstatically. Arrow hugged the dog and kissed her head. "I thought Gallinarches had killed you!"

"Almost," Thiacene said. "Your horses are here, too—I saw them in a shed."

Arrow made quick work of saddling and bridling the animals, then mounted Nightwing while Thiacene took Stalker. Shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun, she gazed out across the desolate landscape. "What now?"

Thiacene inexpertly guided Stalker up beside her. "We're at the very edge of the desert, what the locals call the red lands. I suggest we head out into the desert itself. I can keep the sun from killing us, and we have plenty of food and water. Not even the Black Council will be able to find us in a thousand leagues of nothing."

Arrow agreed. Thiacene gave her a burnoose to protect her from the worst of the sun, and together the two women turned their backs on inhabited lands and headed out into the desert. For the rest of the day, they rode over the shifting sands, their tracks vanishing in the wind almost as soon as they were made. By the time the sun went down, they were far from any trail, deep into the pathless waste where no human ever went.

As they set up their meager camp, Thiacene pulled armfuls of hay out of one of the saddlebags, which Arrow felt certain was not deep enough to provide so much. Leaving the Athraskani to tend the horses, she sat down and began to work on the large square of leather she had taken from the house. Her weapons had all been with the horses' tack, so she was able to cut a rough skirt from the leather, although without needle and thread she wouldn't be able to do more than tie it at the hip. As she removed her trousers and replaced them with the skirt, she caught Thiacene's curious look. "Can't fit in my pants anymore," she explained ruefully.

"Oh." Thiacene sat down and began to pull food from the pockets of her traveling robe. "Does that have anything to do with why you were being held captive?"

Arrow pressed her lips together, feeling anger stir in her gut once again. "Yes. Gallinarches found out somehow." She told Thiacene about her vision in the Hall of Reflections and about Gallinarches' words. When she finished, Thiacene swore softly and stared off across dunes made purple by the sunset.

Beautiful Girl came over, and Arrow scratched absently behind her ears. "How did you find me?" she asked at last. "If you didn't know about Gallinarches' plans, how did you know to look for me at all?"

"The dog." Thiacene nodded at Beautiful Girl, her mouth grim. "I heard that you had left, and I tried to catch up to you. I wanted to ask if I could go with you. But instead I found your hound lying in the sand halfway to Djoser with two broken legs. I knew that you wouldn't have just left her there, and I knew that she didn't break her legs by herself. So after I healed her, I went back to the Sanctum and stole all the supplies I could easily put my hands on, then left the first moment that everyone was distracted. I hid until I saw Kefre heading out of the Sanctum, then followed him straight to you."

"Ah." Arrow pulled her burnoose tighter about her arms; with the sun down, the air was cooling rapidly. "So what now? I had planned on going back to the steppes and finding my clan. You're welcome to come with me if you want to. If the Athraskani are true to form, they won't care anything about you as soon as you're out of sight. They certainly didn't go to any great lengths to get Balthazar back, anyway."

"This might be different." Thiacene sighed tiredly and leaned back against her packs. Briefly, she

explained about the Forbidden and its ability to drain the magic from a wizard in the process of killing them. "And that isn't all. I told you that I snuck away when everyone else was occupied. They were all at Thraxis' trial."

Arrow frowned at the mention of Thraxis' name. "His what?"

"His trial. He tried to kill Melilandra."

The image Arrow had been trying to avoid for days, of Thraxis and Melilandra locked in a passionate embrace, sprang forcibly into her mind. "That's ridiculous. They...I caught them...they had half their clothes off already, and it was clear what they were going to be doing as soon as the rest of them were out of the way." Arrow bit her lip, fighting tears. "I thought...Melilandra told me that a mere human could never satisfy one of your kind, but I...I didn't want to believe her. I wanted to believe that love was more important than being a great beauty, or a powerful sorceress. Lady of Beasts, but I was a fool."

Thiacene's dark brows drew together in a frown that was all too reminiscent of her brother. "Melilandra told you that?"

"Yes. On the way to Xaqqara."

"And they were definitely going to...I mean, it was mutual, right?"

"She wasn't forcing Thraxis, if that's what you mean."

"It isn't. She said he tried to rape her."

Arrow would have laughed if it hadn't been so bitter. "That's ridiculous. And a lie. I saw with my own eyes."

"But she *had* been beaten, and badly. That wasn't faked. And when Viabold found them, Thraxis was strangling her. Viabold had to pull him off."

Now it was Arrow's turn to frown. Viabold wouldn't make something like that up. But none of it made any sense. She could accept that Thraxis had given up on their marriage and sought out one of his own kind, but not that he had resorted to violence. "I don't think he would do that. Of course, I didn't think he would make love to Melilandra, either, so what the hell do I know?"

Thiacene shook her head slowly. "I don't know, Arrow. The evidence is undeniable. I wish I had been able to stay for his trial and hear what he had to say, but I had to get well away from the Sanctum before anyone noticed that I was missing, and I didn't think I'd get another chance. The farther you are away from someone looking for you, the easier it is to block scrying spells, you know."

Arrow hadn't known that, but it made sense. "So they won't be able to find us through magic?"

"No. I'm as strong as any of the Black Council. Thraxis might have been able to find me, but they have him under the binding enchantment that we encountered in Xaqqara."

"Then let's keep heading further away," Arrow decided. "We'll go north tomorrow. There might be a land route back to the steppes; if not, we'll find a ship to take us back over the sea to the Empire."

"What about Thraxis?"

"I'm sorry he's having problems...but they aren't mine anymore. I have to think about my daughter first."

After that, they bedded down for the night. But as Arrow slept, one arm flung loosely over Beautiful Girl's solid warmth, dreams began to trouble her. She saw herself standing in Xaqqara, Athraskani to either side of her. The lion-headed goddess appeared briefly, her feral eyes utterly without mercy.

Then she was home, on the steppes where she had been born. But the yurts of her clan were on fire, the dead strewn all around. Gallinarches held a small baby in his arms, his smile malevolent, but when Arrow moved to wrest her away, he casually snapped the girl's tiny neck.

Then the scene from Xaqqara replayed itself, before everything faded into blackness.

When Arrow awoke the next morning, the edge of the sun had just burnished the eastern sky to gold. Leaving the camp, she climbed the nearest dune and stared blindly south, wishing that she had more than instinct to guide her. She was no priestess or oracle; she had no training in interpreting dreams. But deep inside, within her very bones and blood, she knew what she had to do.

Thiacene walked up behind her, shivering under the blanket wrapped around her body. "I don't think I'll ever get used to sleeping outside," she muttered, shaking the dew off. "What are you looking at?"

Is something wrong?"

Arrow turned away from the south, wishing that there were some other way. Any other way. "Yes."

"What?"

"We aren't going north today."

"Then where are we going?"

"Xaqqara."

* * * *

By that evening, it was clear that Balthazar was not going to be found .

Organized search parties had swept the entire Sanctum from top to bottom, including the grounds and the stables . But the weakest of all the Athraskani appeared to have vanished without a trace. Nor was there any sign of violence—nor any indicator that a stranger had ever set foot in the Sanctum.

But to have left the Sanctum, Balthazar would had to have walked out past the gate guards without their knowledge . And he certainly did not have the power to do that.

As the day wore on, suspicion began to grow in Thraxis . As soon as he was able, he went back to his room, Sakarax in tow. Without explanation to the youth, he crossed the room to the table in the corner of his little cell—the bare table.

"Do you remember if there was a jewel here when you came to wake me?" Thraxis asked, trying to be calm . "A red jewel?"

Sakarax frowned . "No. I mean, there wasn't one."

"Are you certain? Perhaps you simply didn't notice it?"

The youth stared at him as if he'd taken leave of his senses . "But...if it was here this morning...then where would it have gone since then?"

Feeling colder by the moment, Thraxis dismissed Sakarax . Telling himself that he had simply forgotten to bring the doyan'si back with him when he was done with its creation, he went to the workroom where he had cast the spell. But, although everything else was as it had been, there was no sign of the red jewel.

He had taken it back to his cell, Thraxis thought with a sinking heart . And he had been tired and had forgotten to lock the door. This morning, he had slept through several minutes of continuous knocking by Sakarax, not to mention the uproar in the halls. If someone had snuck into the room and stolen the jewel...would he have even known?

How would Balthazar even have known that it existed, let alone what it did? he asked himself frantically, trying to find any loophole in his logic. But of course Balthazar worked in the library and was constantly fetching and putting away scrolls and books.

For the first time, it occurred to Thraxis that a lack of magical power didn't necessarily equal a lack of intelligence .

Cursing himself, Thraxis hurried down to the library, where he had returned the scroll after casting the spell the night before . But, try as he might, he couldn't find it now.

Standing alone in the silence of the library that had once been a haven, Thraxis remembered again the face of the dead servant . Balthazar had killed the man...and he had done it to fuel the doyan'si that Thraxis had created.

None of this is my fault, Thraxis told himself fiercely as he prepared to send word to the Black Council. I didn't make Balthazar do any of this—the responsibility is not mine.

But in his deepest heart, he did not believe it .

Chapter Eighteen: A Greater Wave

Thraxis lost track of the days as they crept slowly past. His only indication of the passage of time

was the single square of light that came through the high window, retracing its path across the stone floor of his prison each day. Kefre or another human brought him meals and water in the morning and evening; otherwise, he saw no one. Once or twice, he thought of escape, but it seemed pointless. What would he escape to? A life of running, of hiding, never certain when the violence that lurked inside him would come out again?

I could find Arrow . I could apologize. I could beg her to take me back.

He set the notion firmly aside, despite the hope it struggled to spark in his soul. What if she took him back, and he turned on her, attacked her? What if he hurt her? He couldn't imagine doing so, of course—but he could not have imagined the frenzy that led him to attack Melilandra, either.

And he had certainly never imagined that violence could be pleasurable. No, Arrow was better off without him.

Deprived of a razor to shave it with, his hair began to grow back. He considered asking one of the guards to bring a razor, but dismissed the idea. Even if they allowed it to him, what would be the point? He had shaved his head to remind himself of the lessons he had learned during his journey with Arrow, when he had been under the death curse and all his hair had fallen out. Lessons that he had obviously forgotten anyway.

One night—he was no longer sure how many had passed since his trial—the door opened unexpectedly. Startled, Thraxis sat up, his sole blanket wrapped around him. The cell was utterly dark, without even moonlight from the window, so the bright light from the corridor outside blinded him momentarily.

The guards never come in so late, he thought, heart racing suddenly. Unless...what if they opened the reliquary? What if they've come to strip me of my power at last?

I don't want to die .

Forcing himself to calm, he blinked until his vision cleared. To his surprise, he saw Viabold appear at the head of the steps, followed by another he could not make out. The human guard lay slumped against the doorframe, unconscious or asleep.

“What's going on?” he demanded sharply.

“Shh!” Viabold shot him an angry glare. “Do you want to wake up the entire Sanctum?”

Taking a deep breath for patience, Thraxis forced himself to match Viabold's hoarse whisper. “What are you doing here? What have you done to the guard?”

“We've come to get you out of here,” Viabold replied. “Now come on—we don't have all day.”

Thraxis hesitated. “Why are you doing this?”

“There will be time for that later. Come on! Do you want to die?”

“No.” Thraxis clasped his hands behind him, feet firmly planted. “But I'm a danger to those around me, Viabold. You saw what I did. You know the truth.”

“Yes, I do. But you don't.”

The second figure took an uncertain step forward. The light touched her features, and Thraxis was surprised to see Cynixia. She looked utterly wretched: her face pale, her eyes swollen and red from tears, her curly hair in disarray. “I'm sorry,” she said in a small voice.

“Whatever for?” Thraxis cast a sharp look at Viabold. “What's this all about?”

“Cynixia came to me yesterday,” Viabold said. “I hope that you will appreciate the courage it took for her to do so, and refrain from completely losing your temper when you hear her story.”

Now certain that he wasn't going to like this, Thraxis said, “What story? What have you done? Does this have something to do with Thiacene's disappearance?”

“No one knows what happened to Thiacene,” Viabold said apologetically. “This concerns you. I told you that I didn't like the fact that you were so unable to explain what you had been thinking when you attacked Melilandra. I tried to suggest to Vilhardouin that there might be other factors at work, but she naturally wouldn't listen. My suspicions were confirmed when Cynixia came to me. Thraxis, you weren't responsible for your actions. Melilandra was. She cast a love spell on you.”

Thraxis blinked. “A...a what?”

“A love spell,” Cynixia whispered, staring at her feet in shame. “I thought...I thought that it couldn't

be true, that you couldn't love a—a barbarian. So when I found the spell in Xaqqara...it seemed like a way of making you see the truth. But Melilandra spied on me, and then forced me to help her perform it on you. To make you desire her so that...so that she could have your child."

Rage built in Thraxis as she spoke, until he had to restrain himself from lashing out at her. Seeing the look in his eyes, she took a quick step back.

"So, you and Melilandra just decided to destroy my marriage, rob me of the greatest joy of my life, for your own ends," he said, his voice deadly quiet.

"Thraxis, I'm sorry, it was wrong," Cynixia whined.

He turned his back on her, battling his own fury. Damn them! He had lost Arrow—had lost a part of himself—and that was the best she could do? "It still doesn't explain why I assaulted Melilandra."

"One of the conditions of the spell was that you would go mad if you failed to love her," Cynixia said miserably. "You were strong enough to break the spell—eventually—but apparently it was still in effect at the time."

"I see. And why didn't you bring this up at my trial?"

"Don't be naïve," Viabold said. "You and I both know that this plays right into Vilhardouin's hands. She wanted Melilandra to have your child and would have condoned any measure to achieve that result. And now that they've discovered a way to steal your power wholesale, well, that's even better, isn't it? The Black Council doesn't want your name to be cleared, so it won't be, no matter what Cynixia or anyone else tells them."

Viabold was right, of course. "Very well. Have they opened the reliquary yet?"

"They finished cracking the cipher two days ago," Viabold said grimly. "The Black Council left for Xaqqara yesterday. At the latest, they'll arrive tomorrow and have the reliquary open as quickly as they can after."

Thraxis nodded briskly, feeling more himself than he had in weeks. "Then we had best get out of here before they have a chance to return."

Cynixia looked at him anxiously, her face pale. "Where will you go?"

Thraxis' heart lifted unexpectedly. "To find Arrow. I'll explain to her what you have told me. It might take a while to fully mend her trust, but I will."

They left the prison behind, and Thraxis smiled again as his powers returned in a rush. For the first time in days, he had hope. He *would* mend his relationship with Arrow, he promised himself. And then, he would spend the rest of his days doing whatever she wanted. It was his foolishness that had kept them in Gypta when the Black Council arrived; his desire for a challenge that had led him to locate Xaqqara, and his hubris that had resulted in finding a way to open the reliquary. All of his choices had been disastrous, so from now on, he would follow Arrow wherever she wanted to lead him without complaint. If she decreed that he would spend the rest of his days on horseback as a herdsman among the Skald, then by the gods that was what he would do.

Cynixia parted ways with them outside the storage building where Thraxis had been held, her good-bye short and tearful. Glad that she was gone, Thraxis looked expectantly at Viabold. "What now?"

"We're taking some carts and horses, and leaving. Everything has already been arranged." Viabold paused, and his look became suddenly grim. "Thraxis...I know this evening has been difficult for you already. But there is one other thing I have to tell you. Arrow will probably skewer me if she ever finds out, but you can't make a decision without knowing the full story."

When Viabold didn't finish, Thraxis frowned, trepidation suddenly fluttering in his belly. "Well? What?"

"Arrow...Thraxis, she's pregnant."

Thraxis stared at his friend as if he had taken leave of his senses. "That's not possible, Viabold. When Balthazar made her a berserker, it stopped her courses."

"I know that. But I also know that magic isn't a set thing; it changes, it reacts to the other magic around it. I don't know how it happened, or even if it could ever happen again. But it's true."

Shocked speechless, Thraxis leaned against the nearest wall for support. He'd never known that

anything could be so joyous and so painful at the same time. “Arrow...pregnant? For how long?”

“About four months, now. Just starting to show, I’d expect. At first, she didn’t want to tell you. But I finally managed to convince her to share the news. She was coming to tell you the day that she caught you with Melilandra.”

No. Gods, no. Thraxis put his hands to his face and sincerely wished that he’d killed Melilandra outright.

“I’m sorry,” Viabold said gently, putting his hand to Thraxis’ shoulder. “You shouldn’t have had to find out this way. But I thought you needed to know.”

He was right. Thraxis hated the fact, but he knew that Viabold had done the correct thing. “Is it...will it be a boy or a girl?”

“A girl.”

A daughter . I have a daughter.

Viabold smiled a little and clapped him on the back. “No need to cry. With any luck, she won’t look like you.”

Thraxis laughed shakily and wiped his eyes. “Thank you for the reassurance. But you’ve seen how this nose inherits.”

“True. But there’s always hope.”

They walked quietly to the corral, where Thraxis expected to find two horses and maybe a cart. But to his shock, he saw that a small group of people was gathered there. For a moment he thought that they had been caught, and he came to a sharp halt.

One of the figures detached itself from the rest and ran towards him. To his surprise, he saw that it was Kalika—and that she had once again shaved her head.

“Thank goodness you’re all right!” she exclaimed, flinging her arms around him. Startled, he patted her awkwardly on the back.

“But...but what are you doing here?” he managed to ask as the others came crowding around him. For the most part, they were the same youths he had been discussing philosophy with for some time, but a few of the faces were new.

“I had Cynixia confess her part in all this in front of the entire group,” Viabold said. “After that, everyone wanted to help.”

“We’re going with you,” Kalika added. Her young face grew suddenly harsh. “The Black Council has betrayed everything we believe in. They’ve stooped to murder. We won’t stand for it.”

“But if you leave, they might come after you,” Thraxis pointed out. “They didn’t chase Balthazar—but he was only one man. I don’t know that they’ll simply let all of you leave without making some attempt to get you back.”

“After all,” Viabold put in grimly, “you represent a lot of power they could steal. If you leave without permission, that may be the only excuse they need.”

Kalika paled, but her chin lifted defiantly. “All the more reason to get away from here, then.”

Thraxis looked at the faces around him, and his heart swelled with pride. The Athraskani had not utterly abandoned honor or their Vows. Perhaps, in part due to him, something of their true way of life would survive. “You’re strong, Kalika. I know that you’ll succeed.”

Her brows twitched together. “You sound as though you aren’t going with us.”

Thraxis sighed, his heart suddenly heavy. Dimly, he wondered how many more emotional shocks he was prepared to endure. “I can’t. I want to...but I can’t. Someone has to go to Xaqqara and stop the Black Council before they open the reliquary.”

“I thought you wanted to find Arrow,” Viabold said, but his look was shrewd. He had known exactly what he was doing by disclosing her pregnancy, Thraxis thought.

“I want to. More now than ever.” Thraxis wrapped his arms around himself and bowed his head, feeling suddenly cold. “But if the Black Council unlocks this terrible spell...where will it end? Who will they kill? If they aren’t stopped today...will they murder my daughter tomorrow?”

Kalika frowned. “But how can you hope to get there before them? They have a two-day lead—the fastest horse in Gypta isn’t going to make it to Xaqqara in only one.”

“I know. But I won’t be going by land.” He clasped Kalika’s arm. “If I can...then I’ll catch up with you. Head north for now. There are places outside the Empire where you can hide—the Chok might take you in. Stay clear of the Skald, though—they’ve had enough of wizards and aren’t likely to welcome you. Viabold will guide you.”

Viabold nodded once, grimly, and Thraxis felt a rush of relief that the older man was willing to take over the task of shepherding this naïve group of youngsters. Then, turning away before anyone could ask him more questions, he ran lightly over the sand. “*Corvus!*” he whispered, invoking the shape that he had long ago memorized.

Then Thraxis was gone, and a lone raven skimmed away over the first line of dunes, heading for the vast desert beyond.

* * * *

After Balthazar’s murderous rebellion, the atmosphere of the Sanctum changed . For weeks, everyone’s nerves were on edge, and people walked the corridors silently, almost afraid to talk or laugh too loudly. The stone halls that had been his home since birth seemed foreign to Thraxis, and he kept even more to himself than he had before. The Black Council had made it clear that they pinned the responsibility for Balthazar’s rebellion on him, denying that they had anything to do with whatever resentments had driven the weakest wizard to such an act.

As a result, Thraxis did not continue with his research at first . It sickened him that something he had created had caused such pain and misery, but what could he do about it? Balthazar was gone and none knew where he had fled. Whatever he was doing out in the wide world now, it was no longer the concern of the Athraskani.

At length, however, Thraxis realized that he could not simply let things lie . Although the creation of the doyan’si had not given him any insights, he was still determined to find something to give the Black Council in exchange for his freedom. Somewhere, there must be an answer.

The books that he most commonly used in his research, along with those that held his own notes, had lain untouched since Balthazar’s disappearance . His attention on what he would do next, Thraxis never felt any warning whisper of magic when he picked them up—if, indeed, there was anything to feel. Instead, he spread them before him on the library table and opened the first one.

Something hard and dark punched into him, sending him crashing backwards to the floor . For an instant he had the impression of claws and razor teeth tearing at his flesh, burrowing into his body. Panicked by the unexpected attack, he fought back blindly, struggling to push away a creature that had no real substance. Then his magic rallied. It was too late for defensive veils, so he turned all of his power to destroying the dark spell that was digging into his chest. To his horror, it resisted doggedly, refusing to diminish. Pouring out magic like blood from a wound, he tried to focus, tried to strike it with a single, overwhelming attack.

When he awoke, he was lying on the floor . His head hurt viciously, and he felt incredibly weak...but he was alive. The room spun about him as he staggered to his feet, and he put out one hand blindly. His fingers came to rest on the book that he had opened, and he snatched them back as if burned, but nothing more happened. The dark curse that had been put upon the book had been a one-time thing only.

But who would have done such a thing? he wondered—then asked himself why he even questioned. There was only one candidate, after all.

After stealing the doyan’si, Balthazar must have murdered the servants to empower the jewel. He must not have felt confident enough to face Thraxis directly, so he had instead put the curse on one of Thraxis’ books, letting it lie there quiescent until the tome was once again opened.

But why try to destroy Thraxis at all?

Small and dark, the memory of their single conversation came back to Thraxis . He had meant to apologize for the words he had spoken that day...but pride had stopped his tongue every time the chance had arisen.

Shame washed over him, but he shoved it away . Perhaps he had not said that he was sorry, but that was certainly no excuse for trying to kill him. It wasn't his fault—he was the victim, not Balthazar. It was a good thing that he had been strong enough to overcome the curse.

Chapter Nineteen: Creature that I Am

The raven's form was not made for night travel, but Thraxis did the best he could. As the sun came up, he kept going, struggling to use the thermals rising from the desert floor. The day grew hotter, and he sought to fly higher, away from the killing heat radiating off the sands.

Why couldn't I have picked a vulture or a falcon? he asked himself in annoyance. But of course at the time he had learned the raven's shape, he had never thought that he would ever use the spell. After all, in his youth he had never even expected to leave the Sanctum Majoris, let alone have to fly across a desert half a world away.

Strength drained from him at an appalling rate, both from the heat and the requirements of the spell. He spotted a small oasis that he would never have seen from the ground and stopped there in the hottest part of the day to drink and rest. Even so, he would be lucky to arrive at Xaqqara with enough strength left to fight the Black Council.

And how, exactly, do I intend to do that? he wondered bleakly when he took to the wing once again. If he was lucky, he might be able to destroy the reliquary and its contents before they got to it. But what if there was no easy way to do so? Or what if they managed to get there before him and open it? How close would he have to be for them to drain his powers away and kill him? What if the spell worked at a distance?

What if the only way to stop them is to kill them?

He had managed to defeat Balthazar without killing him. But Balthazar had been but a single man. If he was honest with himself, Thraxis knew that he would have no hope of subduing everyone on the Black Council and their followers, especially if they attacked him in concert. What if the choice was not his life or theirs, but their lives or those of the innocents they threatened? Between them and his daughter?

The memory of Melilandra's beaten face came back, and he shuddered, appalled that he had done such a thing even in the grips of a spell. Could he find it in him to kill Vilhardouin, the woman who had raised him? Was killing ever the correct solution to any problem? He hadn't thought so...but then, he had never been put in a position like this one before.

I'll just have to be faster than them, he decided. *I'll get to the reliquary first, and if I can't destroy it, I'll bring down the whole House of Light on top of it.*

But then they'll simply dig it out . It might take months or years, but they won't let an opportunity like this one pass them by.

There seemed no ready solution. Trying to put aside his worries for the moment, Thraxis flew on.

* * * *

Arrow took a long drink from her amphora, and then splashed some water on her face, clearing the grit from her eyes. She tried to remember another time when she had ever been so tired. Perhaps when she had been training with Leaf Dancing, or during the terrible winter when she had journeyed to the Empire in search of the Athraskani. But if the weariness of any of those days had been equal to what she felt now, she couldn't remember it.

The sun was going down on another long day of travel, and she gladly left Nightwing's back for her own feet. Thiacene made camp while Arrow tended the horses; in the firelight, the Athraskani's young face looked pensive.

"What's wrong?" Arrow asked, once they had finished their supper. With no stream to wash the kettle in, she settled for scouring it out with handfuls of sand.

Thiacene glanced south, as if the ruins drew her gaze like a lodestone. "We'll be at Xaqqara tomorrow. I don't suppose you have any better idea as to why we're going there at all, do you?"

Arrow sighed and ran her hand back through her hair. The wind had worked it into snarls, so she set to untangling it with her fingers. “No. It seems nonsensical, even to me. The first time we were there, all I felt was a constant sense of menace, of danger. But I know what the dreams are telling me—I even feel it while awake, now. We have to go there. If we don’t, then sooner or later the Black Council will take my daughter.”

“And you’ve never had premonitions before.”

“No. I told you it’s the baby, Thiacene.”

Thiacene held up her hands in a gesture of calm. “I know. And it isn’t unheard of—lots of Athraskani women temporarily become more powerful while they’re pregnant. But you’re human, Arrow. You don’t have any magic except what Balthazar gave you when he made you a berserker.”

“I know what I’ve seen, Thiacene. You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to.”

“It isn’t that.” Thiacene frowned contemplatively. “I just wish that we knew what we’re supposed to do once we get there.”

“It might be clear once we see what’s happening there.”

“I know, but I’d prefer to know beforehand.”

Arrow shrugged. “So would I. But I don’t see how we can.”

Thiacene bit her lip uncertainly. “I could contact someone back at the Sanctum.”

“No!” At the sharpness of Arrow’s tone, Beautiful Girl came to her feet, ears perked for danger. Wincing, Arrow stroked the dog, trying to calm her. “No,” she said again in a more subdued tone. “We can’t risk anyone finding us.”

“What about Viabold? He wouldn’t betray us, would he?”

Arrow hesitated. On the one hand, any information about what they might face in Xaqqara could only be helpful. And she didn’t think that Viabold would betray her.

But then, she had never thought that Thraxis would betray her, either.

“All right,” she agreed reluctantly. “But don’t tell him anything more than you have to.”

Thiacene nodded. “Move away from the fire, then—that way he won’t see you. If anyone does find out he spoke to me, at least he won’t be able to tell them that you were with me.”

That sounded reasonable. Arrow scooted away from the fire and made herself comfortable. Thiacene settled into a meditative pose, her hands folded on her knees and her yellow eyes closed. After a few moments, however, she opened them once again and focused on the flames. Arcane words issued from her mouth, repeated again and again, Viabold’s name woven among them.

Within the space of moments, the flames distorted and leapt, forming themselves into a miniature likeness of Viabold. Apparently surprised at the swiftness of his answer, Thiacene frowned uncertainly. “Viabold?”

“*Thiacene?*” he exclaimed, shocked. “What—where are you?”

“That isn’t important,” Thiacene said impatiently. “Can you talk to me without being overheard?”

“I’m not in the Sanctum—I’ve left.”

“What? Why?”

Viabold shook his head grimly. “Because we’re all in terrible danger. The Black Council are on their way to Xaqqara to open the reliquary—they might already be there. I—and those who are with me—are coming, too. But there’s no way we can make it there before them.”

“Damn it!” Thiacene snapped, pounding her fist against her knee. “Listen, Viabold—I’m almost at Xaqqara myself. Don’t ask why. But I can’t face down the entire Black Council alone!”

Now it was his turn to hesitate. “You won’t have to. Thraxis is on his way there as well. He took the shape of a raven to travel faster. He might have arrived already; if not, then surely he will be there by tomorrow.”

Thraxis . Arrow’s throat tightened, and she bowed her head. Of all the perils she had thought to encounter at Xaqqara, he had not been one of them.

I can’t face him . Not after what he did to me .

“How did...how did his trial go?” Thiacene asked, casting an anxious look at Arrow. Arrow wondered if Viabold had noticed it and realized that she was not alone.

“They sentenced him to death. But you have to listen to me, Thiacene—Thraxis wasn’t in his own mind when he attacked Melilandra.” His voice more grim with every word, Viabold explained the spell Cynixia had found and how Melilandra had taken advantage of it. “When I finally managed to free him, he wanted to go and find Arrow. But I had to tell him...um, something of a private nature...that made him decide to go after the Black Council instead.”

Thiacene scowled at the fire. “You told him Arrow is pregnant, didn’t you?”

Arrow flinched. *Lady of Beasts.*

“How did you know?” Viabold demanded, affronted.

“I healed her after the fight in Xaqqara. So Thraxis decided to go rushing off after the Black Council? Idiot.”

“You don’t understand, Thiacene. He believes that the only way to be sure that his daughter will be safe is to keep the Forbidden out of the Black Council’s hands.”

“He would. Idiot,” Thiacene muttered again. Then she shook her head. “All right. At least we—I mean, at least *I* know what’s waiting in Xaqqara, now. Thanks, Viabold.”

“Wait—why don’t you come and join us? If we don’t all end up getting killed in Xaqqara, we’re going to flee Gypta, maybe go north to the Chok. Will you come with us?”

“Let’s see about that getting killed part first,” Thiacene said, and waved her hand over the flames. They went out, plunging the campsite into darkness. A few moments later, she conjured an ordinary fire without voice or shape.

Arrow sat hunched up by herself, staring out into the night. Weariness ached in her blood, and a tumult of emotions threatened to overcome her.

Thraxis didn’t betray me . He still loves me . He tried to kill Melilandra as soon as her hold over him broke .

He’ll be waiting for me there, tomorrow . In Xaqqara .

No, not waiting for her. He was going to fight the Black Council, to gamble his life on the chance that he could keep the killing spell out of their hands.

It came to her suddenly that Thraxis was the reason her dreams were calling her to Xaqqara in the first place. To save him. For if she did not, then no one would be standing by her when the Athraskani finally came to claim her daughter.

“We have to go,” she said aloud, coming suddenly to her feet. Dreadful certainly bloomed in her heart, and she found herself turning to face Xaqqara, even though she could never hope to see it over the miles that separated them. “We have to go *now*, or we’ll be too late.”

If they already weren’t.

* * * *

It was dawn by the time Thraxis glided between the out flung arms of the escarpment that surrounded Xaqqara. Aching with exhaustion, he landed in the shelter of a half-ruined house and took back his own form. Purple light tinged the eastern sky and made the fallen stones look weirdly unreal.

More than anything, he wanted to lie down and rest. But as he had flown over the city, he had seen the encampment of carts and horses outside of it, and knew that he was late. The Black Council had already arrived.

But it will take them time to open the reliquary, he told himself. They could not have gotten here earlier than late afternoon yesterday, and they would have waited before entering the city again. They would want full light to see by, to make certain they didn’t stumble into any traps that remain unfound. It’s not too late to stop them. It can’t be.

Drawing his robe about him, he set out on foot. Scars from the attack of the colossi showed everywhere on the ancient buildings, and he shuddered at the memory. The very fact that the ancients had created such instruments of destruction should have served as a warning, he thought. Why had he not heeded it when he had the chance? Why had he not been more cautious when it came to the reliquary? Why had he not insisted on learning what, exactly, was inside before seeking a way to open it?

Why didn’t I just listen to Arrow and leave the city undiscovered, to go back to dust in its

own time?

The only answer, that he was a fool, wasn't much of a comfort at the moment. Shaking off self-recrimination, he forced himself to concentrate on his surroundings. It wouldn't do anyone much good if he stumbled straight into the arms of the Black Council, after all.

As he drew near the great plaza, he glimpsed a pair of blue robes, bright against the dust-colored stones. They flanked the entrance of the House of Light, and he realized that they were guards. Perhaps they had even been set to watch for him, if news of his escape had been sent to the Black Council.

Thraxis hunkered down behind a pile of rubble, forcing himself to think through the weariness that glazed his mind. There might be another way into the building, but if so he didn't know it, and couldn't spare the time to look. It was either past the guards or nothing.

Using a lifetime of meditative techniques, he focused his thoughts. The guards would feel the magic in the air the moment he cast his spell, so his only hope was to act quickly enough that they wouldn't realize where it was coming from. And to do that, he had to envision the spell precisely before the casting began.

Tearing off a wide strip of his robe, he spat on it, and then breathed out over the damp cloth, setting a shred of his own essence into it. Balling it up so that it would go farther, he flung it away from his hiding place.

As it touched the ground, it seemed to expand and transform, until within seconds it had taken on the appearance of a double. Guided by his will, the simulacrum darted along the edge of the great plaza, like a man trying to hide but not succeeding very well.

Cries of alarm rang out, and a moment later the two blue robes raced across the plaza. The simulacrum vanished into an alley and they followed it, shouting their anger. Away from Thraxis, the simulacrum would not last long before reverting back into cloth and spit and breath, but with any luck the guards wouldn't see the transformation, and its disappearance would confound them even further.

As soon as he was certain they were gone, Thraxis raced across the open space, flinging himself the last few feet to the shadows of the door. To his relief, there was no one in the vast hall beyond; even the bodies that had lain there before had been gathered up and taken away.

He made his way as slowly and quietly as he could across the great hall. His heart pounded in his chest, and he expected to find himself face-to-face with Vilhardouin or Gallinarches at every turn. The tangle of corridors beyond the great entrance hall was confusing; again and again he stopped and thought: *Is this right? Is this the way we came before?*

And then, after long silence, he heard an unexpected sound. Startled, he came to a halt, straining his ears to listen.

There were footsteps somewhere nearby. The slap of sandals on stone echoed crazily in the intricate knot of the hallways, making it impossible to distinguish precisely how far away they were. Thraxis' first instinct was to move away from the sound and avoid confrontation. But then, wouldn't it be better to know what was happening around him? To know whether the Black Council had opened the reliquary—and whether they were waiting to use it on him?

If he could surprise a blue or green robe, he would be able to force the truth from them. The use of such a spell weighed on his mind, for it robbed its victim of his will and compelled him to answer any question put to him with the full truth, holding nothing back. Such spells fell into a gray area; technically, they did not harm anyone, but depriving another of their free will was not ethical so far as Thraxis was concerned.

So I let myself get killed out of ignorance? he asked himself bitterly. *I hesitate, and so let the Black Council have their way? Let them murder anyone who displeases them and steal their magic? Let them grow fat and powerful until no one is safe from them?*

Let them kill my daughter?

His own words came back to him, ones that he had spoken to Arrow the year before, when they had faced the reanimated dead in the kurgan. *"It is easy to keep to one's ethical standards when one is safe and well-fed. It is our conduct in times of danger and desperation that reveal our true natures."*

He shoved the memory aside with a sudden rush of fury and despair. It had always been a struggle for him to act in peace, to never strike out. Perhaps his true nature was violent and bestial after all.

What does it matter? he demanded, hating himself, hating what he knew he was going to do. *If it's a choice between their lives and my daughter's...then nothing else is of concern.*

Ignoring the cries of his own conscience, he straightened his shoulders and followed the retreating sound of footsteps.

* * * *

The horses were almost stumbling with weariness when Arrow and Thiacene finally caught a glimpse of the escarpment surrounding Xaqqara. They had ridden all night, and dawn was not far off. The desert wind brought them the smells of dust and cold stone, but also of fresh manure, horses, and sweat. Apparently, the caravan of the Black Council was already there.

Dismounting, they left the horses in the lee of the escarpment, where they would not be seen by the caravan when the sun came up. Arrow stroked both horses on their necks, trying to soothe their complaints at being left saddled. Beautiful Girl whined and stared up at her mistress, as if sensing Arrow's distress.

"Should we tie them?" Thiacene asked uncertainly.

Arrow shook her head. "Not the horses. They'll stay where I leave them. I think we'll have to tie Beautiful Girl, though—it's too dangerous to bring her with us." She hesitated. "If...if something should happen, if for some reason I'm not with you when we come back out...take all of the animals to Viabold's encampment with you. I won't have any of them lost if I can help it."

Thiacene looked at her worriedly. "This isn't...a premonition, is it?"

"No," Arrow lied. But the truth was, she had the oddest feeling that she wouldn't be riding away from Xaqqara on either Nightwing or Stalker.

The sun was just rising when they slipped into the city. The early light bathed the stones with an odd, purple glow, making the ruins seem like something out of a dream. The two women carefully picked their way through the tumbled stones, all their senses alert for the smallest sign of trouble. At one point, they came upon the broken remains of the female colossus, which had crushed a building with its fall. It felt odd to scramble over the smooth, expressionless face, and Arrow suppressed a shudder.

At length, they came upon the great plaza in front of the House of Light. Two blue-robed guards waited at the entrance; apparently, the Black Council was expecting trouble of some sort. Even as Arrow began to plan how best to distract and overpower the guards, a sudden flash of movement caught her attention.

The guards saw it as well; yelling angrily, they dashed across the plaza, following a running figure. Arrow caught a glimpse of black robes, and her heart surged into motion, dragging the rest of her with it. She started to leap up out of hiding, but Thiacene locked a hand in the loose leather of her skirt, jerking her backwards.

"Don't!" she whispered frantically. "It's not Thraxis—it's a trick!"

Startled, Arrow followed Thiacene's gaze and saw a second flash of black robe as someone disappeared through the open door into the House of Light.

"Damn it!" she swore under her breath. Not daring to call out for fear of attracting unwanted attention, she double-checked that the guards were gone, and then sprinted across the plaza, Thiacene in her wake. But by the time they reached the vast hall beyond the door, Thraxis was gone.

"Luck doesn't seem to be with us today," Thiacene muttered.

Arrow ran her hand back through her hair, dislodging sand. *Danger* whispered her instincts, and *danger* sparked along her nerves. Everything was moving towards the balance point, and she knew that the world could just as easily fall either way.

"He'll make for the room with the reliquary," Arrow decided. "Do you remember the way?"

Thiacene hesitated. "I...I think so."

"Don't think. Yes or no."

The younger woman's face hardened. "Yes. I do."

“Then let’s go.”

* * * *

Thraxis followed the footsteps, struggling to keep his own as quiet as possible. Maddeningly, the walker remained just ahead of him, drawing him on and on through the shadowy, deserted halls. Unease settled over him at the apparent lack of activity in the building, but he shoved it aside—was he not following one of Vilhardouin’s errand-runners? Clearly, then, the building wasn’t really deserted. Surely he should count himself lucky that he hadn’t met anyone else, rather than worry about a lack of opposition.

At last, the corridor let out into the octagonal room that led to the three Halls. As he stepped out into the room, Thraxis caught a glimpse of blue robes and black hair moving purposefully towards the Hall of Pleasure. The figure disappeared into the Hall almost as soon as he had seen it, and he swore furiously, hurrying after.

The enormous room on the other side was silent and draped in shadow. In the darkness, he could make out only the vaguest suggestions of the bas-reliefs on the walls, the statues filling the alcoves. This was where Cynixia had found the twisted spell that had made him a slave to Melilandra’s will, he remembered, and his groin tightened with fear. Telling himself not to be foolish, he moved further into the room, straining his sight for any indication of the mage he had followed here. She couldn’t have gone far.

Light flared suddenly, blinding him. He lifted his hand to shield his eyes and heard the rustle of robes all around him. His heart pounding in sudden fear, he took a step back towards the door—then stopped when an all-too-familiar voice sounded from that direction.

“Welcome, Thraxis,” said Vilhardouin. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Chapter Twenty: Raven’s Daughter

Arrow and Thiacene hurried through the maze of corridors, moving as swiftly as they dared. Although they came upon no one else, they also failed to catch up with Thraxis. Once, Thiacene led them astray and they had to double back, but Arrow bit her tongue on any recriminations. Although she could find her way across the treeless steppes with ease, this stone edifice confused her. Every corridor looked the same to her nomad’s eyes, and without a guide she would have been hopelessly lost.

Eventually, however, they came upon an octagonal room that Arrow did remember clearly. Thiacene froze in front of her, so that they remained in the shadows of the hallway. From the doorway opposite them came the sound of voices and a flash of light. Although Arrow couldn’t make out the words, the tone chilled her to the marrow.

“What are we to do?” Thiacene whispered, panicked. “They’ve caught him—we can’t fight the entire Black Council!”

An odd calm settled over Arrow, as if she stood apart from events. In that moment, it was suddenly very clear to her what she had to do. Without pausing to think about it any further, she stripped off her sword and the *gorytus* that held her bow and arrows, and pressed them into Thiacene’s hands.

“Here,” she said. “I won’t need these.”

Thiacene’s eyes were huge in her pale face. “What—what are you going to do?”

“Everything comes down to here and now, Thiacene, and at the moment it doesn’t feel like any one outcome is more likely than another. It’s like a game of chance—the knucklebones have been thrown, but they haven’t yet come to rest.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Arrow smiled a fierce warrior’s smile. “I’m going to load the dice.”

And so saying, she turned and ran across the room to the Hall of Reflections.

* * * *

Thraxis slowly lowered his hand. Either his eyes were adjusting, or the light they had used to blind him was fading, because he found that he could make out the shapes around him now. Vilhardouin stood

between him and the only door, her patrician features warped by a look of unholy triumph. She was holding something in her hands, he saw, and for a moment he could not understand what the purpose of the lead plaque might be. Then she raised it above her head, a movement echoed by the ten or so other mages hemming him in, and cried out a series of words in the ancient tongue.

Energy crackled through the air, leaping out from the lead seal in her hands to touch all the rest. Even as he realized what she was doing, Thraxis felt the magic drain away from him, like water spilled onto the sand of the desert. He started to swear at them, but Vilhardouin's hard, cold laugh brought him up short.

"You are a fool, Thraxis," she said, almost sadly. "When I think of all the years of my life I wasted trying to raise you, trying to instill you with the proper values...but then, you never appreciated my efforts, did you? I can only think that you inherited bad blood from your parents."

Fury rolled through him, but he beat it back. He had allowed himself to be captured in a silly trap, yes, but surely they would have to free him in order to strip his magic from him. He had only to wait for his chance. "I am not the one who has abandoned our ways and betrayed our people," he said, fighting to keep his voice level, ignoring the whispers of conscience that said he lied. "Have you opened the reliquary yet, Vilhardouin? Do these poor dupes who still follow you know what is inside of it? Do they truly understand the consequences, or do they believe that you will share the power with them?"

Vilhardouin smiled, deadly as a snake. "They know that the power of traitors will be added to that of the faithful. As soon as I heard of your escape, I knew that you would come here and try to disrupt the proceedings. So I waited with some of the faithful for your arrival. Even now, Gallinarches and Melilandra are beginning the ritual to open the reliquary. As soon as they are successful, you will meet your just punishment." Her mouth pursed slightly. "You have a reputation for defying death, though, and I am not as foolish as your other enemies have been. Kefre, subdue him."

Kefre stepped between two of the mages and entered the circle. His handsome face was grim, determined, and he held in his hands a wooden staff capped at either end with bronze.

Thraxis took an involuntary step back, feeling fear pool in his gut. Arrow had insisted that he learn to defend himself with the staff, but he had no weapons at all now, and no idea what to do without them. Trapped by the impassive circle of mages, he started to side step around Kefre. If he could just get the staff away from the human charioteer, then—

In a movement faster than Thraxis could follow, Kefre whipped the staff around. One end connected solidly with Thraxis' head, sending him to the floor. Strange sounds dinned in his ears, and the floor tried to slip out from under him. Even so, he struggled to move, instinct telling him that to lie still was death.

The other end of the staff caught him on the jaw, snapping his head back with such force that a bolt of white-hot pain speared down his spine. The taste of blood filled his mouth. Struggling to retain consciousness, he forced himself up to his knees, but a heavy blow across his shoulders sent him back to the floor.

Through a haze of pain and blood, he realized that he had fallen near Vilhardouin. He looked up at her and was greeted by an expression that was totally impassive. She would not let Kefre kill him, he thought dimly, but anything short of that was allowed. She did not care about Thraxis at all; it did not trouble her conscience even slightly to see the man whom she had raised from childhood beaten until he could no longer stand.

She did not love him. He was nothing more to her than a tool that had seemed useful, but now was broken.

Rage erupted through him, thick and white-hot. Why had he ever troubled himself, even for a moment, with thoughts of good or right? The Black Council did not care, the Athraskani did not care, no one cared about anything but themselves. They would do whatever they pleased, whatever suited them, and he had been a fool to ever think otherwise.

"Murdering bitch," he started to say, but then Kefre hit him again, knocking the breath from his lungs. He collapsed to the floor, doggedly keeping his eyes fixed on Vilhardouin's face, struggling to convey the depths of his hurt and fury and contempt. She stared down at him, impassive as always, and

opened her mouth to say something—no doubt a condemnation of him.

But the words never came. Incongruous redness bloomed across her throat, and her eyes widened in surprise. Dazed and struggling for comprehension, Thraxis watched as she slowly collapsed to the floor. Blood gushed out of her mouth, splattering his face, and he realized suddenly that the dark shape amid the redness of her neck was the gore-clotted head of an arrow.

For a moment, everything settled into stillness. He looked up, past Vilhardouin's dying body, and saw Thiacene standing in the doorway. Her braids hung loose and bedraggled around her pale face, and her black robes were torn and stained with dust. In her trembling hands she still held the bow from which the arrow had come.

And then, the circle broken by Vilhardouin's death, he felt his power come flooding back.

Thraxis came to his feet, his body healing itself almost on instinct. Kefre stared at him in shock and confusion, then raised the staff once again and took an uncertain step forward.

Rage and desperation intersected with magic. With a snarl of pure fury, Thraxis flung his hand out, loosing a wall of force that punched into Kefre, flinging him into one of the statues. He struck the stone hard, crumpling into a heap on the floor.

One by one, the heads of the statues exploded, sending stinging shards of alabaster and granite through the air. Shrieks of pain and cries of terror filled the room, and the other Athraskani ran for the door, stampeding over one another in their panic. Kefre staggered to his feet, holding his bleeding head in his hands, and followed them. Left alone in the hall, Thraxis felt his anger and power rise like the tide, igniting the ancient, terrible scrolls in their jars, stripping the paint from the bas-reliefs, and scorching wood preserved for centuries in the death-dry air.

Thiacene still stood in the doorway, her yellow eyes fixed on Vilhardouin's corpse. His own eyes drawn by her gaze, Thraxis stared for a moment at the familiar face with its host of lines and its flat, silver eyes. Then Vilhardouin's black robes went up in flames, igniting her silver hair, and within moments all that remained were the charred fragments of bones and the smell of roasted flesh.

Deprived of a place of rest her gaze, Thiacene looked at him instead. He could see the horror in her eyes, but whether it was for her actions, or his, or even both of them, he didn't know. "Go," he said. The heated air of the burning hall whipped his robes around him in a storm, shredding the fabric. "Get out of the city."

To her credit, she did not flinch. "What are you going to do?"

"Melilandra and Gallinarches are opening the reliquary as we speak."

"You're going to stop them?"

"I'm going to kill them."

* * * *

The thick, brilliant air of the Hall of Reflections surrounded Arrow, tangling her limbs and urging her to lassitude. As before, the corridor seemed to stretch off infinitely far in both directions, and scenes from her own life played out on the walls. The air smelled of incense, of sandalwood, and of an animal's den.

Fighting off the drowsiness that the hall seemed to invoke, Arrow tried to run. But as in a nightmare, the air itself mired her limbs, slowing her to a walk. "Damn it!" she shouted. "Help me!"

The Devouring Lady appeared—or perhaps she had always been there. "*A desperate gambit, little mother,*" she said in her husky voice. There might have been amusement in the words.

"I have to find her," Arrow said. "I have to find Raven's Daughter."

"*I have no mercy for the weak, Champion,*" the goddess reminded her.

"So you would give aid to fools like Gallinarches?"

"*It is not for me to order what mortals find within themselves, nor to correct them if they cannot see the truth plainly displayed before them, kin slayer .*"

But despite the goddess' words, another shape appeared in the corridor. It flickered and fluctuated wildly, for an instant showing the joyful woman in the Skald costume, then the haughty Empress in her Athraskani robes. Not knowing whether her idea would work, but unable to allow doubt to breed hesitation, Arrow seized her by the shoulders. For a moment, she stared into features marked by the sigil

of a priestess, and then into a face with serpent-cold eyes and a razor smile.

“Raven!” Arrow said, putting all of a mother’s authority that she could muster into her voice. “You must help me!”

The Empress laughed at her, a high, evil sound. “I cannot help you. I am nothing.”

“Potential,” added Raven’s Daughter.

“Possibility,” finished the Empress.

“Yes, you can,” Arrow said sternly, denying any argument to the contrary. “You have already done so.”

“Warnings of danger only,” said the Empress with an elegant shrug.

“Out there, yes,” Arrow said doggedly. “But here and now, things are different. Why build the Hall of Reflections if not as a tool to weight the outcomes of the future? If it can’t be used to make one possibility more likely than another?”

“It did not save the ancient ones,” Raven pointed out wryly.

“They were fools. I’m not. Here, the present touches the future. Out there, you don’t exist yet except as a baby. But in here—”

“Potential, nothing more,” snapped the Empress, her yellow eyes flashing dangerously.

“Then lend me your potential, Raven!” Arrow shook her daughter, hard, to get her attention. “Raven! Talk to me, damn you!”

Form shifted. Raven reached up, grabbed Arrow’s wrists, and clung to them. “What would you have me do?”

Arrow swallowed hard. It all came down to this moment. “I don’t know how this Hall works. I don’t know if you’ve been borrowed from the future, or if you’re a dream, or if you’re just a possibility given solid form for a little while. But whatever you are, I need you to help me. I have to save Thraxis. I can’t let them kill him.”

An odd sorrow reached Raven’s yellow eyes. “Are you so certain that’s the danger facing him?” she asked gently.

What else could there be? Arrow wondered. “Then whatever danger it is, I need your help to overcome it. I’m just a warrior—I can’t face down even one Athraskani and hope to win. Lend me some of your power, Raven. Awaken some of your potential into reality.”

Was it just her hope making her see things that weren’t there, or did Raven seem more stable, more solid? Had she managed already to tip the scales towards Raven and away from the Empress of the World?

“*One spell,*” said the goddess unexpectedly. Her sharp amber eyes held Arrow and Raven alike. “*That is all you may have, daughter.*”

“Thank you,” Arrow whispered. Raven put her arms about her, and she felt something travel up through her from her womb, a wash of gentle warmth like nothing she had ever experienced before. Then Raven was no longer before her, and for a moment Arrow thought she had gone, until she held up her arm and saw that it was clad in black.

* * * *

Thraxis stalked through the Hall of Knowledge. The wind of his rage screamed around him, ripping scrolls from their shelves and tearing them into a thousand tiny pieces. The papyrus scraps ignited, creating a firestorm that followed behind him like a dog, leaving nothing but ash in his wake.

Destroy it all, he thought, clinging to his anger, his fear. *Let it all burn.*

“Fool!” shouted Gallinarches.

The wrecked door at the end of the Hall stood open. Golden radiance spilled out of it, almost too bright to look at. Gallinarches was framed in the doorway, his thin face drawn with fury. Behind him, Thraxis caught a glimpse of Melilandra. She paced slowly around the reliquary, her voice lifted in the sonorous chant which was part of the key to opening it.

He wasn’t too late, then. But almost. Almost.

“Look at what you’ve destroyed,” Gallinarches snarled, his hands shaking, as if he restrained himself

from physically assaulting Thraxis. “Where is Vilhardouin? It was her task to stop you!”

“Vilhardouin is dead,” Thraxis said flatly. Let Gallinarches think he had killed her—what did it matter? “Just as you will be in a moment.”

He set loose a ball of fire even as he spoke, aiming it at Gallinarches’ head. His cousin swore furiously, blocking the attack with a veil. Lightning cracked the air between them, but Thraxis turned it aside with ease. A strange elation filled him, and he recognized it as the same feeling that had gripped him when his hands closed around Melilandra’s throat.

The battle was a short one. Within the space of minutes, Thraxis had torn through Gallinarches’ defenses. The other wizard fell to the floor, near the doorway. In the room behind him, the chanting had reached a crescendo.

“You won’t kill me,” Gallinarches snarled, pushing himself up on his elbows. Soot blackened one side of his face, where he had narrowly deflected one of Thraxis’ attacks. “I know you better than that, cousin. I know the truth behind your assault on Melilandra, you know. You don’t have it in you to hurt me.”

For an instant, memory clamored for Thraxis’ attention: the day he had taken his Vows, the moments during his journey with Arrow when he had been tempted to use his power wrongly and had refrained, and lastly his long conversations with Kalika and her friends. Every particle of his being seemed to cry out that what he was about to do was wrong.

“Goodbye, Gallinarches,” he said quietly and raised his hand to strike.

A curtain of light shimmered into being between them, a rippling wall of energy that flung reflections out like sunlight on a pond. The force he had unleashed hit the curtain and rebounded, instead striking the stone ceiling with a hiss, like water in a hot pan. Shocked, Thraxis spun about, wondering what other wizard could possibly have the strength to deny him.

She stood a little behind him, in the ashes he had made of the ancient library. She was tall for a woman, and her curtain of braided black hair framed a strong, square face with a prominent nose. Her eyes burned like twin yellow suns, and he knew suddenly that the protective veil which had so easily defeated him had been nothing compared to what she was capable of.

The strange woman tilted back her head and laughed, the sound one of simple joy that could not help but lighten his heart. For a moment she turned her burning gaze on him, and the smile she offered was that of a generous heart which is happy and which wishes happiness to others.

Then, abruptly, the veil disappeared. The woman vanished as well, leaving in her place a disheveled and shaky-looking Arrow. For a moment, their eyes met. Then, without speaking, Arrow crumpled to the floor.

Thraxis cried out and ran to her. How she had come to be there, he couldn’t begin to guess, but it was clear that she needed his help. Heart pounding, he grabbed her up in his arms, lifting her tall frame only with difficulty. He had to get her out of there, he realized, before Gallinarches or Melilandra could attack them.

Gallinarches. Swearing furiously, Thraxis spun, half-expecting to be assaulted on the spot. Instead, he saw that his cousin was still sitting by the doorway...but that now his attention had left Thraxis utterly and was focused on the room beyond.

The chanting had stopped.

Tightening his grip on Arrow, Thraxis took an uncertain step forward. Through the ruined doorway, he could see Melilandra standing before the reliquary, her arms outstretched towards it. Even as he watched, light raced over the gilded surface, intensifying moment by moment until it was almost blinding. Then, very slowly, the door began to swing open.

A wall of heat and light exploded outward from the reliquary. In the instant before it reached him, Thraxis thought he saw Melilandra’s hair and clothing ignite and heard her screams. Then, he was flung off his feet by the force, his back slamming into the floor. Scalding heat stole his breath, and he rolled over quickly, shielding Arrow’s body with his own.

Beneath his hands, the floor began to rumble.

No, not the floor—the earth itself. Thraxis caught his breath, waiting for the tremors to stop, but

instead they only intensified. Dust filled the air, and the room containing the reliquary collapsed in a roar. Stones began to come loose from the ceiling above him, one striking the floor dangerously near his head.

Cursing, he staggered to his feet, clutching Arrow to him. Somehow he managed to run across the heaving floor, avoiding the falls of stone that were becoming ever more common. A wall went down to one side, and he glimpsed daylight beyond. Not wanting to linger under a roof any longer than necessary, he made his way towards it.

“Th-Thraxis?” Arrow gasped, stirring suddenly in his hold.

He stopped and let her down. Her face was frightfully pale, and she could not support herself, but had to lean against his shoulder. “What’s happening? Why is everything moving?” she asked, coughing as even more dust filled the air.

“I’m not sure,” he confessed. “Something happened when Melilandra opened the reliquary—she set off some sort of spell. The building is shaking itself to pieces. We have to get out. Can you walk?”

It was not easy to scramble over piles of rubble with the ground swaying and Arrow leaning on his arm, but somehow he managed. But if he had expected to reach safety along with daylight, his notions were dashed as soon as they clambered out through the collapsed wall. The entire city was coming down, he saw with dismay, tons of rock crashing to the ground as the earth strove to shake off Xaqqara, like an animal ridding itself of a parasite.

“We need to get out of here fast,” he said anxiously. “Before something comes down on top of us.”

Arrow shook her head, her face white with strain. “I can’t,” she said in a voice that was only a ghost of its normal self. “I’m too weak to walk far, let alone run. Thraxis, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” More than anything, he wanted to kiss her. But remembering how they had parted from one another, he didn’t dare. “Just give me a moment.”

Pushing aside his weariness one last time, Thraxis drew on the very dregs of his power. Holding the memory of shape and scent in his mind as clearly as he could, he whispered “*Equus*.”

For a second time in two days, bone shifted and muscle realigned. Within moments, he had taken on the shape of the black horse that he had learned that last afternoon before the Black Council’s arrival. Arrow’s eyes grew wide at the sight, and he wanted to tell her that he had practiced the shape to please her, but that his own foolishness had gotten in the way of their ever having a quiet moment to show her. But of course he couldn’t speak.

When Arrow didn’t move, he went down on his forelegs. Finally grasping his intent, she seized a handful of ebony mane and swung herself up on his back. Surging to his feet once again, trusting that she of all people could hang on no matter how tired she was, Thraxis began to run.

It was the most harrowing journey of his life. The ground shifted and jerked beneath him, and all around buildings came down, either one massive block at a time or all at once. Sand and dust filled the air, blinding him from obstacles that could easily break a leg. A huge obelisk fell beside them, so close that the impact nearly flung him off his feet. But, feeling Arrow’s weight on his back, he forced himself to continue on, leaping piles of rubble and dodging falling blocks.

At last, after what seemed like an eternity, they cleared the city. Beyond, the caravan that had brought the Black Council was in an uproar, with Athraskani and humans alike running hither and thither, expecting the end of the world. Ignoring them all, Thraxis stretched his legs out into a gallop and left Xaqqara behind.

* * * *

As the months passed, Thraxis slowly realized that he had not defeated the curse after all . At first, he had denied the warning signs. His appetite decreased and he began to lose weight, but what of it? And sometimes his joints ached in the morning with a pain that he couldn’t seem to ease, but perhaps he was only growing sensitive to the damp. But as he grew thinner and thinner, the whispers started, impossible to ignore. And when his long, black hair began to fall out in clumps...there was no more denying it.

He was dying .

At first, he raged against Balthazar . Then he flung himself into a new venue of research,

certain that there must be some means of breaking the curse. A little more time, a few extra prayers to the gods, and he would be fine.

Except of course that he wouldn't .

He admitted it to himself one night, sitting on a bench in the garden and watching the sun go down . He, Thraxis, was going to die. To cease to exist. And he would leave as his legacy to the world...nothing .

He might as well not have lived at all, he acknowledged sorrowfully . He had not seen his parents in twenty years; they certainly would not mourn his passing. He had no real friends. His amria, if she existed at all, had never come to him. The only fruit his research had borne had resulted in the deaths of ten humans—not to mention his own demise. If anyone remembered him in the future, it would be as a cautionary tale: don't end up like poor Thraxis.

It might be more bearable, he thought, if he could have said that he at least had known love, or true happiness, during his brief span of years . But he did not even have that. No one had ever truly loved him...and now no one ever would.

Chapter Twenty-One: Fall Away

Night fell, draining away the heat of the day. In the south, a plume of smoke and dust could still be seen, reflecting the harsh glare of the moon. Thraxis walked slowly over the tall dunes, his head hanging with weariness and his sides lathered with drying sweat. Arrow clung to his back still, and over the hours he thought that her grip had become firmer as she recovered her strength.

He had started out following a set of tracks heading away from Xaqqara, the spoor of two horses and a dog, hoping that it marked Thiacene's flight. The tracks were headed in the general direction of the oasis he had rested at the day before, which he and Arrow would need in any case. They had no food, no shelter, and no water. If they did not catch up with Thiacene...he did not know what they would do. It was a long trip back over the desert to the river, and he doubted their ability to survive that long without resources. Arrow had once mentioned that her people drank the blood of their horses during times of scarcity; perhaps he could convince her to do the same with him, if it came down to the choice of all of them dying otherwise.

Then, just as he was about to stop, unable to go any farther without rest, a flicker of firelight caught his attention. Startled, he swung up his heavy head, ears perked forward and nostrils flared. The scent of smoke, humans, and horses came to him, and he felt an immense surge of relief. Picking up the pace, he cantered over the last few dunes, until he could see the oasis clearly.

Thiacene wasn't alone. For an instant, fear touched him—had some party sent out from the Sanctum captured her? But then he saw Viabold's familiar blue robe and Kalika's shaved head, and knew that sanctuary was indeed before him.

As he cantered up, Thiacene leapt to her feet with a glad shout. Arrow slithered off his back, to be caught up in a fierce embrace by his sister. Tears made tracks through the dust on Thiacene's face, and he wondered suddenly if she had told anyone else what she had done to Vilhardouin.

Then Beautiful Girl bounded up, barking ecstatically, followed by everyone else, all of whom gathered around Arrow. Feeling rather forgotten, Thraxis invoked the magic and took back his own form. He had meant to stand there until someone remembered him...but somehow discovered himself lying flat on his back instead.

Viabold's face appeared between him and the stars. "You look like hell," Viabold offered.

Thraxis scowled at his friend. "I thought I told you to go north. That's in the opposite direction, you fool."

Viabold put down a hand to help him up, and Kalika appeared on his other side, giving him a boost to his feet. "We could hardly let you go to Xaqqara alone," she pointed out, unperturbed. "Our lives are as much at stake in this as yours."

"No, your lives would be much less at stake if you wouldn't insist on risking them."

"We thought it might come down to a matter of risking them now or risking them later. Now seemed better. Are you saying you aren't glad to see us?"

For the first time in what seemed like forever, he managed a smile. "Not at all."

The camp had been in the middle of making dinner when they came in. During the meal, Viabold and Thiacene explained everything to Thraxis and Arrow, filling in the details of their individual journeys. When Thraxis realized that Gallinarches had held Arrow captive with the intent of stealing the baby from her, his hands shook with rage. Perhaps she should have let him kill Gallinarches after all.

Thraxis told them what little he knew about what had happened to Xaqqara. He had not intended to mention Vilhardouin's death, but when he tried to skirt the issue, Thiacene spoke up, telling everyone that she had broken her Vows and killed a member of the Black Council. Her voice was flat when she spoke, and there was a haunted look in her eyes...but at the same time, he noticed that she was still carrying Arrow's *gorytus* with her.

When at last there was nothing left to tell, silence fell briefly over the camp. Then Sakarax stirred, looking worried. "Do you think they're all dead?" he asked.

Thraxis remembered the fire and Melilandra's screams. "I don't know," he said at last. "Maybe. Either way, I can't go back the Sanctum."

"So what now?" asked Kalika.

Arrow sat on the opposite side of the fire from Thraxis. Her head had been bowed during their discussion, and her arms were wrapped protectively around her belly. But at Kalika's question she raised her head, then stood up. Turning away from them all, she walked to the edge of the camp and stared north. "I want to go home," she said softly. "I want to see my sister, Kestrel. She lives among the Chok, with her husband and children. I think they'll put up anyone who wants to come, so long as they're willing to lend a hand with things."

And what about me? Thraxis wondered. He ached to go to her, to put his arms around her and hold her close. But he did not know if she had forgiven him yet.

When no one said anything, Arrow turned and wandered off, disappearing amid the shadows of the trees clustered about the oasis. Thraxis watched her go, feeling empty and alone. A sharp tug on his sleeve caught his attention back to the camp, and he looked over to see Viabold glaring at him. "So go after her," Viabold said impatiently. "*Talk* to her, you fool."

She had not gone far. When Thraxis found her, she was standing at the edge of the trees, staring up at the stars. Beautiful Girl dug in the sand nearby, hunting for some small creature that she promptly swallowed in a single gulp.

Arrow turned at the sound of his steps, then looked quickly away. She wrapped her arms around herself once again, defensive, and his heart sank. But when she finally spoke, her words were not what he had expected.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know that you're angry."

He stared at her in bafflement. "What am I supposed to be angry about?"

"About the baby." She swallowed hard. "Thraxis, I'm sorry. I didn't lie to you. I didn't think I could conceive. I know how you must feel...that I tricked you, that I treated you no better than the Black Council or—or Melilandra. And I'll understand if you don't want a hand in raising her."

"How could you even think such a thing?" he asked, aghast. "I would want her even if she was not mine, because she's a part of *you*. How could I not love her, knowing that?"

Gods of truth, but he wanted to go to Arrow, wanted to fold her in his arms. But she still had not said that he had the right, so he forced himself to remain where he was, even when the look of surprise and gratitude that she gave him tore at his heart.

"I'm glad," she said, blinking rapidly against tears.

When she didn't continue, he decided to ask her the question that had been burning in him ever since Xaqqara. "Arrow, tell me something. Why did you keep me from killing Gallinarches?"

The look she gave him was surprisingly wistful. "I thought that I was sent to Xaqqara to save you from the Black Council. But if you had killed Gallinarches, it would have destroyed you. You aren't Thiacene—she doesn't believe the things you do, Thraxis. I'm sorry—I know that it hurts you. But once she gets over the shock, I don't think she'll truly regret killing Vilhardouin. You had already broken your Vow by hurting Kefre—if you had killed Gallinarches as well, you would have torn yourself apart. And I need you—we need you—too much to let that happen."

He seized the hope her words offered. “Then...you want me back?”

She hesitated, and he despaired. But again, her words surprised him. “Melilandra told me that only an Athraskani could...could satisfy another of your kind.”

It made him angry, but he forced it aside, knowing that rage would do neither of them any good. “And how would she know? Melilandra never satisfied anyone in her entire life.”

A faint smile flashed across Arrow’s face. Encouraged, he moved closer to her and slipped the ring off his smallest finger. “Will you come back to me? Will you be my wife again?”

“Yes.”

He put the ring back on her hand, and then kissed her. She clung to him fiercely, and he hid his face in her hair, feeling as though he had come home from a long journey. When her hold loosened a little, he slid his hand down to the small, soft swelling of her belly. Something fluttered under his fingers, and Arrow let out a surprised laugh.

“She moved!” she exclaimed, a look of wonder crossing her face. “Did you feel it?”

He grinned back at his wife, thinking that the entire world was not enough to contain his joy. “I did.” And he pulled her into his arms and kissed her again.

Epilogue

A late spring rain pattered on the thatched roof, and thunder rumbled gently somewhere far to the south of the Chok homestead. Thraxis crouched in the hayloft that had served as a bedchamber for Arrow and him since their arrival a month earlier. Arrow leaned back against him, and he supported her upper body in his arms. The light of a single lantern cast a warm glow over her naked skin, gleaming off the sweat beading on her brow and illuminating the look of intense concentration on her face. She had gone down deep into herself, to someplace he could not reach, and it worried him a little despite the constant flow of magic that linked them.

“Is it supposed to take this long?” he whispered to Viabold, using magic to keep the sound of his voice—and thus his worry—from Arrow’s ears.

Viabold shot him an annoyed look from where he crouched between Arrow’s knees. “What was our agreement?”

“But—”

“What did I tell you?”

“That you would look after the baby and I would look after Arrow.”

“Then do it and stop nagging at me like an old woman!”

As if to underscore Viabold’s words, Arrow let out a low moan. Horrified that he had let his concentration slip, Thraxis found the source of her pain and blocked it. “Sorry,” he whispered, not certain whether she was even aware of him at all.

“Good girl,” Viabold said encouragingly, running his hands lightly, rhythmically over her belly. “You’re almost there. Push for me now, girl. Push!”

Thraxis could feel Arrow’s body tense with effort. He blocked the pain from her, dampened the bleeding as soon as it started, and tried to feed some of his own strength into her weary body.

“Yes!” shouted Viabold triumphantly. He caught hold of something Thraxis couldn’t see and pulled. A moment later, he sat back, a bloody, squalling infant in his hands.

Arrow laughed, a weak sound but a happy one, and reached out. Viabold cleaned the blood from the baby with water that had been steeped with herbs, and then passed the newborn to her mother. Within moments, she had started to suckle.

Viabold finished cleaning up, then silently stood and departed. Left alone with his wife and child, Thraxis held them both, kissing Arrow’s hair and trying to get a good look at his new daughter. It seemed impossible that the rather squashed-looking baby at her breast could possibly grow up into the tall, beautiful young woman he had seen at Xaqqara.

Easing Arrow gently back onto a pile of pillows, he covered her with a light blanket, then stood up

and quietly crossed the floor to swing open the small window that provided a breeze in the loft. The rain had stopped, he saw, and the sun turned the eastern sky to gold.

“What do you see?” Arrow asked him sleepily.

He turned back and smiled at her, feeling tears well up. “The most joyful dawn I have ever known,” he said truthfully.

She laughed and kissed the baby’s head. “Joyful Dawn. Not a bad child-name.”

“Child-name? Oh.” He had forgotten that the Skald named their children after the first thing the father saw after beholding it. That name lasted for the first five years; after that, the child would be given a new one. Thraxis suspected that Arrow already knew what Dawn’s would be.

“Well, at least I didn’t say something stupid, like muddy ground,” he said wryly, settling back down by Arrow. She chuckled wearily at that, then the sound trailed away. When he looked at her, her eyes were closed, her breathing soft and even.

Kissing her again, Thraxis held his sleeping family in his arms and watched the sun come up.

* * * *

Thraxis hurried down the halls of the Sanctum, annoyed at the interruption of his studies . Vilhardouin had not said what she wanted of him, only issued an imperious summons, as if he had nothing better to do than attend her.

He passed a group of youths huddled in a stairway, gossiping . “Did you hear?” asked one, his eyes huge. “The gate guards just let in some kind of barbarian woman. She has a sword and knives—all kinds of weapons! And get this—she was sitting on a horse’s back!”

Someone else giggled . “I don’t believe that!”

“It’s true, I tell you! What do you think she wants with us?”

A barbarian, Thraxis thought as he passed by and the voices died away behind him. How odd. But then he dismissed the woman from his mind. After all, what could she possibly have to do with him?

About The Author

When Elaine Corvidae was eight years old, she came home from school one day and declared that she was going to be a writer. Elaine is not certain what prompted that declaration, but unlike so many other decisions in life, it stuck from that day on.

Elaine has worked as an office assistant, archaeologist, and raptor rehabilitator. She is currently earning her Masters degree in Biology at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. She lives near Charlotte, NC, with her husband and their three cats, who are just like children, except they never ask to borrow the car.

Elaine is a vegan (strict vegetarian) and interested in animal rights. She enjoys backpacking, wasting time on the computer, good beer, and loud music.

Her first published novel, *Winter’s Orphans*, was the recipient of the 2001 Dream Realm Award and the 2002 Eppie Award.

Elaine’s second book of the Lord of Wind and Fire series, *The Crow Queen*, won the EPPIE for Best Fantasy of 2005.

To learn more about Elaine Corvidae visit her official website at <http://www.onecrow.net>.