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From Scripture to Midrash to Postmodern Fantasy: Adaptation as a Contemporary Continuation of Tradition

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From Scripture to Midrash to Postmodern Fantasy:
Adaptation as a Contemporary Continuation of Tradition

By

Elea Ingman

A Senior Project in Partial Fulfillment of the Honors Program

ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

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thank you, thank you, three times thank you.

Introduction

Challenges and Processes

Producing my Honors Project was a fascinating and challenging experience, and certainly one-of-a-kind. It all started back when I was first introduced to the idea of the Project. It was my first year, and I sat in TRW agog with the possibilities. Right away, I was captured with the idea of writing a novel, probably fantasy. Over the years, I added and subtracted to this vision as my interests grew and changed. I became a Theology major in addition to English; I fell in love with the Hebrew Bible; I realized that one of my side-projects, a fantasy story I was writing in response to a recent film, fit snugly with the story of Exodus. While I toyed with the idea of this story, I was thrilled to collaborate with Dr. Colleen Carpenter on her work on the role of the Imagination within Theology. Here, I was introduced for the first time to Midrash, and made some first attempts at consciously writing my own.

It was at this point that I decided that I wanted to expand my sketches of my Fantasy-Exodus story into a full-fledged novel based within Scripture, Biblical context, and Midrashim. I was exhilarated; for the first time, I would be working on something that I was truly and completely passionate about, able to move in any direction I chose. Books on Egyptian society and Jewish texts began accumulating in my room. While abroad in Ireland the Spring of my Junior year, I spent particularly rainy days tracking down and watching every documentary on Exodus, Egypt, and Jewish scholarship that I could find. I wrote, and I re-wrote, and I started everything over again.

By the Fall of this, my Senior year, I had become aware of a major problem: I was afraid to actually write. I had, at this point, over a hundred pages of story, and I was nowhere close to finished. Instead of continuing off of what I already had, however, I obsessively rewrote what I

had already written. The effect was that I successfully went nowhere, fast. With school back in full swing, I found it increasingly difficult to give myself over to my writing.

After struggling for several months with the feeling that I needed to be working on something more productive whenever I sat down to write, I realized the source of my block. I have always been good at writing, but my training has been almost completely academic. Creative writing was something allotted to those moments when I was done with all of my required work. Even the work I had done for my Creative Writing classes had been short pieces, written for the class and my professors and not for me. Now, for the first time, I was allowed, even *required*, to write for myself – and I no longer remembered how to do it.

Once I got past that struggle, there were other problems to deal with. I had been doing research for so long that I no longer knew where many of my ideas had originally come from, or if they were, in fact, originally mine. Similarly, much of my knowledge of postmodernism had been gleaned from years of observations and sources long since lost to time. On top of all the rest, my research into Midrash was going poorly. It seemed impossible to find a definitive definition of what Midrash was, and, once found, to actually find a source for the Midrashim on Exodus.

Finally, in what was perhaps the most unexpected challenge of all, my committee returned my first draft to me with a great many questions, the central component of many being “Where are the women?” As someone who considers herself a feminist, I was horrified. For a while, I tried to make excuses – there were more women characters coming! – but I had to face the fact that, though I claimed to be writing a feminist interpretation, I had chosen a male-centered story. Though there were many opportunities in the text to center an adaptation on one

of the women characters, or even to speak with her voice, I had chosen to write a narrative that focused on the relationship between two brothers.

As much as I adore it, the Fantasy/Sci-Fi genre is not exactly a hotbed of feminist work. Until recently, women in Fantasy novels were often relegated to the roles of Princess-in-a-Tower, Witch/Evil Queen, or Amazonian temptress. Even Tolkien, the Father of the genre, has only minor roles for women, when they enter the picture at all. I was, unintentionally, following the same path; even though I was including women characters, and even giving them some important roles, women were not at the center of my work. They dogged the sidelines, waiting for their chance to step in for a moment of glory.

Making my work more feminist has been a slow and painful process, and requires me to discard many previous plans. I finally started to find success in the character of Wendi, originally a bit part who decided she wanted to be much more. Much to my surprise as much as anyone, Wendi became one of the most motivated and interesting characters of the work so far. She reminded me that I do, in fact, have the capability to write rounded female characters, and that I enjoy it immensely.

As I look back on the work I have done, I am ever more excited to continue. Writing fantasy as a continuation of Midrashic tradition is something that I can very willingly devote my life to doing. At the moment, I am looking to continue my studies of the Hebrew Bible, and I hope to one day read it in its original languages and understand the richness of its context. For now, I am pleased to have completed the work you read here. Included is a draft of a cover, the first part of the novel as completed for this project, and an appendix further outlining some of my sources. It is the culmination of many years of research and effort, and I hope very much that you enjoy it.

Project Title:

**From Scripture to Midrash to Postmodern Fantasy:
Adaptation as a Contemporary Continuation of Tradition**

Dormant Light

A Novel

By Elea Ingman

ELEA INGMAN



DORMANT LIGHT

Prologue

A city of tents lay on the border of the Usianian Empire. Not that the borders of the Empire needed to be marked by anything other than their natural surrounding: from north to southwest gray mountains stabbed in sharp, rocky crags; to the north proper was the sea; and for the rest, it was edged by a fathomless gorge, in which the tors of the Empire's capital city rose like skeletal fingers to claw at empty sky. Against the sheer cliffs, Usiana towered over the mainland like the living palace of the Gods. For millennium the only living creatures here had been rocs; huge, fiery-plumed birds that made their aeries atop the granite chimneys. Now, the pillars were crowned with fortresses. From the center-most of these tors sprang a long, graceful arc of white granite— mightiest of bridges, it was one of the only connections to the mainland. The mainland was land and not much more; an empty expanse of stone, sparkling with slivers of quartz and mica, stretching like a barren, waterless sea to the horizon.

In this caustic place dwelt the e'Shœn, people of the tents; and if they had originally fled Usiana by force, they had long since made the desert theirs, and theirs alone. Their tent city at the foot of the bridge was an uncommonly permanent settlement, marking the beginning of their realm. The e'Shœn guarded their ignominious dwellings with a ferocity that garnered suspicion from the citizens of Usiana— not that much was needed to garner suspicion against the e'Shœn in any case. This same unfriendliness drew a great deal of curiosity from the younger and more foolhardy Usianians, who were sure that it stemmed from some sort of shadowy and exiting business. No one but e'Shœn merchants and Usianian soldiers had crossed that bridge since the tribes had been cast out of the Empire, and even then the crossing was made only for the most important business, and the two groups never came much closer than the outskirts of the others' domain.

Usiana and its surrounding land was a place of stark and perilous beauty, of scorching light and freezing shadows. The people were, as is so often the case, a microcosm of their climate; simultaneously close-knit and ruthless, with wit that cut as often as their steel and an almost barbaric zeal in everything they put their minds to. What energy the Usianians could not express in military force they devoted to politics, and considered themselves enlightened. The e'Shœn devoted their energy to business and survival, and considered themselves honest.

Within the tent-city of the e'Shœn lived representatives of every tribe, and their goodwill was insured by a single official, called the Ishæn. On this day, as the evening began to paint the sky bloody, the Ishæn, leader of the e'Shœn of the Tent-City and Chieftain of the Border, sat at his desk and thought. The desk was rare, made of wood, light and portable. The Ishæn's thoughts were not so uncommon; they were the same questions plaguing all others of that land. He was worried about the past, and what it might mean for the future. His people had been rocked by the failed uprising in the Carotine, a far Imperial stronghold. Now, almost five years after the rebellion had been raised and defeated, those rebels that had fled to the desert and, by default, the e'Shœn, had formed bands ready to rush across the bridge at a moment's notice and wrest the might of Usiana straight from the Emperors' hands. It was the young people who had inherited the bitterness of their *damas*, their elders, who wanted to fight. They knew little of why their parents and grandparents spat in the direction of the White City, but they knew that that was how things was done, and they were rightly done. So much fire, the Ishæn thought wearily. If only it could be put to a use other than killing and fighting and hatred. At least their attention was joined in common cause—were they to turn against each other, like in the days of blood feuds, the e'Shœn would not long survive.

There were problems enough within his community on the border, without civil war to add to the tension. Looking around his pentagonal tent, he took in the damage from his last visitor. She had been an especially irate matriarch who had disagreed with his decree on the partitioning of land for the year. Gouges in four of the five walls cut deep enough through the layers of fortified fabric

that ruddy light shone through the tent's outermost coat. The tainted sunlight made the tent feel like the stomach of some great, mythological beast. The destruction inside was also fitting for such a creature; the cushions were rent and choking on their own stuffing, and the few tapestries, hung from rods and gathered at bases of each wall, were torn into shreds. Precious jewelry, half-scrolled maps, and other small trinkets spilled from split boxes and bags. The soft cushions and semi-portable furniture were strewn about the place.

His eyes skipped over the overturned bedframe—wood, like his desk; to have multiple wood items was a definite rarity for an e'Shœni, and a mark of the Ishaen's status—and came to rest suddenly on a man standing behind it, dressed unobtrusively in grays and tans. Instantly, the Ishaen was on his feet, reaching for the crossbow by his side and cocking it in the same movement.

"*Avrin taen!*" the intruder said quickly, holding perfectly still. *I am unarmed.* There was a moment of tense consideration, and then the Ishaen lowered his crossbow slightly.

"You speak eShœn'i?" he questioned in the same tongue. The intruder nodded once, and the Ishaen's eyes narrowed and sharpened, as did his consideration of the man. "That is interesting," he said. While he waited for the intruder to name his business, the Ishaen made a thorough examination of the situation. There were no tears that went completely through the tent, that he could see; no way for the man to come in except through the opening behind the Ishaen himself, and to do that the intruder had to have passed him within inches. A chill crept across the Ishaen's neck at the thought.

Deliberately, he turned his attention to the intruder himself. His cloak and hood were of fine quality, despite their plainness. He wore black, tight-fitting gloves, and kept careful spacing of his hands from his sides to show that he held no weapon, nor was reaching for one. The urge to strike at the had menace cooled after its initial shock, but with each new fact noticed, Ishaen felt as though his hand was twisting around the crossbow of its own accord. A spy, perhaps? But who had sent him? And why was he here, making no attempt to hide his presence, when he apparently had enough skill to sneak into an Ishaen's tent under his very nose? Then the Ishaen's gaze fixed, and in less space than a blink his thoughtfulness pulled back into a grimace. How long had he been here, this man, that he had had time to remove his mask and hang it from his belt?

When it became clear that the man was not going to speak further without prompting, Ishaen sucked his lips over his teeth in an expression part annoyance and part appreciation of the intruder's respect in his presence.

"Why are you here?" he asked, squinting as if by doing so he could peer past the intruder's enveloping headscarf. The intruder murmured something, muffled by the dead layers of tapestry cloth draped around the tent.

"*Aeb?*" Ishaen inquired sharply, and the man repeated himself.

"Do you not know?" he asked again, impatiently. His hands twitched, stilled in the act of reaching for something. Ishaen noted this with a flick of eyes in an otherwise relaxed composure.

"No," he admitted gruffly, "I do not."

Another twitch of the intruder's gloved hands. For a moment, there was a tense stillness; then, slowly lifting his arms in a circle from his sides to his cowed face, the intruder reached up and untied the ends of his scarf. He pulled the cloth down around his neck, revealing, under the cropped hair of a city-dweller, the sickly hue of an Usianian aristocratic. Though, looking closer, Ishaen thought that there might be actual sickness paling the man's cheeks. He was sweating, though that could have been from the mask, or the stress of trespassing in e'Shœnin land. And he did look nervous, The Ishaen noted with satisfaction. It was some balm to his pride that the intruder had not slipped past his defenses with an easy heart.

The intruder wet his lips in an anxious, self-conscious way, his eyes feverish but steady on the Ishaen's face.

“Well?” he demanded.

For another moment they stood in near perfect stillness. Somewhere outside the tent, children were running and shrieking in play, women debated loudly in eShœn’i, and a man could be heard shouting wrangling instructions over the staccato chirp of a Noble Lizard. The wind ran around the tent like a child, pushing its hands along the cloth. As the seconds dripped by, even these domestic sounds became muted against the stillness within the velvet bowels of the tent. Every few seconds, the intruder’s hands tightened convulsively around the mask, as if the waiting cost him physical pain.

Finally, there was a flicker of recognition, and the Ishean smiled grimly and shook his head, pushing a memory back to its proper place, and reached for the breast of his jacket. With a sniff of surprise, the intruder stumbled back a step and pulled his arms protectively over his chest and face, but the Ishæn made a consolatory gesture.

“*Tae na*,” he reassured. He pulled a small vial from an inside pocket and shook it so that its contents sparkled dully in the fading sunlight, then placed it on the table between them with a pleased air.

The intruder blinked at it, a small frown creasing his face. There was a pinch of haughtiness in him, now, the entitlement of a man who is used to getting what he wants.

“What is this?” he asked tightly, furiously.

“What you came for.”

“No,” the other said, with a sharp gesture of his own. He glared at his opponent. “No. Where is it? No games, Ishæn!”

If the Ishæn was offended by the familiar tone, he made no sign. With a shrug, he picked up the vial again.

“Your loss, *utap*.” The e’Shœni word for *foreigner* snapped disdainfully from the Ishæn’s tongue. He tossed the vial into the air and caught it again, giving the intruder of look of mild amusement and pity. How little these city-dwellers knew. How little they comprehended.

The Ishæn pulled back the folds of his robe and tucked the vial away again. As he did, a shadow moved across the room, blocking the light from the doorway behind. He had time to thank the gods that someone had arrived to help when there was a metallic ring, the sort of half-heard, half-felt vibration of metal sprung from its binding. Then came a heavy *thup*, like that of a stone dropped onto a pile of cushions. The Ishæn and the intruder’s eyes widened at the same time, and the Ishæn’s lips parted in a surprised grunt. Then he fell, face-first, onto his desk. Papers flew off the surface like startled insects.

The aristocrat’s eyes rose up the length of the bolt embedded in the Ishæn’s back, his arm raising in tandem so that when he locked eyes with the newest addition and shook back his sleeve, the bow strapped to his own arm was already aligned with his opponent’s heart. The newcomer moved into the tent, temporarily a black shape against the muddy red light, and then secured the flap behind it. It did not seem to fear having its back to the aristocrat, weapon or no; but when the aristocrat shifted into a defensive position, the newcomer looked finally looked around.

Its gaze glanced off the aristocrat and landed instead on the Ishaen, sprawled across the desk. Dressed in layers of red and gold, fingers adorned with many rings, and his scarf lined with bells, the Ishaen was every inch an eShoenin chieftain. Wiry hair sprouted from under his headscarf, several years darker than his trimmed beard. His right hand was still clutched to his chest, and his mouth, bloody and missing several teeth from hitting the desk, was set in a permanent scowl. Seemingly satisfied, the newcomer turned its gaze back to the Usianian aristocrat.

“Are you alright?” the newcomer asked, stepping forwards, but the other only cocked his weapon.

“Considerably better than him,” he replied coldly, nodding towards the body.

The newcomer skirted the desk with its rapidly dying ornament. The aristocrat moved as well, squinted after it. With his eyes adjusted again, he could make out the sigil of the Emperor's Guard on the newcomer's cloak— an argent, many-rayed sun.

"Well, Prince Kale!" the newcomer said. "I hope you're satisfied."

The Prince dropped his weapon and swore. "Nocix," he spat. "What are you doing here?"

"I might ask the same of you," the guard replied affably. "You might thank me for saving your life, my Lord."

Prince Kale scowled, chin raising after the custom of irritated nobility. "I was doing perfectly fine on my own, thank you," he said, rather stiff. "Had I wanted your help, I would have requested it *before* leaving the Palace. If I were to thank you, it would be for adding another foreign crisis on top of the list that I already have to deal with."

The guard listened in a silence that was more considering than docile. It nodded once at the end of the Prince's rebuke.

"You're welcome," it said.

Prince Kale grunted in incredulity and set himself forward to examine the Ishæn, studiously ignoring his self-appointed savior. The Ishæn was dead, or quickly on his way to being so. Grimacing, the Prince dragged the Ishæn off the desk by his collar; the remaining maps and papers on the desk were smeared with thick red before fluttering to the ground. The guard watched him impassively.

"I wouldn't—" it began, with a glance at the tent flap, but at that point gravity took over and the body hit the ground with a earth-shuddering thump. The Prince jumped back from the body, ashen. After a moment, he approached again. He looked even paler than before as he bent over the body, as if his visage were a mirror reflecting the dead face below him. The Ishæn's eyes were still open, widened with surprise and frozen in accusation. Avoiding his gaze, Kale pulled delicately at the folds of the Ishæn's robes, searching.

The guard glanced over its shoulder again, featureless in its black mask.

"Kale," it said. "We need to leave."

The Prince frowned slightly but did not look up. He was too intent in his task to notice the familiarity of the tone, not to mention the fact that a guard had been dangerously close to giving *him* an order.

"I suppose you've alerted all the *elyards* from here to the Gates," Kale noted. He was not completely oblivious, after all.

"Of course not," the guard replied, with an odd note in its voice. Was it smugness? "But we need to leave before they get suspicious."

Kale didn't move. When the Guard was not looking, he tucked several items into his cloak. When the Guard turned back around, he gave up his search with a feigned grunt of disgust. He stood looking at the body for another long moment; then with a surprisingly tender gesture, he pulled Ishæn's scarf over his open eyes, and folded Ishæn's jewelry-laden arms across his chest. He ruined the effect a second later by jumping away, shuddering and retracting his hands from the body as if they burned him through his gloves. The guard started at the sudden movement but, amazingly, retained its silence. The Prince Kale brushed himself off as if nothing had happened, straightened the fastening of his cloak, and unhooked his mask from his belt. He slid it over his face and then paused, looking around the deadened dwelling with his now featureless gaze. Apparently satisfied, he brushed past the waiting guard.

"Let's go," he commanded.

*With cries they came, and shrieked of death
a thing unknown to verse or age
The glories of the river
unleashed; unbound
Of time and revolution*

1

Virtually the entire Empire was contained between the obsidian walls of the White City of Usiana. The inky gates provided a stark contrast to the white-marble-and-granite splendor that gave the city its identity. It sat upon tors, great pillars of stone, in a gorge that was a good fifty leagues at its widest point and twice as long. All the land belonged to the Empire, even if most of it was empty space and inaccessible cliffs. Far to the Northeast, in what had once been the Carotine Kingdom before its annexation into Usiana, the white granite finally dropped, straight and sheer, to the sea. For the nobles of the White City, the sea was an unimaginable thing, far less material than the darkness of the Aybss at their feet. No one had ever survived the attempt to measure the depth of their pillared home. The gorge existed as an inky chasm embracing the pale stalks of the City—the Underworld, manifest.

Down there, in the darkness, lurked creatures that howled louder than the wind and that feasted on flesh. The Usianians did not know exactly what they were, but called them River Glories, a name derived from a faerie tale's ancient stanzas. Whatever they were, they were not simply the products of imagination—the last dozen explorers who had rappelled into the chasm had been nothing more than torn and bloody carcasses when they were pulled back up. The Abyss was real, and Usiana was perched atop it.

Not all was harsh and dark, however. In the center of the city-state was the Citadel, a great fortress that contained within its blue-veined walls the Emperor's dwelling place: the Palace Anaedhin. Built on the widest of the tors, the citadel was the stunning centerpiece to the Empire, and the Palace sat as a jewel atop it. Bridges flew out from the citadel to every pillar in range, like spindly spokes on an uneven wheel. Gates, walls, open courtyards, throne rooms, observatory domes, and countless dwellings graced the many streets within the walls of the Citadel, all made of pure, white marble and softly grained granite. Upon the Palace itself, minarets spiraled up in miniature imitation of the foundational tors, tipped with glossy onyx.

And nowhere was the Palace simply stone. Innumerable diamonds, sapphires, and opals were embedded in the bleached marble, winking contemptuously at the stars above. Entries and exits, large and small, were guarded by gates of beaten gold and silvery-blue adamant. In the inner courts, where the stretches of white marble would have been too dazzling for mortal eyes, chips of lapis lazuli and platinum formed intricate mosaics. More beautiful than even precious jewels, however, were the gardens; courtyards overflowing with hardy vines and trees, birds clinging to their stunted branches; flowers, of every sort and season, flourishing under great domes of glass and crystal; trickles of clear water flowing into shallow pools and basins, their music almost hidden under the ever-present howl of the wind. There was tenacity to the beauty, the harshness of land evident even in this most lavish oasis of human make; and it was here, on the edge of the Citadel in a cramped dustroom, that the Prince and his guard were hastily changing back into their formal wear before re-entering the Palace.

“Haven’t you someplace better to be?” Kale sulked, quite finished with both his rescue and his rescuer. He had placed his mask carefully on the granite block that served the dust-rooms as

benches, and was pulling off his scarf with unnecessary finesse. The guard gave a bark of laughter, glancing over its shoulder at the Prince.

“You realize the irony of that question, yes?” it asked. There was a bite in its congenial tone.

“I’m sure no one notices I’m gone,” Kale replied, in a voice that was both a challenge and a resignation to his fate as the forgotten son of the Emperors. He shook out his scarf and folded it in a practiced movement. The Guard shook its head, with as much exasperation as can be indicated by a figure completely masked and cloaked in black robes. Not, really, that it would have expressed an abundance of emotion in any case; the Imperial Guard, plural, were notably plain of expression while on duty. The Guard had other curiosities as well, the most striking of which was their complete androgyny; their hair was worn either shaved or long and braided, their voices were unanimously low, their forms were clad in thick scales of armor and enveloping cloaks. Most Guards began training near their tenth year, and never seemed to develop any signs of their sex. Some speculated that they were vessels of Taerix, the God of War; others that performed demonic rituals giving them the strength of River Glories; a few believed that they were not human at all.

None of these were true, the truth being, as it often is, both simpler and more fantastic, but they did provide the Guard with a great amount of amusement. Nocix had grown up with the two youngest Usianian Princes, and neither remembered if it had been boy or girl. It hardly mattered; Nocix’s informal role was the voice of reason, which was not a profession better suited to one sex or the other. Kale was surprised it had done something as impetuous as leave the Palace to look for him. That being said, it did not seem particularly pleased. It pulled down its hood, then jerked off its scarf and flung it somewhere in the vicinity of the bench. A second later, its porcelain mask scratched and juttered across the granite with a stomach-cringing *squee*.

“I can *feel* you disagreeing with me, Nocix,” Kale spoke up wearily. “If you cannot comport yourself in suitably reserved manner, you might as well say what you’re thinking. I take it you think I’m wrong, and the court might actually look around from their gossiping long enough to notice that the Prince Kale is not among them?”

“Well, obviously you’re wrong,” the guard affirmed with a surprisingly complacent air, “because *I* noticed you were gone; and if I noticed, then at least half the court must have done so long before.”

Kale snorted, and contented himself with frowning at his coat clasps. As much as he appreciated Nocix’s notice, the guard was, ultimately, a servant; observation was his occupation. Cloak shed and hung on the wall-hook behind him, Kale went to tackle his jacket buttons when realization struck him like a stone to the gut. He spun around just as the guard turned, too, hands midway through brushing out his bronze hair. The voice, no longer muffled by the mask, was not the guard Nocix’s at all, but—

“Træson!” Kale hissed in horror. “What the devil are you...you’re supposed to be at the revel...you—you eShœn’i *síther daí*—” he fell speechless before he could make it through the bilingual insult. Træson, his older brother and Crown Prince of Usiana. The impetuosity of the ‘rescue’ suddenly made perfect sense.

“Funny,” Træson remarked. “I believe I said the *exact* same thing when I discovered *you* were missing. Down to the stammer, even. The advisors thought I was having a fit, I think.” He was smiling, but his voice had progressed from an edge to a full-drawn blade.

“Træson—”

“You didn’t think I’d leave you to run around the Empire, did you? Can you imagine how devastated the Emperors would be if you had been murdered on the very night you returned from your apprenticeship?”

“So *you* came to find me.” Kale shook his head. “You do realize the irony of that, don’t you?”

Træson was too furious to take heed of such logic.

“Your own turning, Kale! You thought no one would notice if you went on a suicide mission on *your own turning*!”

“And did anyone notice?” Kale snapped, undoing his last button viciously. “Aside from you, did anyone care that I was missing? Or were they too busy stuffing their painted faces with celebratory fare to give a flying whit whether or not I was there?”

Træson pulled the golden wire by the door to call for a servant, then turned back to his younger brother with raised eyebrows.

“That,” he admonished, “was unkind.”

Kale shrugged out of his jacket without taking off his outer coat and hung it on the cloak hook; traversing outside required many layers. His anger had dissipated with his outburst. “It is true,” he asserted, and almost added, ‘isn’t it,’ but that sounded petulant even in his head. Anyway, Træson was no longer listening. Kale cut his eyes at his older brother, who was ringing the servant again with a consternated scowl. Træson was too honest altogether, Kale decided. Had he not been caught so entirely off-guard by the interruption in his plans, Træson’s disguise would never have held up for as long as it had.

“Damn it to the Abyss,” Træson grunted, giving the wire a glare of personal affront. With the thick stone walls of the fortress, the wire system had been created so that servants could be signaled without a lot of vulgar shouting; unfortunately, the bells that signaled the servants were inaudible on the other side of the wall, which meant it was impossible to tell if the wire was broken or the servants just inattentive. Knocking also being pointless, a second wire ran into each room with a its own bell, to give the nobleperson warning of the servant’s approach. The bell in the dustroom remained conspicuously silent. Træson folded his arms.

“If we don’t get back to the revel soon, the courtiers will get suspicious,” he was muttering. “Can’t afford people talking...not now, after everything...”

A twitch of tension formed in Kale’s jaw, and he busied himself with folding his shed clothes and laying them neatly on the bench. He had planned to change into servants garb before sneaking back to his rooms, where his valet was undoubtedly still waiting, and probably growing anxious. There should have been no need for fuss. No one would have noticed or worried. Except Træson had had to come looking for him, and *now* he had the gall to worry about the consequences? The way he was carrying on to himself, one would have thought the situation was entirely Kale’s fault.

“After everything I’ve been through, forced to shoot an e’Shæn chieftain,” Træson said, and that was all Kale could take.

All you’ve been through? Kale seethed; but aloud he said, dryly, “I would commend you for your impeccable aim— if my goal had been murder.”

“I make my own decisions,” Træson muttered, half-drawing his short-sword and then shoving it irritably back in its sheath. He did not seem to realize he had done it. Kale tilted his head in a shrug. He was back on the high ground, and that was satisfaction enough.

“It’s too late for regrets,” he said. “And, technically, you didn’t do anything unsanctioned by Usianian law. He would have killed you.”

“After we broke into his camp,” Træson reminded, obviously fretting now, and Kale smiled.

“After *you* broke into his camp. There was no ‘breaking’ involved until you showed up. This is going to create a lot of trouble for me, you know. I had hoped to make my debut a little less noticeable. But your involvement won’t cost you, of course— a perk of being heir to the Empire. You’re infallible.”

“Oh? Where does that put you?”

“Oh, my dear, dear brother, your concern is so touching. But, as you know;” Kale’s passionless smile widened, and something dark and dangerous flickered in his eyes, “I can take care of myself.”

At that moment the door was pushed open with a familiar scrape of stone-on-stone. Before he knew what was happening, Træson was thrown backwards by his brother. He grunted as he hit the stone table squarely across the back of his knees and then crumpled over with thud, sending a plume of dust into the air. Kale had already whirled around to face the door, a flash of gold in his hands. The door paused, and then the shaved head of a Guard poked into the room. It took in the two half-dressed Princes, one sprawled on the ground with dust settling in his hair, the other standing over him defensively with an aura of blue-gold light around his raised hands, before sidling inside and closing the door after itself.

“Ouch,” Træson was complaining, or trying to between gasps for breath.

“Take...care...of...myself...my *ass*...nearly killed me...”

The Guard bowed to the younger Prince, and Kale dropped his hands, a little regretfully. The blue-gold glow disappeared.

“I didn’t need a demonstration, Kale,” Træson continued, pulling himself up painfully and brushing dust from his hands. “Prince Kale,” he corrected, flushing and switching into formal speech at the sight of the Guard. Then his face relaxed again.

“Nocix!” he greeted in surprise. The Guard bowed again, smiling a little. “I did not expect *you* here. After all. You could have just as well sent a servant. But good of you to join us. Are the bells not working?” He was still rather out of breath.

“I didn’t check,” Nocix admitted. “And there are a surprising number of dustrooms occupied at the moment. It took me a few tries to discover which one your Lordships had appropriated for this little adventure, and then I had to convince the cloak attendants to let me in. It was all surprisingly difficult without a uniform.” The guard looked meaningfully at the sun embroidered articles of clothing strewn over the floor and table.

“The use of which I appreciate greatly,” Træson assured the guard, and made a magnanimous gesture. “You may have it back now, if you wish.”

“Only as long as you don’t want to wear it to the revel,” Nocix agreed with almost convincing sincerity. “Otherwise, I have managed to acquire some of your festive wear. I hope it is adequate.” The guard spoke with the familiarity of common years; only a few months older than Træson, the two had been raised together, and later were apprenticed to the same Warden. There had never been any doubt as to the hierarchy in their friendship, and so it had bred no ill-feeling. For many years Nocix had served as Træson’s official *gaeta*, which meant the dubious honor of accepting the Prince’s punishments; but at Træson’s coming-of-age, Nocix had graduated to Cup-Bearer, testing meals for poison and keeping watch as the head of Træson’s personal Guard. It was a bittersweet promotion.

“You have my undying gratitude,” Træson said with honest feeling, encompassing in his thanks, as always, a little bit of the debt he would never be able to pay back. It lay between them, and even such a slight mention chafed them both; Nocix’s jaw tightened, and there was a pause, during which Kale became suddenly consumed with unknitting his shoes’ bindings.

“And you have your uniform, as soon as you can help me get out of it,” Træson continued quickly. He grinned. “It itches.”

“The glories of the Imperial Guard,” Nocix said with a straight face. Feeling as if Træson had been granted forgiveness for his blunder, the whole room relaxed. Nocix nodded once in acknowledgment and then helped the Prince pull on his jacket. Kale slipped out of his shoes and looked up.

“With your leave, I will retire to my own chambers to prepare,” he announced, edging towards the door. “Wendi will be wondering what is taking me so long, and I would not want her to have to come looking for me. She is undoubtedly very busy with her responsibilities for the revel, and I

would not want to inconvenience her any more than necessary.” He gave his brother a pointed look and turned away.

“You do *not* have my leave,” Træson retorted, ire raising again. He jerked forwards with such violence that a brass button almost came off in Nocix’s hand. “Do you really think I’m going to let you out of my sight after you decided to take an excursion *OUTSIDE THE EMPIRE?*”

“Careful, Traes; a servant might hear,” Kale said coolly. “As I repeatedly have told you, I had everything perfectly under control.”

“That tent looked like a war zone, Kale.”

“Not my doing.”

“Well, I’m certainly convinced,” Træson said sarcastically. “And given the e’Shœn’s relationship with the Carotine rebels at the moment, that whole nest practically *is* a war zone. Besides the outskirts of the Carotine itself, you could hardly have chosen a more dangerous place. I am speechless with disappointment.”

“Apparently not.”

“For one single day, could you refrain from doing something likely to get you killed?”

“The last five years confined to the Temple weren’t enough for you?” Kale asked. His tone was almost polite, but his hands were flickering with light again.

“Træson,” Nocix interrupted, and jumped when Træson turned his violent scowl on it instead. “I imagine this argument might be better dressed?” it offered, holding out a pair of ivory-brocade breeches.

“Right,” Træson said, snatching them from the guard’s hands as if his younger brother was their fault. “Nocix, you’ll have to serve as our valets for the time being.”

“Absolutely not,” Kale said levelly. He took a step back and crossed his arms. “Wendi is waiting for me. I need to clean up before presenting myself to the entire court.”

“You’ll have to make do here,” Træson replied shortly. “There’s no time. We’ve already missed evening meal.”

Kale stiffened. “I am not changing in here,” he said in equally clipped tones.

“You don’t have a choice.”

“Of course I do. It’s my turning, as you keep reminding me. The dancing, at least, cannot start without me.” There was a touch of arrogance in his voice, and he increased the perception with a defiant lift of his chin. Before Træson could say anything, Nocix jumped in again.

“There’s not much you can do to stop him while you’re half-dressed. At least Your Highness should be wearing pants before running through the Halls.”

Træson’s jaw twisted, but he conceded. “Of course,” he said with a deep breath.

Now that Træson was no longer harping on him, Kale allowed himself to relax a little. Nocix was describing the missed feast in vivid detail and Træson was swearing melodramatically as he tripped over his breeches. It was nice, Kale reflected, after his time in the Temple, just to have the presence of others in the room who were brusque and unconcerned with reverence. Even the chafe of the others’ crassness on his nerves was stimulating after so long amongst demure voices and bowed heads.

But to strip himself in this dusty room, in their company, was inconceivable. Fortunately, one of the walls had a large panel of polished obsidian, so he could at least order the rest of his appearance. He took a long, critical look at the dark surface, then stepped up and placed his palm flat against the surface. The inky stone rippled with lighter shades, until it was difficult to focus on the stone itself and not at what was reflected in it. When it was near silver and Kale could clearly make out the lighter streaks of green in his mirrored eyes, he stepped back in satisfaction. He retreated back to the granite bench where Nocix had laid a velvet bundle of tinned paints. Kale

opened several and checked their color on his hand. It was then that he realized that he had no idea what constituted a correct color; he had never had to make the choice before.

Hesitating, he looked up at the other two, raised his hand, was about to ask their opinion; and then a streak of stubbornness struck him and he made the decision himself. He had watched after himself for almost five years, after all; and it was unlikely they knew any more of paints than he did. What he did know was himself, and so he chose a shade close to his own coloring. Once his face was properly coated in the glittering stuff, he turned his attention back to his horrendous jacket. He turned it over in his hands with a look of horrified fascination on his face, pulling back ribbing and creases, before laying it carefully back on the table again and backing away. Under the pretense of examining his hood-flattened hair in his mirror, he watched Træson surreptitiously over his shoulder.

As soon as he was sure that his brother's attention was elsewhere, Kale released the clasp of his outermost cloak and vanished completely into thin air. The cloak crumpled to the ground with a barely a sound; but, as if he had been waiting for Kale to disappear all along, Træson cut off in the middle of what he had been saying to Nocix, scooped up an open tin of powdered paint, and flung its contents in the general vicinity of the door. The hazy contours of the younger Prince was momentarily outlined in the resulting cloud, and there was a satisfying outburst of curses. The outline brushed at itself, still swearing and coughing. Træson looked around for another tin of powder, then settled for a handful of dust from the floor.

"Alright, alright! Stop!" Kale snapped. His fallen cloak was picked up by an invisible hand and swung around to fall on abruptly visible shoulders. "Enough!"

"Don't do that again," Træson warned.

"I'm supposed to be presentable," Kale grumbled, brushing at his front again. Turning to examine his appearance in the mirror, he found his black hair glittering and dusky with powder. There was a movement behind him, and he turned to eye Træson suspiciously. "Traes. Put the dust down."

"Are you going to do that again?"

"No, for god's sake!" There was a pause, and then Træson grinned triumphantly.

"I haven't done that since we were ten," he said.

"Also on my turning, I believe," Kale remembered, half fond and half bitter. "One of your more clever moments, that dust trick. There were less sparkles, last time."

He turned to Nocix, who seemed to be fighting laughter. Kale cleared his throat.

"I've been meaning to ask, Nocix; nothing untoward happened to the Empire in our absence, I hope?" he asked dryly. "I assume Træson left you to look after things while he rescued his helpless little brother?"

Træson sent him a look Kale recognized from years of use in the presence of servants and courtiers. Kale shrugged in response and picked up his reveling clothes with a sigh. They were a truly impressive shade of crimson, the color of blood harvested close to the heart.

"Nothing to report," Nocix announced, tactfully ignoring the brothers' glances. "I did think the Marchioness Shaese of the Northern Tors and the Count Anfaen of the Southern City would come to blows for some minutes. It was exceptionally diverting."

Træson looked half-turned at the news, pulling his jacket out of Nocix's hands. He burst into a shout of laughter. Kale looked up from his clothes, distracted and surprised.

"Did she insult his mother?" Træson inquired, trying to gain control over his features but obviously picturing the scene with relish.

"Marchioness Shaese do something so straightforwardly insulting? Of course not. I believe she told him that she especially liked his hat tonight, and he grew rather livid."

"Well, was it a nice hat?"

Nocix smiled ruefully. “He wasn’t wearing one.”

Træson snorted again, and then gave in to another gale of laughter. Kale’s lips twitched despite himself. He had passed Baron Anfaen on his way out of the City that evening, the Baron just arriving for the revel. Apparently, he had refused to wear a scarf over his revel wear, making do with only a hat. He had arrived at the palace windburnt to a lovely shade of fuchsia, except for his conspicuously bald pate.

“Really, Træson; the man can’t help his face,” Kale reprimanded, deadpan.

“If Baron Anfaen insists on going out with no scarf, he deserves to look like there’s a pale nest on his head,” Træson said.

When Nocix had succeeded in fixing a short cape to his epaulets, Træson turned to his brother.

“Well?” he asked. Kale frowned, and held up the clothes.

“Red,” he said, in way of explanation.

“He’s apprenticed for five years, and he becomes practically ascetic,” Træson grumbled to Nocix.

“No one wears red to a revel,” Kale protested.

“Except the host. Which is you, if you’d forgotten. Happy Turning.”

Kale sighed, and turned around to finish dressing in relative privacy

Nocix led the way into the hall, watching out for anyone who might give them more than a glance. Træson walked beside the guard, continuing to chuckle as his companion reported more court gossip. The sound bounced from stone to stone in the empty halls. It was unnaturally quiet. Any servants that might have been going about their business on a normal night were currently assisting in the palace proper; in the banqueting halls and main ballroom, and in the rooms of the courtiers and guests. Kale felt their presence all the more with it gone, the same way the sudden moments of still in the ever-present wind felt particularly dangerous. It was oppressive, unnatural. There was too much room to think—everything rose up at once to fill the soaring, empty arches, fled to the shadows behind the pillars in the abandoned halls. The stone, which could make an army of a single person, now seemed to swallow sound instead. Their footsteps were too loud and not enough.

Træson glanced back every other minute, lips twisted in vague irritation--no doubt he was making sure his little brother had not crept off again, on some other mischievous scheme to make Træson’s position even more difficult than it already was. He need not have worried. Kale smiled grimly, and rubbed the pad of his thumb over one of the rings he wore over his gloves. He had no further intention of leaving the Palace tonight. After all the trouble he had gone through to retrieve it, the ring seemed such an innocuous object; it fit him perfectly, as if it had been measured to his hand, and Træson had not even noticed that he was wearing it. Simply but elegantly made, the ring was silver and inset with a square, flat ruby—it was the kind of jewelry which is instantly impressive for its make, but not otherwise memorable. This was what he had been looking for, this tiny thing. Just when he had been growing truly worried, he had recognized the glint of it on the Ishaen’s hand in the sunlight; had cut it from the Ishaen’s stiffening finger. It did not occur to Kale to regret the theft; after all, it had not been the Ishaen’s to own. No doubt it had been considered a war trophy from the Carotine rebellion four years ago. Once, however, it had been substantially more; it was the mark of rank that had adorned the hand of the Prince Tain, one of Træson and Kale’s four elder brothers whose lives had been claimed in the rebellion.

It had been their deaths that had led to Træson’s position; his unexpected ascent from half-forgotten, second-youngest-of-six to Crown Prince, heir to an Empire. Kale had risen reluctantly

with him. Those first years, both Træson and Kale had remained in their respective apprenticeships; it was only a year ago that Træson had celebrated his twenty-first turning, only to be rushed immediately from the Guard to instruction in the running of an Empire. Kale expected similar treatment, if not quite so urgent. After all, he was not nearly as personable as his older brother, and with a few serious quirks besides. He had amounted to little before his four brothers' death, and he did not imagine that the Empire had so completely changed as for him to be fully acceptable now. Not until Træson died would Kale be fully recognized; but if that was the price of recognition, Kale preferred to stay in the shadows. He had grown to like it there, after all.

During one of his visits to the Temple, Træson had made a point of getting Kale on his own in order to explain the how things had changed in the wider world. If the Crown Prince was to be believed, the Empire had suffered a huge upset over the course of the last five years; loyalties changed, technology advanced, borders strengthened in light of the Carotine rebellion. Skeptical always, Kale had sent out scouts of his own, to find what he expected: as much as things had changed while he remained cloistered in his apprenticeship, the essentials had remained the same. The people were still obstinate and capricious, the City was still standing. Træson had suffered an upsurge in popularity, but that was only to be expected. The Empire was still, and solid, and enduring, despite the howling of the wind.

In true Usianian fashion, the names of the lost Princes had faded within two years of their deaths. Dæslin, Talondæ, Tain, Condrix—their memories had eroded in the consciousness of the people, like monuments left to the elements. The rebellion in the Carotine had been postponed, not averted, but many innocents had already died. The four eldest Princes had fallen without honoring their names, and so their names had been forgotten.

But Kale had not forgotten. After five years, yes, his brothers' faces were blurred and ragged around the edges, but they had not had much presence in his life to begin with. Except for Tain. The memory of Tain was bright and hard, and Kale avoided looking directly at it if he had any choice. Like Kale, Tain had been dark-haired and emerald-eyed, and, like Kale, he had been a sorcerer. They were—had been—the only two in their immediate family. What natural power they possessed was balanced by sorcery's lack of respectability; it was not a skill, because it could only be used by some particular members of some particular family, it was not flexible, because each sorcerer could develop power over only one thing, which they did not choose, and it was not, over all, all that more useful than anything that could be done by anyone else. In his more carefree days, when it was a matter of respectability and not security if he escaped his Guards and went roaming through the City, Kale had once heard a man in a pub say that sorcery had no more use than a man being particularly skilled at shaving with dull knives. Certainly he would not have to sharpen his blades as often, but what use was such a talent to society as a whole?

Admittedly, the man had spoken low, lest someone of sorcerous blood should overhear. Despite the contempt it generated, sorcery was a type of power, and it was a power not everyone had access to, and was thus menacing. Those who were not sorcerers, even family members, left such things well enough alone. And so Tain and Kale had been thrown together as mentor and student, as if, by being older and *fæ*, Tain was automatically the best person to guide the learning of his brother. Their abilities had been different, of course; even between brothers, they always were; but such an argument assumed that any normal Usianian cared to know the differences between sorcerers.

Kale rubbed at the ring again, and reflexively allowed a blue-gold glow to form around his hand. It was comforting, like keeping a light touch on the arm of a friend; or, as Kale had seen guards and now Træson do, keeping a hand near their sword hilt at all times. It was not so much being prepared for action as it was knowing the power was still there, accessible. Long before he had ever understood the need for the comforting presence of friend or weapon Kale had indulged this

habit, so that now it was unconscious most of the time. The glow around his hands trembled, and sparks lit up briefly like from the midst of a dying fire. His...power (dare he call it that?) made people nervous. Even if conjuring little beads of light could not actually do any harm, just as touching a hilt is a long step from drawing the sword, it was a reminder of his abnormality. The only one who had ever encouraged the use of sorcery had been Tain, and he... Kale erupted in shivers and his glow went out completely. Tain was dead, he reminded himself, and took a deep breath. The ring was the proof of that. His brother's ring was on *his* hand, now. Tain was dead.

The side hall through which they were striding opened onto a greater Hall with a flourish of desert vines carved into the stone frame. They traveled quicker now, turning right down the Hall, flanked on either side by rows of columns, two deep. The light was brighter here, but the space itself loomed overhead. It was too quiet. Kale became aware that his hands were trembling, and he gripped harder around the square edges of the ring. It had been hard enough during his apprenticeship in the Temple, with their sacred spaces and demurely lowered voices; but at least there he had the wind, however familiar a sound. Here, near the center of the Palace, there was not even that, let alone the murmur of a prayful crowd. He was cowed by the immensity of the Hall, made tiny and vulnerable, not in the way of humility or awe but in blind and trembling panic. Without distraction, he thought too much, and too largely.

In stories, it was always images that came before the minds of heroes stories, memories as vivid as the day they were made, but Kale saw no hallucinations in the dim light. He felt them, though. Gradually, it became too cold - the air burrowed through every layer of his clothes to nest in his skin. His mouth went dry, and he coughed into his sleeve until Træson looked back at him again. Gritting his teeth, Kale gave his brother a conciliatory wave, and tried to pretend he could not feel sweat beading along his hair and neckline.

Worse of all, a rhythm began pummeling against the inside of his chest, steady as a discipling lash, until he felt as if he must be rocking forward and back with each blow. After several minutes, the rhythm had traveled up to throb against his eyes. Only after he gave in and listened to it did he realize that it was his heartbeat.

But no—the sound was vibrating through the walls, echoing down the passages. Ahead of him, Træson and Nocix finally fell silent themselves and listened as well.

“The drums,” Nocix said. Both of the princes stared at the guard. “You remember, Træson,” it prompted, and Træson gave a little start at the reminder.

“Yes, of course,” he said, a little distantly. The drums grew louder, until it felt like the stone was pulsing beneath their feet. Suddenly, all the hair on the back of Kale's neck stood up at once, and he whirled around. Nothing but the beat of the drum and the vaulted, blue-lit halls; but he would have sworn on the god's inscription that he had heard something. Like the rush of wind against a great wall, or the open-mouthed hiss of a noble lizard, the sound of air moving, distant and yet eminent. Like...voices. Thousands of voices raised all at once around the Palace's walls. The image came to him in a flash, from back when their brother Condrix had been celebrating his twenty-first turning: the Usianian streets crawling like a hive of horned nivlings, the dark cloaks of the citizens snapping in the wind, revealing bright inner linings like the flash of iridescent wings. Dark, veiled bodies swarming over the white stone, spilling out of doorways, jostling in the streets and alleys, scuttling over rooftops. A high, excited buzz in the air, cresting even above the howling wind, and then the shock of the drums, the inexorable beat, and thousands of voices taking to the air in a roar of fulfilled excitement...

Nocix was striding down the hall again; if the drums had begun, the revel was truly beginning; but Træson took one look at his brother and stopped dead.

“Are you alright?” he asked. For the first time that night, annoyance had left his face completely and he looked just as he had five years ago; young and somewhat helpless, with a crinkle

of innocent worry furrowed between his eyebrows. More than Træson's earlier fear and anger, the informal concern made Kale want to assure him that everything was taken care of already, and that he need not worry. Before, Træson had only been a Prince; now he was just an older brother. The familiarity was so strong and sudden it hurt.

"Of course I'm alright," Kale said. He brushed a hand through his hair in what he hoped looked like a vain gesture, and not one to calm his nerves. "Do I look poorly?"

"Yes," Træson said with a wry grin. "You're as pale as dust."

Kale blinked at him, and realized too late to return with a jest.

"That wasn't a compliment," Træson said, brows coming together again to belay his light tone.

"Træson, I am perfectly fine—" Kale protested, and then cringed back when Træson stepped towards him, hand raised. Træson paused, taken aback at his brother's reaction. Too late again, Kale tried to regain a regal bearing, brushing nonexistent wrinkles from his jacket and straightening his sleeves.

"*That's* what I mean," Træson explained gruffly. He grabbed Kale's shoulder to keep him still, and fixed the part in his hair. "You say nothing is wrong, and then you jump when I so much as look at you." He brushed off some dust that Kale had apparently missed, and then examined him critically.

"Would you believe I suffer from nervous excitement?" Kale offered, managing a grin. Træson's expression softened again. Kale controlled an inward lurch of disdain for his brother; Træson was simply too emotional, that was his problem.

"If tonight gets to be too much for you, you will let me know, won't you?" Træson asked. "I understand if there's too much...excitement... and I'm sure Nocix and I will be able to satisfy any questions from the court if you need to retire—"

Kale pushed by him, expression studiously blank. Enough was enough.

They caught up with Nocix at the end of the hall, the guard looking suitably bored as it waited by the Emperor's entrance to the Reveling Hall.

"Ready?" Træson asked. Kale nodded. Nocix gave them both a fleeting grin, meant to be reassuring, Kale thought, and nodded in turn to the gray-liveried guards on either side of the double doors. In unison, they bowed to Nocix and the Princes and then turned to press their hands against the single black rock in each wall. The glossy surface of the stone shone brighter, as if a flame was burning in its heart, and the doors swung outward.

There was no need for masks at a Usianian revel, though some wore them; everyone was nearly unidentifiable anyway. Women and men wore thick paint, accentuating their eyes with thick lines of kohl, their faces pasty and glittering with powdered stone. Those wearing masks were mostly guests from the Carotine or over the cliffs, though some of the less-wealthy Usianian wore masks out of necessity. Face paints of quality were expensive, and nothing less than the finest quality would dare be seen here, tonight.

Outside, night was falling at last, and celebrations were starting in earnest in the darkening streets. Round cræ lamps of variously colored glass were hung from their hooks over the doorways, the cæl inside them humming steadily as they burned. The drumbeat, inexorable, pulsed just too quickly to allow one's body to lapse comfortably into it; each time it fell was a shock, and it whipped the people into a frenzy. Swirling in and over all were the myriad scents of reveling food; heady, fragrant herbs, bread baking against the walls of outdoor stone ovens, garlic and fowl frying together in purified oils; the fragrances almost-visible in their pungency. For once, the evening air was warmed, hazy with so many oven-fires and so many people in the streets. Musicians began adding their own drums to the throbbing Palace drums, as well as flutes, lutes, harps, and voices. From across the bridge they could be heard as a high buzz somewhere in the back of one's consciousness. The tor's heights were lit like candles, winding up from the darkness.

Inside the Hall of Revels, where the powerful celebrated in ways of their own, it was as if the world turned upside down. Here, the abyss plunged up, not down, to a blackness that presumably hid the ceiling. Columns emerged from that pressing dark like drowned arms from black water, the stone long and pale and grasping for the floor. Around the columns were wrapped lattices, made of some black metal that neither chipped nor faded; and from them, starting some eight feet up and continuing another twenty, hung dozens of globular lights— more cær. They shone with a clear, blue-white luminance that somehow made the room seem darker, as if one had only to extinguish them and the stars would be visible overhead.

The floor was polished black marble, and in its chill surface the spots of lamp-light truly did look like stars, fuzzy-edged and sized variantly based on their distance from their source. On one end of the hall was a pair of massive, gold-plated doors; they were so massive, in fact, that they could not be opened, and instead there were smaller, if still substantial, doors for the nobles to use. The Emperor's door was located halfway down the Hall, protected by a black-lattice balcony atop a seven-step dais. The other end of the hall was curtained. Between the columns were smaller pillars of varying heights, though none were shorter than four feet nor were any taller than ten. There were no windows in the Hall, but all walls but the back were mirrored. It gave the illusion that the hall, and its occupants, went on forever.

And on this day, such an idea was not fully laughable. There was a feeling of fae power in the air; roiling in the blackness above, casting shadows in the innumerable mirrors. The Main Hall was no stranger to great crowds of murmuring courtiers, individuals drifting from one jeweled group to the next like scavenging birds; but the somehow, this particular revel made the familiar scene sinister. The talk was too loud and relaxed, more like a market square than an Imperial Court. A spirit of panicked gaiety was in the air, the sort of hysterical hilarity that usually accompanies a major shock to the system. Shocked they were, indeed. There was a sort of savage impropriety in a revel that rejected the stoic ideals of the Empire, and yet one had the sense that the revel was somehow necessary, fundamental to the continuation of life. There were rarely more than three grand revels a year, and celebrations such as the a Prince's twenty-first Turning occurred perhaps twice a decade.

Usianians were as comfortable with the uninhibited nature of revels as they would be with wire-walking over the Abyss. It was against their basic instincts; it was terrifying, and it was thrilling. As they milled outside the closed doors of the Hall of Revels, the courtiers' eyes were feverish, dark

with dilated pupils; their mouths were too wide and red in their glittering faces. Jackets and hose, gowns and shawls, had been bleached of the rich purples, blues, greens and crimsons of rank; now all was demure white. It was the color reserved for slaves, exiles, and the dishonorable dead; even servants wore gray, not white. But it was the night of the Prince's twenty-first turning; and on the night of a Prince's twenty-first turning all the court wore white in deference.

The woman's golden eyes flashed as she took in the waiting Hall of Revels, empty now but for a few moments more. She adjusted her cloak impatiently, and then reached down to her side, checking for the hard, thin plate that she knew was there. Knowing things had never been a great comfort for her—it was in the checking, the rechecking, the consistency, that things were truly known. She had been told to watch the Prince, and she had never once since receiving that order let her guard falter. It would not have mattered if he had been locked in a room in the middle of the tor with a window allowing her to observe his every movement; she needed not only to see, but to touch and smell and hear. Even then, she scarcely believed her own senses. Complacency put others in danger, and the golden-eyed woman made sure that the most dangerous thing around her person was herself alone. She was more insidious than complacency, more wicked than sharp-toothed words or steel darts. It was why she was so good at her job—what better tool to subvert danger than danger itself?

An outbreak of voices pealed out beyond the public doors—courtiers, freshly released from their day of drudgery, talking politics, excited for the revel—and they drew nearer, excited and echoic as they approached their relief for the evening. The woman slipped back, into the shadow behind a pillar, and took the object from her ivory cloak. It was a mask, of course; made to cover her eyes and forehead and droop down her right cheek as if her face had melted on one side. For all that it was a mask, it was nonetheless an expensive one; made of hardened cloth, black, and studded around the edges with white glass. She tied it around her face and waited for the crowds to pour in.

And so they did, nervously, as unsure as youths at their first love-making. Despite their frills and blossoms of lace, the nobles could not deny their own deathly pallor; the knowledge that on this day of festivity, it was as if they had been stripped of all their previous identities. They moved, ghostly, across the shining floor. The drumbeat, never ceasing, thrummed through the stone and glass, shivered in the women's skirts, trembled in the men's laughter. And, almost without realizing what was happening (the feeling that the hall was enthralled to some fae power increased) they began to dance. It was music-less, for now; a symptom of the room and the night, not yet imbued with the sensual purposefulness that it would gain with the addition of instruments. For now, the courtiers pretended that their movement was mere mingling, flitting from pillar to pillar, their circular dance like eddies of steam skimming still water. The whole effect was rather barbaric.

The Emperor's doors opened.

She didn't need to hide her gaze; everyone was staring at the Princes. For once, the Crown Prince did not enter first, but lingered in the doorway beside his ever-present guard. It was the Prince Kale who drew everyone's gaze. He could hardly help it; after so much white, the wine-red flush of his jacket had a refreshing thrill, like the smell of rain to one dying of thirst. For a second the Prince seemed taken aback by the sight of them all, stopping short only a few footlengths from the doors. Recovering quickly, he strode to the railing, cleared his throat. The Hall filled with the sourceless rustle of anticipation. He seemed to be fiddling with something in his hand, but she could not make out what it was.

"I thank you for your presence here tonight," he began. Despite all her self-training, she started—enough that the noble beside her gave her a surprised glance through her kohl-caked lashes. The Prince's voice was delicate, beautiful, its inflections subtle in such a way that they were

felt bodily more than acknowledged by the ear. She closed her eyes, focused herself. *Should have expected*, she thought briefly, *he's a sorcerer—but he looks so...what? Human?*

The thoughts passed by in less than a second; then she was analyzing. A typical beginning to an address, following the pattern of centuries. Nothing unusual, so far. She waited, unconsciously narrowing her eyes in expression of her resolution to remain focused.

“It is an honor to celebrate the turning of the years among such noble people: especially upon this my twenty-first turning, marking the expiration of my apprenticeship. I am sure many have wondered at the suddenness and abnormality of my choice of apprenticeship—” it had been quite a point of discussion; his sudden disappearance five years ago, and then the news that he had taken up apprenticeship in the Temple, which was perfectly respectable for a Prince but unusual because all of his elder brothers had trained with the Guard; but he managed to make it sound like old news, boring but necessary to address—“I do not intend to torture your curiosity. It is true that I was very ill for a time—” there was a murmur amongst the listening court— “and, during my illness, I was taken into the sanctuary of the Temple. During my interment, I grew fond of the priests who watched over me, and decided to spend my time learning from them.” He cleared his throat, dropped his gaze for a moment in a subtle but unmistakable demonstration of emotion, just enough that every courtier in the Hall would think themselves perceptive to notice—*no doubt, he's good*, she thought, appreciatively.

He continued on in a slightly hoarser voice, praising the Empire, thanking various nobles—the usual tenants of speechmaking. The tension in the hall was drooping slightly; after all, there was only so far that even a beautiful voice could carry the interest of too-familiar words. Then, just before the courtiers had lost interest enough to start commenting to each other, their attention was snatched once again. Without pausing in his smooth words, the Prince was unbuttoning his jacket! Was he going to undress in front of them? The impropriety! A stillness more poignant than words fell on the stunned court as the Prince removed his jacket so he stood before them in his shirtsleeves. He was thanking them again for their attendance. The Crown Prince had taken a step forward, obviously as nonplussed as the rest.

“I do not pretend to make speeches like the Prince Træson,” the Prince said, and at his acknowledgment the Crown Prince stopped where he stood, “and so I will not bore you with more words, when you are so fed and likely to fall asleep. Therefore, let us dance. But—” the woman saw his mouth turn up ever so slightly, and even from her small distance, recognized the mischief there; “I cannot help but feel rather foolish before you all. As an Acolyte of the Temple, I have learned the value of humility, even in a Prince—perhaps especially in such a one. As a mark of this, I will join you in garb, and for tonight, at least, we shall be equals. Brother,” he bowed to the Crown Prince, who was a millimeter from agape, then turned again to the Hall and touched a gloved hand to his jacket.

At first, it seemed nothing was happening; then, all at once, the jacket's color buckled, fluctuated, and was drawn out entirely. The Prince shook his hand as if removing a bit of cobweb, and the crimson splattered to the floor—but no—she stepped forward as the front row of courtiers took an automatic step back. The color hovered hazily over the floor, like a spot left from looking directly at the sun, before dissipating completely before her rapid blinking. The Prince had replaced his now-white jacket and was descending the dais. The courtiers milled about in temporary confusion, some looking merely surprised, some afraid, and some furious.

Now the Crown Prince was descending—it was impossible to tell into which category he fell, but she thought it likely to be all three—and where had the younger Prince gone? Vexed, she was about to dive into the melee when there was a trumpet blast from almost overhead. The muttering died down immediately. There was another trumpet blast—this one a third lower, from across the Hall. The musicians had appeared upon their pillars: trumpets, horns, flutes, lutes, harps, percussion.

As the music began, she sank back into the shadows. There was no use in fighting the crowd now, as they organized to dance. She would wait, and she would watch.

III

Usianian dance, at least the proper kind such as was hosted at the Palace, was remarkable for a number of reasons. To an outsider, the pattern was impossible to follow. Dancers swirled around the shorter pillars without ever quite touching them, the movements simultaneously complex and simple, steps as light and heavy as the wind. Hands gripped and released each other in time; bodies whirled, glittering, past one another, while the musicians played over their heads. The music itself had no discernible melody, and if it did, it was purely accidental. Trumpets and horns called to one another like battle cries, now triumphant, now mournful. Percussion wailed, cymbals shivered and purred. The harps, flutes, and occasional wordless voice provided a low, endless backdrop of sound. And, underneath it all, the drum pulsed on.

The people found themselves breathing in concord with each other and with the dance and were vaguely surprised, as if their bodies had joined in a song that they had only ever known in their sleep. Through this current the younger Prince moved naturally and yet separate, seeming to skim the surface where everyone else was drowned. Despite his trick with his coat, he was unmistakably *different*.

The moon had risen over the tors and time had long since melted to a slow, buttery crawl when Træson finally caught up to his brother. Kale was attending to the conversation of a group of spirit-sipping nobles, who were discussing petty Court politics in pompously serious tones. It was a mark of their involvement in the discussion that they did not greet the Crown Prince until he was practically upon them.

“...and if the Chamber think that they can simply ‘acquire’ excess resources without the express permission of the Court, they will soon find themselves violently disillusioned,” asserted the outspoken Marchioness Shaese, while an elderly Lord muttered “outrageous...outrageous” into his wine. “Your Imperial Highness,” she added, with such an air of continuing the same conversation that it took a few seconds for the Courtiers to realize that she was no longer addressing them.

“Prince Kale,” Træson greeted, as the others finally realized his presence and burst into a flurry of bows and murmured deference, “If you would honor me with your presence, there is someone I would like you to meet.”

“Of course,” Kale acquiesced quickly, and gave the circle a short bow. His voice was husky, and he coughed several times before he was able to deliver a parting comment of: “Thrilling, as always.” The Princes strode away with the Marchioness’ suspicious gaze following, hawk-like, after them.

“You shouldn’t antagonize them like that,” Træson said under his breath as soon as the Marchioness was sure not to hear. Kale’s lips twitched.

“Stop it, Traes...I’m already trying not to shudder in relief,” he replied. “*Gods*, I should hate to be windward of that woman. I suppose I should thank you for rescuing me.”

“One thanks out of two isn’t bad,” Træson said dryly, and this time Kale actually did smile slightly.

“Did you notice me suffering from afar, or do you actually have someone for me to meet?” he asked, so cheerfully that Træson could not help glancing at him warily. Kale seemed in legitimate high spirits, however, so Træson relaxed.

“Someone to meet, of course,” he replied, “though I’ll be damned to the Abyss if I know where she’s—ah!” He led the way around a pillar, avoiding dancers, and stopped a short ways before another group of nobles. A woman with hair nearly the same white-gold of her gown extricated herself from the group and flowed to meet them. She was smiling shyly as she looked curiously between the two. Her eyes were the color of the midday sky; a bright, pale color not found among native Usianians. She moved like water.

“Prince Kale, I would like to introduce to you to Her Luminance, the Duchess Elside; my...um... She is, well...” Træson struggled, and blushed under his paint. Kale cleared his throat. The Duchess looked faintly amused.

“Elsida; the Prince Kale,” Træson finished hurriedly.

“Your Luminance; *Tdero--tdin ach noro--iri-zen*,” Kale bowed over her hand. Despite his hoarse voice, the greeting was fluent down to the accent. The Duchess’ shy smile bloomed into brilliance, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

“I have heard so much about you,” she replied with the same nuance of speech, “but I did not know you spoke *entiri-so-ach nero tdisen*.”

“Not nearly so well as I should like, Your Luminance,” Kale inclined his head grandly. “I hope those who have spoken of me have not been over-zealous; I should hate to fall short of your information.”

“My informant holds you in high regard,” the Duchess confided with a fond glance at Træson, who had not yet recovered from his first blush and had no hopes of doing so now, “and I am glad to find he has not misconstrued your eloquence.”

“Nor has he over-exaggerated your beauty,” Kale returned with similar grace. “In truth, he did not do it justice; but the fault lies not with him, but in the capacity of words.”

“Yes, well,” Træson interrupted, still pink under his high collar and watching the Duchess and his brother exchange smiles with growing irritation, “I am pleased that you have finally had the opportunity to meet.”

“You have not been here long, Your Luminance?” Kale inquired.

“Less than a year,” she replied. “I arrived a few days after the Prince Træson’s Turning.”

“A pity you had to miss it.”

“The roads over the Cliffs were poor. There was much rain last year.”

“If you find yourself without entertainment in the coming days, I would hear about your travels. It is not often we have travelers from over the Cliffs, and none so eminent as Your Luminance. I am eager to know of your experiences of the Empire.”

“My brother aspires towards diplomatic occupations,” Træson explained. He put Elside’s arm on his, a little possessively.

“Not priesthood?” she asked with some surprise, looking between them. Træson winced apologetically, but Kale did not seem offended by the question.

“Certainly not, Your Luminance,” he said. He appeared unruffled, but his hand twitched and a couple of sparks drifted around his fingers.

“Were you not apprenticed to the Temple?” she persisted. Træson pressed her hand in his. She glanced up at his face, and seemed to realize she had crossed a line. “I am sorry - is that not the thing to say? I am not yet familiar to good convention.”

“Your assumption is understandable, and one I am sure many people are wondering,” Kale said. “One does not actually ask, however.”

Elsida’s lips flattened in consternation. “Then how—” she cut herself off with a chagrined smile. “I am sorry, again,” she said. “I ask many questions.”

“*Ach hiri en-tero*,” Kale said. “Curiosity is not a crime, Your Luminance.”

“*En-siro ten*,” she muttered under her breath, and Kale’s lips twitched. *It feels like it.*

“We shall have to expand our future discussion to include Usianian customs,” he said. She brightened, and then grabbed his hand and pressed it to her lips. Kale jerked back in surprise, but she had already released him and was pressed to Træson’s side like a shy child. Træson cleared his throat.

“I am sure many others desire your conversation, Prince Kale,” he said. “We should not like to horde your company.”

“My brother speaks truly; I must attend to other guests.” Kale gave them a full bow. When he rose, his words were written with the regret of their parting. “Træson; Your Luminance. *Zen ach noro; asch-nachschi en-ami*,” he added, and slipped back into the crowd.

The Duchess *hmm*-nd thoughtfully and slipped her arm through Træson’s. She was smiling gently, as if woken from a good dream. They watched the younger Prince as he moved between dancers and conversationalists, catching occasionally on the arms of well-wishing courtiers and detaching himself just as easily; a bit of flotsam in the stream of dance, moving with the current and yet, as always, separate and above. Træson wanted to speak, feeling as if he needed to explain something, but found his mind distressingly empty of suitable words. The Duchess’ presence was warm against his side. He found himself unable to look at her.

“He is very...” she began, and paused.

Træson hazarded a glance at her.

“Yes, he is,” Træson said, resuming his survey of anywhere but her.

“Charming,” the Duchess finished. Ah. That had not been the word he was expecting. He snorted, a little louder than he had intended, but she went on as if oblivious.

“Yes. Charming. Do you not think? And very different from you, as you have told me. A very intriguing man.”

Træson made a noncommittal noise. Was she saying that he, Træson, was *not* charming? Suddenly, the revel seemed a little flatter than it had before, and a simmering weight began to gather on his chest. He felt that it had been building, all through their conversation, until now it was heavy and solid, pressing against his lungs. *A very intriguing man?* The description caught him off-guard. Kale was- is - not a man, Træson wanted to argue: he’s my brother. My *younger* brother. Always getting us in trouble and trying to talk like he’s older than he is—and the elders always taken in, think him so brilliant...and he *was* a man, technically; but charming was surely going a bit far. Slippery, more like. Snake-like, really.

He realized Her Luminance was still waiting for him to say something and cleared his throat.

“Um. Yes, we’re very...”

“But his grammar was not *nearly* as good as he thinks,” she said suddenly, with a flippant shrug. There was a little shakiness in her voice, but she smiled up at Træson, and he felt some of the weight on his chest crumble away. He grappled for words and suddenly found himself, with relief, on stable ground.

“No? No, he is much better at languages than I,” Træson admitted, half-apologetic, half-buoyed. “I was never as interested in such things.”

“All the better,” she said. “I can teach you.” Her pale eyes glowed with the promise, and for a moment Træson was completely distracted. Had he been irritated? Why? He was vaguely aware that she was giving a dismissive wave in the direction Kale had gone.

“People like your brother, meaning no insult to him, are too sure of their own cleverness,” she said. “They are too proud to admit that they can make mistakes. I had much rather have a willing student.”

For a wild second, he wanted nothing more than to bend down and kiss her full on the mouth, damn anyone who saw to the Abyss. *No!* The mental shout was so strong and panicked he had to grit his teeth to keep it from spilling out of his mouth.

“Yes, I can see why you would feel...” he mumbled, without really being aware of what he was saying. “That,” he completed quickly, “why you would feel that.”

She was looking up at him again, her smile laced with sunshine from another land. She interlaced her fingers in his and gave him a knowing look, which he returned with a bemused half-

smile that let her know that he knew that she knew that he was struggling. She kissed his hand. Ingrained so deeply into Trason's being that they were no longer distinguishable from his self, the taut voices of etiquette awoke with a vengeance, feverish with horror as it fought to control his mounting need. That bit of his conscious that was still aware of the voices flinched back in chagrin and contrition, while protesting that it was the drumbeat, the closeness of the crowds, the dancing; the drumbeat, the drumbeat, the drumbeat...

"Shall you show me how to dance?" she asked, and the voices were overwhelmed in a flood of warmth.

"Yes!" he said, too quickly, and pulled her into the swirl of dancers. She was laughing at him with her wide, pale eyes. He did not care.

Kale, too, danced; with a number of illustrious women who he more or less recognized. They were all elegant, and pretty to varying degrees, and forgettable except in snippets. One was extraordinary only for the excessively large feather sticking from the knot at the back of her head; one for her fascination with something over his shoulder, no matter which way or who they were facing. Some danced like swallows diving on the wind, and some like swallows after being knocked into a turret.

Many he did not recognize at all, though less than he had expected after five years. After all, there were always delegations arriving from somewhere in the Empire, and the roads had been relatively peaceful of late. If the threats from the Carotine border had not dissuaded nervous visitors, it had kept them at the Palace—or that is what they would claim, when they were asked. But lingering courtiers might find themselves in a different hall this night, while the immediate Court and its guests celebrated away from the rabble. There had not been so many changes, nor, Kale suspected, would there be for probably several more decades. It was comforting to know that the world was so steady in these little ways.

By the middle of the night, Kale was over-warm and dehydrated, but flushed with success. He had re-familiarized himself with all of the most notable nobles, and a great number of the less notable (who were vastly more important in the long run.) His duties as host had allowed him to avoid most of the dancing, which he found he enjoyed far less than he once had. Additionally, the nobles willing to forgive a good number of eccentricities due to the somewhat mysterious circumstances of his apprenticeship. It was gratifying to know that his reputation had not suffered so much that he could no longer avoid questions without making himself unapproachable, nor had people changed so much that they were no longer interested in vague answers and roundabout explanations. He had forgotten how much he missed the ridiculous cat-and-mouse of political conversations.

That being said, he found he had lost some patience with it, as well. He was in the process of extricating himself from the dance, which took about two sets to accomplish when done with the proper amount of grace, when he turned and found himself standing next to a short, thin man with a remarkably sharp point of a nose. His black beard was glittering with the pale pink dust of his paints. Kale recognized him immediately; Maesha's was a face that had seen little change in all the time Kale had known him, which had been all of his life. He, and the woman Maesha was watching dance with narrowed eyes, were the Emperors' Chief Advisers. The two had been at odds before they had been born to this world, as the saying went; and if they did not end up madly in love, they would continue hating each other long after they had left this world, which would likely be at each others' doing. Kale was betting on the latter.

Out of the two, he found Raen a hair's breadth more tolerable, due mainly to the fact that while she despised sorcery, she did not advise active policies against it. Maesha, on the other hand, desired nothing more than to make sorcerers' lives miserable. He was more clever than Raen, but, thankfully, less imaginative. If they ever did come to friendly terms, the outcome would be disastrous. Judging by the expression on Maesha's face, however, that point was safely in the far, probably-nonexistent future.

Kale attempted to slip away before either could notice him, but at that moment Maesha turned with a huff and commented in his usual acerbic tone, "I've seen beautiful women dance, and women dance beautifully, and every so often the two at the same time; *that* looks more like a faen ritual, and she's the bloody sacrifice."

Kale's jaw tightened, but he greeted the Adviser with clear, if political, cordiality. "Adviser Maesha."

"Prince Kale," Maesha inclined his head in the smallest possible representation of a bow. "I thank the Gods you are recovered from your long illness."

"I was recovered some four and a half years ago," Kale corrected. "Though I appreciate your well-wishes, they are too late."

"It's never too late to thank the Gods," Maesha replied, with a sly glitter in his black eyes. "Surely you can agree, my Prince."

Kale said nothing, but his jaw tightened even more.

"Six months is long enough of a time," Maesha continued, examining his fingernails. "And right after your sixteenth Turning, too. Very mysterious. But that's simple coincidence, of course." He bared his teeth at Kale in what he supposed was meant to be a smile. Maesha's teeth looked dangerously sharp in the light of the Reveling Hall. "But here you are, five years to the day, in perfect health and home at last." His gaze was sharp, too; it cut at Kale's face, trying to dig out the secrets Maesha knew were there, under the skin. He motioned over a servant carrying a tray of long-fluted drinks in each hand, and one on her head.

"A drink to your health, Prince Kale," Maesha said, offering Kale a glass and raising one of his own. Kale watched him drink, and then replaced his full glass on another servant's tray and walked away. He did not know how much Maesha knew, or thought he knew, but he was not going to stand by and be mocked.

He worked his way around several knots of nobles pretending to discuss the dance and actually covering a range of topics from the fashion of some poor man who should have fired his tailor last season to rumors of a Carotinian army marching across the desert at that *very moment*. It was a testimony to the amount they had already drunk that their conversations remained near as loose-lipped as before Kale joined them for his gratuitous comment—several even went so far as to challenge the Imperial position on the matter of Carotine refugees, though not in so plain of words, of course. Finally, though, he had made it to the back wall where a servant, in rare, black livery for easy recognition, directed him through an out-of-the-way arch and down a narrow passageway. A cloak was wrapped around his shoulders, a door opened, and Kale walked into the frozen night air.

The balcony was set back in the rounded wall, protected from the wind. He went to the railing and leaned against it, shivering as the heat of the Hall chilled on his skin. For a moment, he thought that the sounds of the revel had followed him out; but it was only the voices from the City below, wrapped in the familiar drumbeat. Kale took a deep breath and let it out again, resting in the fact that even after all this time he was not, as he had feared, become a stranger in his own home. Not any stranger than normal, anyway.

After a few more minutes of soaking up the City, Kale sent the guard for a carafe of water. Alone for the first time that evening, he allowed a real smile to break onto his face, small and tight.

Light danced suddenly around him, brilliant and golden, and he raised his palms in conquest of the night. The ruby on his hand sparkled in the glow.

“You failed,” he whispered, and his eyes burned with fae light. “I survived and your birthright is *mine*.” He twisted the ring from his hand, and then dragged off his tight gloves with his teeth. He needed to touch it, to know it was real, to *feel* the physical proof of his success. The jewel glittered dangerously as he examined it in his own light, the metal flashing silver. Fire burned in the ruby’s center, as if one only knew the correct word and it would burst forth to consume everything at its master’s command. Kale’s own light turned fiery as he turned it over in his fingers; sparks fell, hissing, from the aura around his hands, and the slight breeze that the architecture could not prevent swept them over the stone. But it was only a jewel, a bauble set in silver. Its touch was not fire. It was cool.

The feel of it against his bare skin acted as a depressant; Kale slumped suddenly against the railing, exhausted again, and his light waned. He was lying to himself if he thought he had won without sacrifice. What was he doing here, muttering his victory to himself? He pressed the ring absentmindedly to his lips, staring out into the night again. Could a war really be won if all but the final battle had been lost? The rowdy, laughing City was mocking and separate now. He had imagined it celebrating with him, when it was celebrating despite him. With a gesture of irritation at himself and everything Kale turned back to the door, and met the pale eyes of the woman standing in the doorway. His aura went out immediately, with a delayed jitter of shocked golden sparks.

“So that part is true, too,” she said before he could open his mouth. She stepped towards him, as graceful as she had been on the black dance floor, her expression so frank that it was completely unreadable. She cocked her head. “Sometimes I think the people here have *nothing* in their heads, they are so difficult to get a straight answer from. Is the Prince *agiri-tae-fa*, or is he not? Is it so hard to tell if a person is a sorcerer? I did not think so.”

Kale came back to himself with a start, and pulled his gloves on hastily.

“Duchess,” he began, but she shook her head.

“My name is Elsida,” she said. Her eyes were wide and pleading, her long, moon-colored hair off-set by the dark outside-cloak around her shoulders. Kale swallowed, and closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them, he was controlled once again. He half-smiled.

“Of course. Then you must call me Kale.” He glanced around the balcony, found a bench hidden in the shadow of the wall, and gestured to it. “Will you sit, Elsida? I imagine that you did not wander out here by accident.”

She did not move. “No, I did not. I—” she hesitated as the guard returned with Kale’s carafe of water. The Prince murmured something to the guard; it placed the carafe and a glass in the ledge inset in the wall, left again, and returned almost immediately with a bundle of cloaks which it arranged over the bench. Then it bowed to the two and retreated inside once more, closing the door after it. Kale went to the ledge and poured water for himself.

“Will you sit?” he asked again. She nodded once and did so, looking a little nervous now. He waited, and sipped at his water.

“Do you know,” she began slowly, “that since I arrived here a year ago, not a single person has spoken to me in my own language?” For a second they regarded each other in mutual surprise, and then Elsida pulled back. “I...I am sorry,” she said, “that is not how I meant to start, I...”

“*Tir ach be*, it is all right,” he murmured, and she burst into silent tears. After a moment, he sat down beside her. They remained like that for some time, she hugging her cloak to herself as tears flowed down her cheeks, he sipping occasionally at his water. Neither of them looked at each other.

When she had subsided, blotted the tears from her face and tucked her square of silk away again, Kale set his glass on one scrolled bench arm and turned to her with the air of a judge steeping his fingers and leaning forward in deliberation.

“Now,” he said, in her language, “what is it you wanted to talk about?”

She shivered and pulled her cloak tighter, so that just her hands showed pale against it. “Nothing, I suppose,” she replied, her smile belied by her miserable tone. “I just...wanted to hear the words of my people again. It has been a very long time, it seems, and it was so unexpected...I am not sorry to have tears because of this,” she added fiercely, but she turned her gaze away, staring out over the City lights.

“Are you so unhappy, Elside?”

She looked around again, startled. “No! No. It is just lonely, sometimes. When you greeted me *entiri-so-ach nero tdisen*...I had forgotten how good it was to hear my language in another’s mouth. But no, I am not unhappy. I am honored here, after all; Usianians are very curious about the lands over the cliffs. And your brother is very kind.” Her cheeks went rosy. “But you, Prince,” she continued, giving him shrewd look, “you do not seem very happy, either.”

He did not reply, and she pulled her cloak tighter, aware that she had crossed a line. After another minute he stood as if to leave, and she jumped to her feet as well.

“Kale,” she said quickly, and he turned, “your *neive*—it is light?”

“My *neive*,” he repeated, trying the word. “That is what your people call it?” She nodded, looking wary lest she had angered him. But he only said, “Yes, I suppose you could say that.”

She hazarded another question. “May I see?”

He stared at her for a long moment, and then the corner of his lips quirked up.

“You want to?” he asked. She nodded. He glanced at the door.

“Alright,” he acquiesced, “but we should go in soon. It is cold, and others will be wondering where I am.” And with a quick gesture, a spout of flame flared up between them, seeming to strike a point in midair before tumbling over itself. Kale held out his hand and the fire coalesced into a whirling ball, slowly glowing brighter and more white, until it was as if a miniature sun rested in the air over his palm. Had Elside been a small child, she might have jumped up and clapped her hands; even now, though she was much too refined for such activity, that same genuine excitement was still evident in her eyes. Kale covered the ball with his other hand, shrinking it, and then held it out toward the awed Duchess. She reached out tentatively.

“Will it burn me?” she asked. Kale shook his head.

“It’s just light,” he explained. “Producing heat takes much more energy, usually.” It was mostly true, at least; but he did not want to get into the mechanics of sorcery.

Elsida bit her lip and reached her hand into the ball of light. Her eyes opened wide and she laughed aloud, twisting her hand around in the glow. When she pulled her hand back again, the light remained against her skin. She examined it with wonder. Kale closed his hand and the light disappeared, leaving the night even blacker in its absence. Elside blinked, temporarily blinded. She heard Kale move past her, and the door open.

“Come,” Kale said quietly, “Let us return.”

IV

Kale had to lean his whole weight against the door in order to enter his chambers. It was barely three hours until sunrise on the ninth, and final, day of the revel. Wendi was drowsing in a chair waiting for him, but she jumped up at the scrape of stone heralding his entrance. Her call to attention was ruined by the fact that she was wavering on her feet, dizzy from rising too quickly.

“*An'cæl*—Your Highness,” she attempted to bow, and dropped back into her chair with a “*humpf*” as her knees gave way.

“Wendi, have you slept at all?” Kale asked, sounding as weary as she looked. She rubbed at her eyes and pushed herself back to her feet, careful to do so slower this time.

“I’ll take your jacket, then, *An'cæl*. Would you like me to heat stones for the steamroom?”

“Wendi.”

“All right then,” she sighed. She crossed her arms and gave him a stubborn, if furtive, look. “You know better than to think I would sleep on a watch, *An'cæl*.”

Kale gave a sigh of his own, and relinquished his jacket to her. “I told you I would not return until near daybreak. You should have slept.”

“*An'cæl* is right, of course,” she conceded mechanically, and he shook his head in resignation, too exhausted to argue further.

Wendi left to heat water for Kale to clean the paints from his face, allowing him to change on his own; a concession most servants would have been too respectable to allow. Her lack of traditional sensibilities was the main reason he had requested her as his valet, despite the mutters in Court at his hiring a Temple Acolyte for “personal use.” She had wanted to come along, however; even as an Emperor’s son, it was beyond his power to order an Acolyte to leave the Temple. Had Wendi not accepted the appointment he could have done nothing to force her service—but she had accepted, and so there had not been much her Superiors could do to stop her.

By the time Wendi reentered Kale was asleep, his hands folded over the bedcovers, as still and straight as a corpse. She ventured closer, until she could see the sweat trickling down his face, and his hands trembling even in sleep. She strode from the room as quickly as she was able without making noise, went straight to her own modest chambers. With an impatient hand she lit the *cær*, filling the room with a flickering light that grew to a steady, blue-white glow. As soon as it was bright enough to see she pulled aside the curtain to her single, granite cabinet, hopped up to the top of the stepstool and reached to the back of the highest shelf. An armful of variously-sized glass bottles emerged from the dark space, clattering dangerously against the stone. Only a few actually had anything in them, and these Wendi tucked into various pockets for safety before jumping back to the ground. When she lined them up in the light, however, she snapped out an oath with a surprising amount of irreverence for a Temple girl, and pushed the bottles away. She returned for the rest of the bottles and held these up to the light in their turn, but they remained empty. Though she knew it was no use, she checked the partly-full bottles again.

It was her own fault. She should have gone to the Priests when she first realized the medicine was running out. After five years, she had started to think that perhaps it wouldn’t, that maybe the tiny bottle was magicked to never empty. Then, when it had gone, she hadn’t known what to say or who to tell; couldn’t quite bring herself to admit to her Superiors that five years ago, an *eShœn’i* doctor had handed her a vial and told her how to administer the medicine it contained before disappearing back into the slums of the City, or that she had been following those instructions faithfully for every night since. She had half-hoped that the medicine had been some type of *e’Shœn* superstition, more barbarian-tradition than actual medical expertise, but that was as much of a dream as the bottle being magicked. The night before the move back to the Palace it had gone completely dry. At first the effects were minimal; by the third day, it was clear the Prince’s health was

deteriorating. Reveling paints hid his pallor and the deepening circles under his eyes, but they could not disguise the increasing frequency that he rubbed at his hands or the fact that it only took a few hours before his voice began to crack and roughen. Kale excused it as the stress of moving back into the Palace, and the Temple Superiors agreed, neither knowing anything that would suggest otherwise.

Wendi, meanwhile, had been desperate enough to try and find the eShœn'i doctor, but to no avail. After her own search, mostly of those records she could access from inside the Temple, turned up fruitless, she went so far as to ask for help from one of the less savory sorts visiting the Temple. The woman, a rumped, old hag who smelled strangely of ginger and had looked maliciously delighted that an Acolyte should be asking, reminded her that most e'Shœn were prohibited from passing the border of the Empire—even if her mysterious doctor had managed to gain legal entry, he would not have been allowed to practice. And judging by the speed of his instructions and departure, he had not been comfortable staying any longer in the Palace than was necessary. Even if he had stayed in the City, by now, the horrible woman explained cheerfully, he was most likely hanged for one thing or another. She had left cackling, and Wendi had gone back to her House feeling a strong urge to bathe.

It all was abysmal timing. She did not know exactly *what* would happen the longer she could not find the medicine, only that it was bound to be Not Good. And for the stuff to run out now, (little caterpillars of anxiety chewed merrily away in her gut) now, when the Prince was trying so hard to convince the everyone, himself included, that it had all been nothing, that it was over...

There was a stone-shaking *thud* from the Prince's room, and Wendi jumped up, wide-eyed. It took a moment for her head to stop spinning again, and then she headed for the door. She was exhausted from her secret search, not to mention the preparations of the last few days, and Kale had dismissed his other chamber servants. In fact, he had dismissed most of his personal staff including the majority of his Guards. But if things kept growing worse she would have to ask the Prince for more help. The thought made her pride ache worse than her limbs, and on the strength of that thought she forged her way back to the Prince's bedchamber.

Kale was examining his room with a critical eye when Wendi returned. She really did try to be demure, but it was not in her nature. Kale could have laughed at her expression as she stopped dead in the doorway, looking back and forth from his empty bed to the strange-shaped shadows in the gloom, but he was concerned with other things; namely, continuing to rearrange the furniture. He had pushed two of the couches into place, and had nearly dropped a third on his foot. It would leave until morning. He would make do with chairs, in the meantime. Wendi stepped into the room tentatively, as if she expected a trap to spring out of the floor any second.

"What...?" her brows knitted as she looked between the furniture and the robed Prince. He wondered if she was quite well. She looked a little...well, *common*, for lack of a better term. Some of her braids were coming undone, and there was a bit of wildness in her eyes that was more often seen in the less civilized sort of character. Kale turned his gaze from her consternated expression to give the room a leisurely glance, and then moved to explain.

"I think I would like a wall here," he gestured to the broken line of couches. She only stared at him, so he continued. "So much space is really unnecessary." Stares. He coughed his voice's growing hoarseness into his sleeve. "I don't suppose it would be socially acceptable to move to a smaller wing?"

There was a longer pause. Wendi drew a deep, long-suffering breath. "Perhaps An'cæl would find it beneficial to rest for more than half an hour before rearranging his chambers?"

He thought of returning to bed and flinched inwardly. Without examining it too closely, he could sense darkness pushing at the edge of his consciousness, and knew it was somehow associated

with *bed*. “I am quite awake,” he said aloud, and turned his attention back to the room. As if she had answered his question, he continued; “No, you are right. I must make do with this,” and gave the lush furnishings a dismissive gesture. “Certain changes will be required, however. I’ll have a list ready tomorrow.”

She was watching his hands for some reason. It was disconcerting.

“And my books,” he continued, with an effort. “I’d like them moved in here.”

She did not answer, only nodded—and even that was only the barest semblance of movement. He looked around himself, wondering what he was missing that could make her so distracted. He crossed his arms, feeling defensive. Her eyes followed his movement with the wariness of a mouse following the wagging head of a snake.

“Is there something wrong, Wendi?” he asked impatiently. She jumped.

“No, I just... An’cæl is still wearing his gloves,” she said quickly. He looked at his hands in idle surprise. So he was. Surely that’s not all that had upset her?

But perhaps he gave her too much credit. After all, she was a fair servant, but she was very young, and had never shown signs of being especially observant. Well, if it made her that unhappy—he pulled off his gloves.

“Good, An’cæl,” Wendi said, and there did seem to be relief in her voice, “but now, you should rest.”

She approached with her hands raised, like Kale was a dangerous creature she had to soothe. He jerked away from her, an automatic reaction to being stalked. “Dawn is nearly here,” he contended, with a look out one of the narrow windows on the Eastern wall. The first glance being not enough, he went to the window and peered out, only to find that dawn was not really near enough to lighten the sky as of yet—but his point was clear, anyway. “I might as well get something done,” he said, and turned so sharply from the window that he almost ran straight into Wendi, who had followed to stand directly behind him.

“My Lord, you must rest,” she pleaded. She took a deep breath. “Please.”

It was the please that got to him—he had never heard the word cross Wendi’s lips before. He narrowed his eyes.

“Wendi, what is this about?”

“Y-you need your sleep, An’cæl,” she stammered, dropping her gaze guiltily.

“So you have mentioned,” he said. He fiddled with his hands, waiting for her to either say something or move aside, but she did neither. He was about to push her gently out of the way when she blinked rapidly, and her eyes fixated on his hands once again.

“You’re wearing your gloves, An’cæl,” she said. He checked. She was right.

“I took these off,” he protested.

“You just put them back on,” she told him with a quaver in her voice. Now, what was that quaver about? And why was she still so *close* to him? Wendi had not moved since almost running into him, and Kale was increasingly aware of his valet’s proximity. His back was literally up against the wall. He might have been able to rationalize the increasing pressure in his chest as a defect of the room, a combination of the stone architecture and the excessive number of musty tapestries that covered it, if not for the breeze sneaking through the caulking of the glazing behind him. The air was there, he could feel its chill against the back of his neck; it should not be so difficult to breathe, surely...

Wendi was pleading with him again, but the need for space was a more immediate concern. He tried to brush past her, but she chose that moment to grab his wrists before he could get away. Immediately, the shadow roiling at the edge of his consciousness charged the barrier of his mind, pushing against it, bending it in like the walls he had put up were made of clear rubber. Images

flared up in the smoke, leering, still hazy but clearly dreadful. He cowered back, trying not to look too closely. From behind came a *rap-tap-tap*, sharp and real through the strengthening roar of the walled-out nightmare cloud. Wendi's voice, rising and falling, became fainter; a single, rhythmic call lost in the horde, like a single merchant's voice on the main street on Market Day. And then again, through it all, the impatient *rap-tap-tap* somewhere just distant, just at his ear.

"Someone's at the door," he gasped, and turned—

Everything was suddenly still, quiet. The room was empty, and narrowed around the door. The latch was already thrown. Kale blinked. The doorknob was in his hand. But it wasn't his hand, not really—it belonged to a different him, one that could be simply tired without being weary, and who now was going to open the door even though the real him knew and was shouting *no, no, no...* The him with one hand on the doorknob paused, listened; but not to the panicked voice he should be hearing. In place of the knock, a plea came forth from the other side of the door.

"Kale..." it cajoled in a dark tone between a whisper and a murmur, a voice that smiled like a demon, "*Kale...Kale...Kale...*" It was insistent, forgiving; if only he would open the door, it wanted him to open the door, it wanted in, this enchanting voice, *let me in*, and he was turning the doorknob, when with the whipping, fluttering noise of flock of crows taking flight, a pale, long-fingered hand draped itself like lead over his wrist and—

"No! Enough!" he snarled, and shoved Wendi away. "*Do not touch me!*"

He had not shouted, but they both reacted like he had, flinching back from each other. She gaped with half-spoken words still in her mouth, while he was simply stunned by the solid reality of her, the room, himself. For a mouse's heartbeat they stared at each other without recognition, and then Kale registered, objectively, that he was a bit shaky and should like to sit down. He sank onto the edge of his bed, glad, for once, that the Palace mattresses were too soft—the give concealed that his knees buckled at the last second. Sensibilities of etiquette began to return, though not enough, yet, to embarrass him. He clasped his hands and leaned forward on his knees, and watched his twined fingers tremble between visible and invisible. Sweat and pain dripped into his eyes.

There was a presence in front of him; Wendi, with her mouth set and her eyes as cold as bronze coins, clearly intending to stand her ground. With her stance as it was now, Wendi somehow managed to channel a woman two or three times the Prince's age, even though she was barely more than half it. She took a deep breath, and drew herself up to such a bearing that she seemed about to put her hands on her hips and scold him.

Instead, she asked, in an incredibly level voice, "What did you do?"

He turned his attention back to his hands. "Get out," he ordered, quiet and furious. Wendi's brow creased, and her eyes flashed. She did not otherwise move, but it was as if the force of her bent over and shook the Prince by the shoulders. He stiffened and looked up, displeased.

"Get out," he repeated. Instead of raising his voice, he lowered it to a near hiss. Despite herself, Wendi took a step back. She was vaguely intimidated by Kale, when she remembered to be; now, she felt the first flutterings of fear in her stomach. Then she bit her lip, set her jaw, and widened her stance.

"What did you do?" she asked again, and this time she demanded.

Kale rarely lost mastery of himself. Any expression of emotion was, for the most part, a conscious decision. But he was weakened, and gods forbid a little frightened, and in such situations his power would flare to the surface. It was usually brief, a flicker like a stone dropped into the center of a still, deep pool, and Kale himself did not always notice.

Now, at Wendi's raised voice, his reaction was disturbingly controlled. Kale's outline shimmered once and then stilled, solid. It was as if a tentacle had reached up from the middle of the pond, snatched the stone, and submerged again without a ripple.

“What do you mean by that, Wendi?” he asked. His voice was lethally quiet now. A little butterfly of fear shook itself out of its chrysalis and began fanning its wings, tickling the lining of Wendi’s stomach.

“I mean...” she shrank a little, but stubbornly held onto her position. “I mean, An’cæl, that I was wondering what you got up to this week that you evidently weren’t supposed to, since you never showed up here the first night of the revel and sent me into a panic since I was expecting your Lordship, and people have been saying...” she trailed off, and then finished with a resolute “and that’s a start.”

Kale had closed his eyes, and opened them again once he was sure she had finished.

“You want me to explain myself to you?” he confirmed, still very, very quiet. Somehow, though, his voice had no problem carrying to her ears. “You think I *owe* you?”

Wendi bit her lip, and any rebellion went out of her like a whoosh of air. She might have started apologizing right then and there, except Kale sat back, looked at her with clear, frank eyes and said, “Fine.” He flexed his fingers, unhooking them as painfully as if they were swollen with arthritis. He pulled a ring from his hand, held it up for her to see.

“I was recovering this,” he said. She reached out towards it, curious. “It belonged to...my brother.”

Wendi’s response was gratifying. She hissed and drew back, automatically making a Temple gesture signifying the presence of evil. “Where? How?” she asked, voice low and furious.

Kale gave her a patient half-smile that warned her not to press her luck too far. “As for ‘where,’ in the e’Shœn camp over the bridge. As for ‘how,’ that’s my own business.”

Her eyes widened. “You went to the e’Shœn?”

He sighed. “Yes. To their chief, for lack of a better term. They call him the Ishaen.”

“And...this Ishaen just *gave* it to you?”

Kale rubbed his hands and made a face. “Well,” he admitted, “no, not exactly. He might have, but...” he shot his valet a look and fell silent. No need to bring in Træson’s involvement.

Wendi had other things on her mind. “Did he know who you were?” she asked faintly.

Kale did not notice her tone. He tipped his head in a shrug, sliding the ring back onto his finger. “I thought so,” he said. “But...well. There was a little miscommunication, I believe.” His mouth pulled in the tiniest resemblance of a frown. “You seem very interested by the e’Shœn.”

She blushed bright in the apples of her cheeks. “No, An’cæl. Just interested in the story.”

He raised an eyebrow, but did not seem overly concerned. “You have your information, now. Are you satisfied?” She nodded meekly. “Good.” He moved restlessly. “I should—” he broke off in a fit of dry coughing and turned away. The coverings bunched beneath his supporting hand, fingers clenched so tightly around the fabric Wendi could easily have traced each of his tendons. Without his eyes on her, Wendi’s face contorted with worry. Her hand shot to her face and she rubbed frantically at the corners of her eyes.

“I’ll find An’cæl some water,” she burst out, and rushed from the room. She slammed the door shut behind her—or at least the equivalent for a servant, which meant the metal door actually made a noise when it was closed—and leaned against it, hiding her face in her hands or a long moment. She was thinking of many things, past and present and future, and most of all, repeating a single question over and over in a small, shivery voice; “What can I do? What can I do? What can I do?”

Kale waited until the door closed behind her, and then he rose and stretched. He felt weak, more weak than he should have after a night of dancing and political banter; but maybe it was just that he was not accustomed to such activities anymore. It was a pity; he used to be quite good at both. Admittedly, the last revel he had attended of this magnitude had been before his voice

changed, so perhaps his memory had had time to selectively forget certain things. He walked up and down the length of his room, hugging his arms to himself, and running over the night in his head. He kept getting distracted by the heavy nothingness in the room. It was strangely quiet with Wendi gone; though it was not as if she was a particularly loud person. Maybe it was the curtains, soaking up sound.

He went up to one and tugged experimentally. It was too heavy to tear, and there were caps on the ends of the brass rod to make sure it did not slide off. Kale concentrated for a moment, then reached up to the top of the hanging, his hand within a quarter inch of the cloth. He made a painfully slow, sweeping gesture, and a thin, uneven line appeared in the crimson velvet, smoking slightly. When he had made it all the way across, he took a step back and examined his mark. It was a poor burn, barely reaching the back of the fabric in places, and weaving as crazily as a drunken donkey. This time, though, when he gave the cloth a yank, a tiny tear appeared in the middle of the burnt velvet. Several more yanks, and the hanging was in a rumpled mass on the ground.

Unfortunately, the blank stone wall behind the hanging was little better. It made the emptiness of the room colder and larger rather than musty and close, but Kale was not entirely certain he preferred it. The blank space seemed to stare at him. He was put in mind, suddenly, of an old faerie-tale about stone giants with great, unblinking eyes in the middle of their heads, who could stand still for thousands of years watching the world. Træson had once told him that the tors were all giants, and claimed that the Anaodhin ancestors had built the Palace and all rest of Usiana right into their heads unknowingly.

“But they’re still watching, learning all our secrets,” Træson had whispered, young eyes wide and guileless with the confidence of his tale, “and one day, they’ll wake up. And *then* we’ll be sorry.”

“What’re they gonna do?” Kale had asked, awestruck and horrified.

“I dunno,” Træson proclaimed solemnly. “Have their revenge and all, I guess. For building buildings in their faces.” He stuck his nose to nose with his little brother’s for emphasis, and then waited for a second, obviously expecting Kale to scramble away. All that happened was that Kale’s eyes grew round and bright, so Træson finally had to sit back himself, with all the proper haughtiness and self-assurance of a storyteller in his seventh year of life.

“Traes,” Kale pulled frantically at his brother’s sleeve. “Traes, what if they shake their heads and we all fly out the windows into the Abyss?”

Træson pondered this. “I dunno that they have necks,” he pointed out. “The tors are pretty straight.” Kale considered this idea, and then his eyes widened again.

“Traes, what if they just knock their heads into each other?” he whispered in delighted horror. “It mightn’t even be on purpose. Maybe if the An—An—maybe if our ancestors built on their heads they can’t see anymore, and they’ve been takin’ a nap and didn’ know, and then when they wake up they’ll just run into each other!” He demonstrated, pudgy fingers curled into fists. “Bam! Bam! Noooooooooo...” He wriggled his fingers in evidence of the people falling from their smashed livings, then gave his brother a significant look.

“With their heads?” Træson had said, with older-brother disdain.

“They might,” Kale muttered, deflated. Then he lit up again. “Traes! Maybe—”

“Shut up!” Træson had burst out, tackling Kale and clamping a hand over his mouth for good measure. “Do you want them to hear you and get *ideas*?”

Looking back, Kale was almost certain Træson had picked up the story from one of their older brothers, no doubt intended to frighten them. He shook his head with a wry snort at the memory, then leaned forward and put his forehead against the cool stone. *Maybe he should try to put the curtain up again, just hang it over the rod.* Which brother could it have been? Condrix? *No, Wendi could do it.* Condrix might have, to try and prove that he belonged with the elder three. He was always doing

things like that. *No, Wendi was too short.* It couldn't have been Dæslin, he was above that sort of thing. *He'd have to wait until tomorrow.* Tomorrow.

Kale squinted at the window, but there was a glare from the cær and he could not see how light it was yet. With a muffled grunt he dragged himself away from the wall and checked outside, then turned out the lamp and checked again. That *must* be light on the horizon; assuming he was looking at the horizon and not the lights of the e'Shœn camp. He had never had a room facing this way before.

He thought about sitting back down on the bed for a while—his knees were getting shaky again—but he feared he might not be able to get back up from the mattress. Instead, he curled up on one of the couches in the middle of the room, facing the windows. It was definitely too uncomfortable to sleep on, which was exactly what he wanted.

Wendi could not bring herself to go straight back to Kale's room. She also could not stand the thought of going back to hers, only to see the bottles everywhere. As her only viable option, she struck out for the Walls in the hope that walking would settle her mind.

The Walls was a jumbled mass of passages that made up a sort of inner city to the Palace. For the most part, these passages were constructed within the inner walls of the Palace—hence the name—though some dipped down to the Builders' Catacombs for brief spans. Those that did utilize the Catacombs did so for only a short period before the passage was closed off, and one had to return to the upper levels again. It was an efficient and discreet way to move about, and servants were strongly encouraged, by suggestion of the Emperor, to make use of them whenever possible. For all intents and purposes, this meant that the suggestion was an Official Order, and the outside Halls were left to those servants too old to navigate the maze-like paths, those bearing burdens too large for the narrow, winding spaces, and those who had, for whatever reason, gotten their Passage Privileges 'revoked' by the Head Steward.

Wendi had heard of Noble men and women who paraded their servants about as an obvious indication of wealth; but the Emperors were quieter, subtler, and more effective in their way. With their pale livery and 'secret' passages, the servants of the Imperial Palace were all but invisible, and so was the work they performed. It gave the Palace an enchanted air, as if it, itself produced all that might be ever be needed: the walls and floors gleamed without ever seeming to be polished; food arrived and plates were taken away without interruption to conversation or need for a lot of clattering trolleys; and Nobles had been known to answer a knock at the door, only to turn around a few minutes later and find their room miraculously tidied, bed made and linens replaced. All the while, the servants snuck around in the Walls like benevolent faeries, granting their services with pitying disdain for those undeserving wretches that were their patrons.

An unforeseen consequence of the Walls was that the servants had easy access to each others' chambers, as well. The walls were too small to patrol, and on the Residential floors, valets and the like dwelt directly adjacent to their patron, "in yelling distance," as one old matron like to put it. This meant servants' rooms were harder to get to for routine patrols, unless one wanted to trek through the patron's room. With servants so numerous and so successfully invisible, it was commonplace for any indiscreet incident to literally run through the Walls like particularly vicious plague-rats. If it was a particularly interesting tidbit, it would circulate through every serving girl, roc-trainer, and valet within two hours. If it was only of mild interest, the time might lengthen to half a day. Point being, secrets were the commodity of the serving class, and in that regard, a certain simple Temple girl-turned-Valet was richer than the Emperors themselves, and she guarded her wealth jealously.

So Wendi was cautious as she strode the narrow passages of the Walls. She composed her face like a musician composes a children's song, light and neutral, and kept her anxieties reserved to expression through the exaggerated length of her stride. After a few twists and turns of this she

slowed to half-pace and caught her breath. After all, she had told Kale that she was bringing water, and there were only so many excuses for lateness she could use at one time. She decided to turn around before descending to Down, the large, circular space in the Builders' Catacombs which was the central meeting point to all the passages in the Palace. Before she got there, she found herself at the top of a flight of middle-worn stairs. Wendi frowned. She was still new to the Walls, and she had forgotten that this passage connected with one a floor down. It did not take much debate—she did not want to leave the floor and risk getting lost. She turned and went back the way she had come.

Except she didn't. She made another turn a few minutes later, and found herself in a passage she did not recognize at all—or, rather, she did recognize it, because it looked exactly the same as all of the other passages she had been wandering for the last quarter of an hour. What it did *not* look like was the passage she knew led back to Kale's chambers, as she had marked the last hallway with green paint the first time she had ventured into the Walls. She backtracked again, and ended up in a passage she *did* know, from the long scuff-mark on the wall, but which she thought was supposed to be in a different direction altogether. Wendi was growing nervous, now, for her own sake as well as for the Prince. She looked at the scuff-mark, and suddenly realized that she could be stuck in these passages forever, tucked in an unused corner, forgotten until some unfortunate serving boy tripped over her dusty, skeletal remains...*I'm trapped*, she thought, with increasing panic; and though she had never been claustrophobic, she felt that the walls, already almost brushing her shoulders on each side, were squeezing in closer. She began a rapid chant to Gwinga, God of Tight Spaces, and fought against the urge to hyperventilate. *Oh Gods*, she thought frantically, pressing the heels of her hand over her eyes, *I can see a glow up head, growing closer. The Gods have come for me. I am done for. Sweet Phaeneros, save me.*

Or, as she found a few seconds later, it was a laundress coming around a corner, her cær attached to the front of her basket. She stopped in front of Wendi in surprise.

"Hello," the laundress greeted companionably. Wendi peeked out from behind her hands, and then ground one into her forehead in utterly aghast at herself. "You must be the Acolyte. Erm, Fladwen."

"Wendi," she corrected, and leaned forward to look suspiciously at the other girl. "How do you know who I am?"

"Your shift is a little strange for anyone who should be running about this time a night," she said with a grin. "And you're not wearing shoes."

"Ah." She looked at her feet. "Yes, that is a giveaway."

"Not that I blame you," she said cheerfully. "I wouldn't wear shoes if I didn't have to, either. Name's Elen, by the way."

"Elen, or El'Len?" Wendi asked, blinking against the cær light.

"Either, I suspect. I'd shake your hand, but then I would likely drop this basket on your feet, and it hurts well enough with shoes." She grinned again. She seemed odd; Wendi kept expecting her to speak in a commoner's rough accent, but she was as well-spoken as a Duchess, if a little plainer of word and conduct. Her eyes remained respectfully on Wendi's face, she appeared genuinely cheerful, and Wendi did not trust her in the least.

"Are you taking that to His Imperial Highness?" Wendi inquired as politely as she could, remembering Kale's official title just in time not to stumble over it. He was An'Cæl to her, but to call him so in front of someone else felt like an invasion of intimacy. Elen did not notice her slip, just nodded in answer to the question, but Wendi rushed on before she could open her mouth again. "If you would like, I could take it the rest of the way for you. I am headed back that way myself."

Elen gave her a shrewd look that went disturbingly with her overly-freckled face and open, congenial manner. "It's a lonely night in the Walls. How about I walk you to the last straight passage, and you take things from there?"

Wendi felt her throat tighten, but she had little choice; she did not really know the way. After a moment's hesitation, she inclined her head as respectfully as she could manage—there was no way she was going to bow to this girl. “A wonderful idea. Might I suggest that you lead? That way you don't have to keep peering over your basket in fears of running me over.”

The laundress grinned toothily. “You're a smart young lady, Wendi.” Elen squeezed by her with some difficulty in the narrow way and then set off immediately, light bobbing around the walls and ceiling of the passage ahead. Wendi followed cautiously, tense with foreboding. Elen kept up a steady stream of talk all the way. It was gossip, mostly; a rich vault of it. Wendi wondered how a laundress would pick up so much information; but then again, everyone needed clothes and linens washed.

“Well, I've probably just about talked your ear off,” Elen was saying brightly. “Do you have any stories for me, Winni?”

“Wendi,” she said automatically. “I...um...” She racked her mind for something appropriate. Elen clearly knew who she was and who employed her, and wasn't above a little digging for information. “His Imperial Highness is in good health,” she lied with a struggle, “there's really not much to tell, I'm afraid.” Her ending words came out a little strangled, which emphasized them in a meaning she had not meant to reveal. Elen glanced over her shoulder at Wendi, shifting her basket.

“Not to worry,” she giggled. “You wouldn't have heard much yet, I imagine, coming from the Temple and all.”

Actually, Wendi knew plenty of stories that would have made the lanky young girl drop her basket, but they were Temple stories, and she felt no need to share them with some common Palace laundress. She sniffed haughtily, then remembered that *she* was a common Palace servant now, horror of horrors.

“Just wait. You'll get used to it here,” Elen assured her, and turned to watch where she was going again. She had almost been walking sideways in the effort to look at Wendi. “Soon, you'll even know how to get through the Walls without getting lost.” This time she stopped completely and turned to look Wendi full in the face. Her grin had turned into a smirk, and her eyes had the same calculating look in them again. Wendi sucked in a breath. She managed a weak, embarrassed chuckle.

“I'm pretty obvious, aren't I?” she said, and Elen hooted with laughter. When she looked at her again, the strange coldness was gone from her eyes once more.

“More than a little, that's for sure,” she ribbed. She made a gesture down the passage with the basket. “You know your way from here?”

Wendi looked around, and was surprised to see her green paint mark within inches of her left hand. “Yes,” she replied.

“Alright. You can lead, then, as I suspect you have the key?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, and they performed their awkward little dance again, switching places. Wendi did not start walking, however, but stood wringing her hands.

“I could just take that for you for the rest of the way,” she offered.

“Nah—you shouldn't be able to see over the top,” Elen replied good-naturedly. Wendi did not move. Elen shifted the weight in her arms, trying to see what was the matter.

“Really, it should be fine,” Wendi insisted, voice rising in pitch a little. “I've had much worse loads in the Temple.” When the laundress made to protest again, Wendi narrowed her eyes. “I'm not just some little girl, you know,” she told Elen frostily. A breeze emerged from the still, close air of the Walls and ruffled the laundress' hair from behind. She put a hand to her dark curls in confusion, balancing her basket between her hip and the wall. Darkness gathered behind Wendi, looming behind her like a bank of black clouds. The wind picked up. Elen's eyes widened slightly, and her smile faltered for the first time.

“Alright, alright,” she agreed hastily, setting down the basket and unhooking her cær without taking her eyes off Wendi. “Just don’t...don’t magick me or call down the wrath of the Gods or something,” she requested nervously, eyes flicking between her and her looming shadow. The wind died down as quickly as it had come, and the laundress breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.” She backed away, palms raised in surrender. “It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” she stammered, then turned and fled.

Wendi grimaced as she watched Elen go. It was not as if she would have hurt her. She did not think she had given the impression that she was someone that would harm others. But she had gotten the reaction she had wanted, hadn’t she? She had known that, no matter how harmless, a show of power would be enough to send the lanky girl scampering. But Wendi felt a sharp pain in her chest, like she had been struck by a javelin. Rubbing at the corners of her eyes again, she dragged the basket the rest of the way down the passageway.

Even with the hard cushion, (if it even deserved to be called a cushion) of the couch, Kale had not been sitting long before the quiet began to suck at him again. He concentrated on the wind against the glass windowpanes. When that was not enough, he tapped against the wooden armrest, looking for comfort in the sound of real wood, but it only made things worse. The silence felt centered on him, watching, like he had stood up in the middle of Temple prayer and started having a conversation about lizard skins and everyone else was shooting him malicious glances. The empty wall was the worst. He could feel it, glaring at him from behind. Several times the hair on the back of his neck prickled warningly, and though he knew it would only be the wall, it became harder and harder to turn around and make sure. Instead, he sank beneath the level of the couch’s back, out of sight. He pulled his knees into his chest and his arms into his voluminous sleeves, so that his sleeping robe draped him like a blanket.

It was still not enough. Faint, but growing, Kale could hear the distant roar of wind and shadow and voices, reaching up from under the floor, dragging at his hems like demonic children, *pay attention to us*, and in the border of his consciousness he watched the whirling nightmare reach inside with a spindly, gray hand while he was standing by the door, and it was all happening again, all of it, hours of it, all at once, and his hands glazed with blood—

He groaned and covered his head with his sleeved arms. *No, no, no*. It wasn’t real. *Go away*, he told the nightmare, but it only snickered and reached for him again. The wall was up again, the hand kept back by the rubbery membrane, but Kale jumped back despite himself. The nightmare found this incredibly amusing. It howled with laughter, screamed with it, twisting and whirling on itself in hilarious agony. Its cried with the voices of the River Glories, horrible and keening. Kale curled tighter in upon himself, knowing that if he looked up the nightmare would be standing in front of him with its arms opened wide, and in its outstretched claws would be memories. One look, and he would not be able to turn away. It would wrap itself around him and he would have no choice but to watch, and remember. Panic hammered in his chest and he pressed his eyes against his arm. No. He wouldn’t look. He wouldn’t.

There was a clinking sound as Wendi set down the laundry basket. She barely registered it at first, worried she had already taken far too much time in getting back to the Prince with his water. Then came the worry she had broken something, and she went hurriedly to the basket, shifting the cleaned clothes carefully and looking for broken glass. A pouch sat against the side, the kind the launderers used to store items they had found in pockets or purses. Wendi hesitated for only a second before opening the pouch and withdrawing the glass vial that it contained.

“No,” she said. She stared at it blankly for a long minute, and then shook her head. “No.” It was impossible. After everything she had done, everywhere she had searched...it was

incomprehensible that this little, dark-glass vial should be sitting in a basket of laundry. But the Prince had been to the e'Shoen camp... Her mind made up in an instant, Wendi sprinted back to her room and flew through her desk drawers, finally coming up with an old, stained pocket-knife. Her hands shook so badly that she was barely able to cut through the thick sealing wax, but then the vial was open. She sniffed it cautiously and pulled away with a jerk, blinking the water from her eyes and nodding. It had to be right. It *had* to be. She slopped water into a glass. All it took was a drop. She started to tip the vial, was forced to use both hands to keep it steady. One drop. Yes.

She closed the vial again with a shudder, every second that it was open meaning another second that it could spill, that she could lose everything again, and then nestled it safely in a bundle of handkerchiefs. She dried the glass as best she could on the edge of her shift, and gave up when she dribbled water over her feet.

"Good enough," she muttered, barely aware of what she was saying, and then forced herself to set the glass down and take a step back. She took a deep breath and smoothed back her hair. She took several more breaths. Then she picked up the glass, and, more calmly, went back to the Prince's chamber.

Dark pink light was just showing on the edge of the horizon when she padded into the room. After her flurry of activity, the Prince's chamber seemed peaceful, still and quiet. For one fearful moment, Wendi thought he had left; then there was a soft sound of shifting cloth. She turned around in the center of the room, searching, and finally tracked the sound to one of the moved couches—one of the more uncomfortable-looking ones, she had thought. She approached the Prince cautiously. He was completely enveloped in his robes; only when she was a few feet away did she notice his hair standing out against the dove-colored silk.

"An'Cæl?" she called softly. He did not respond, but when she listened Wendi could hear his breathing, muffled and wheezing. It sounded as if he had his face pressed to the couch. She knelt and set down her glass. "Prince Kale?" Tentatively, she reached out and touched the bundle of silk on what she assumed was his shoulder. "Your Highness? Kale?"

Wendi heard his breathing quicken, and the bundle began to shift and stretch. She pulled back her hand quickly. Slowly, Kale pushed himself upright, bleary-eyed and shivering. He pulled his robe closer around him. His hair was tousled from where he had been running his fingers through it, and his face was drawn as if against a sudden light.

"I-I'm sorry, An'Cæl, if you were sleeping I did not mean to disturb you," Wendi stammered out. His brow creased. He seemed strangely young, wrapped in his robe and blinking owlishly at her.

"No," he whispered hoarsely, and his voice was deeper than she expected; she realized that she had been expecting the voice of a young boy. "No," he repeated again, shrinking back into the couch, eyes widening. He was not replying to her, as Wendi had thought; he was looking past her, at things she could not see.

"An'Cæl," she said firmly, and gave his shoulder a gentle shake. He drew in a choked breath, still fixated on something beyond her and the room. "An'Cæl, you are dreaming. Listen to me. It's not real." He made a soft sound under his breath, hands twisting, sparks jittering between his fingers.

"I...can't. I...can't. Don't...make me." He gasped between his words as if he was sobbing, but his cheeks and eyes were dry.

Wendi pulled herself up onto the couch next to him, trying to pull his attention away.

"An'Cæl, listen to me." She shook him by the shoulders, less gently this time. "An'Cæl. Kale, wake up!"

He gripped suddenly at her hands, fingers digging into her wrists. "Please, don't," he begged, and now his voice did sound younger, and frightened, "*Acere faen, Tain*—please—" He flinched and ducked as if avoiding a blow, and at the same time Wendi repeated, louder, "*Kale!*"

For a second, he actually looked at her. “Wendi,” he said. He was still holding her wrists with a vice-like grip.

“Yes, An’Cæl,” she sighed in relief.

“I...I am so tired,” he mumbled. Without warning, his eyes slid shut and tumbled forward, almost pulling them both to the ground. Before Wendi could even gasp in alarm he had caught himself and was leaning back again, face in his hand.

“An’Cæl,” she said seriously, half-holding him up, “when you went to the e’Shœn, did you take a bottle?” His brow creased. “A very small bottle? Dark-colored?”

“He wanted me to take it,” Kale murmured. “I wasn’t going to. But then—”

“You did,” she confirmed. It had to be right. “Did he say what it was? Kale, what did he tell you?”

“Wouldn’t say. Acted like I knew. Wasn’t going to take it, but why not. Put it in my pocket...don’t know where it is now. I’d forgotten...”

He was leaning heavily against her now, almost unconscious. His grip loosened on her wrists, and she dove forward to retrieve her glass.

“Here, An’Cæl,” she implored.

“What is’t?”

“Just water, An’Cæl.”

He took it from her with both hands. When he had drank half, she managed to convince him to return to bed, where he sat and shivered and sipped at the water. She watched him for half an hour, until his eyes closed and his breathing slowed; then she went back to her room, retrieved a blanket, and returned to curl up on the couch to watch the morning spill over the horizon.

V

The Imperial Residence took up an entire floor of the octagonal Palace, and was divided into a practical eight apartments. Once, each had housed a member of the Imperial Family, but since the deaths of four of the Emperors' six sons, that arrangement had undergone some adjustments. The Emperors were certainly wealthy enough to leave the spaces empty, but to do so would go against their natures. Both had been Generals for their respective armies; the Emperor for the Usianians, and the Empress for her native Carotine. The first defeat of the Carotine, and the subsequent marriage between the two Generals, had established Usiana as an Empire. The Emperors were not nearly as spartan as they had been in their military years, but neither were they about to leave living space open for something as trivial as sentimental reasons. In this regard the Empress was particularly adamant. If the Princes' deaths had been honorable, there might have been more discussion; but as it was the empty chambers were simply more memory to be chiseled out and carved over.

Filling the space was a challenge, though not for lack of applicants. Most, if not all, of the highest Court Officials coveted the living spaces; there might have been a series of mysterious deaths had the Emperors not stepped in. Rather than offer the space to a chosen few, the empty chambers had been redesigned for the use of the Honored Guests. That way, the Emperors had explained to Træson in private, there could remain some semblance of peace in their living—they suffered the groveling and simpering of the Court enough each day without having to meet it around every corner of their Residence. In this way the Emperors retained their respective, and adjacent, apartments, the Princes were promoted to the chambers of their eldest brothers, and a few residences were left for eventual family members and filled, in the meantime, by a rotating menagerie of Lords and Ladies from across the Empire.

The only permanent resident who was not of the Family was the Duchess Elside, and her non-Imperial status was only expected to last another year at most. Anything else relating to the matter went unspoken, at least in civil society. To discuss the relationship of any person, especially one of rank, was the height of indecency. And so the Duchess' presence was officially that of a visiting Dignitary, despite the common knowledge that her arrival on the Prince Træson's twenty-second Turning had come after careful arrangements between the Emperors and the nobility of Tdiran, Elside's homeland.

High-ranking officials and visiting dignitaries dwelt on the floor below, in the substantially smaller rooms of the Southwest Wing, while lesser Nobles and a few high-ranking merchants made due with the Southeast Wing, where the chambers matched the size of those of the Imperial Family's servants. This was more of a reflection on the servants' chambers than the Nobles'. Servants in the Southwest Wing dwelt in a small room off of their employer's chamber, or on a cot in the bedchamber itself; the Southeast Wing had separate dorms for any attendants. The majority of the servants; launderers, cooks, pages, and the rest; lived in a block of rooms in the middle of the Palace that extended through all floors but the top, with easy access to the Walls. At the center this block was a single, spiral stair, and it was here that the laundress Elen was currently making her way down from the top of the Palace to the bottom. No one seemed to notice her; they hurried by on their own business, frantic in the dull, vague way of those whose lives are defined by fetching one thing and bringing back another.

When she reached the first floor, Elen struck out into the main halls. There were a few Nobles about, marked by their rich, dark clothes in the fluttering tide of pale-robed servants. A few were quite substantially drunk, and as Elen hurried by them, one might have expected a few comments or even an attempted grab — after all, she was a pretty enough girl, and inhibitions were low by the ninth day of a revel. But no one even glanced her way. One would-be lover actually moved out of her way and threw an arm around a horrified, middle-aged manservant instead. But if Elen was

beyond the notice of other people, she noticed them even less. She moved with an intensity that seemed contrary to her genial face, and did not let up her pace until she had passed from the Palace main and into the halls of dustrooms leading out into the City.

Fifth door on the right; Room 17. Elen began humming an old children's tune under her breath.

*One's for the sun who revives while we sleep;
Two's for the movement of water that creeps*

The room was dark, but it was not empty.

"You came," he said in relief. "I thought maybe...it doesn't matter now. Shall I help you with your dress?"

"No need," Elen replied. "I can't stay for long." She ran her hands along her hairline, underneath it, and then tossed the whole lot of her curls to the dustroom bench. A wig. She combed her fingers through her actual hair, short and inky black. "Thank the gods, a hundred and one," she sighed. She perched on the edge of the bench, stretching luxuriously.

"Well?" she asked.

"I have what you wanted," the man said nervously, moving forward. "It was Abysmally hard to get, I can tell you."

She leaned forward and took it from him, grinning like a cat. "But worth every ounce of effort, I can assure you. Light a cær, would you?" Her voice seemed a little deeper than it had before, though maybe that was just a side effect of the echoic room. The man fidgeted.

"Is that wise?" he protested.

"Light it," Elen ordered coldly. The man obeyed.

*Three's for the strong hands whose service is deep;
Four's for the weaving of friendships that keep.*

Blue-white light flickered around the black walls and across the man holding the cær. His face was drawn, eyes unnaturally dull; the face of a man living a nightmare. Elen gave him a charming smile, but her face had changed. Her freckles had melded into a solid mass of sun-darkened skin, her cheekbones grown more pronounced, her jaw squarer.

"You see, Maesha," she said. "isn't it so much nicer to see each other face to face? No more of this sulking about in the dark from now on."

Maesha made a short of whimpering noise in the back of his throat. Elen, or the person who had been Elen, held the object in her hand up to the light.

"Ten's for the full set, the moon at its peak. Eleven is plenty; the harvest to reap," she sang under her breath. "Excellent," she said louder. She tucked it into an inner pocket of her robe. "How many others have you gathered?"

"Enough."

"I'll be the judge of that," Elen said. She gave the Adviser a sharp look, and her face slid alarmingly, another set of features emerging from beneath them like rocks in a pool. Maesha choked and took a step back.

"We will meet here," Elen pulled a scrap of slate from her robe and pushed it across the bench toward him. "The usual rules. No weapons. No speaking unless spoken to. We finalize our plans this night. Anyone who disobeys, or who shows up late will wake up someplace dark and doorless. Understood?"

Maesha opened and closed his mouth without a sound. Satisfied, Elen swept to her feet and snatched the wig from the bench, shaking dust from it. She replaced it, and suddenly her appearance was defined once more; a tall, vaguely pretty servant girl with laughing green eyes. *Thirteen's for fortune, Fourteen's for balance, Fifteen's three-quarters full and full of leaks...*

“Good night, Maesha,” she said flirtatiously and flitted from the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. Maesha stood stock-still in the empty dustroom until the last echoes of her footsteps faded from hearing. Then he stumbled to the corner of the room and was violently sick.

Elen hummed to herself as she padded back down the halls, the gazes of passerby slipping around her. She touched the object in her pocket and smiled a sharp, dangerous smile.

Se'enteen's for traitors, corruption and sneaks.

VI

It was near evening, the resting day after the Revel. Kale was about to open the main door of his chambers when he heard voices on the other side of the metal. He paused, exasperation flickering once over his face.

“For Hiraens’ sake,” he snapped, starting to rethink his plan to visit his brother. The voices on the other side of the door died immediately. And he had been in such a good mood. Then he leveled his voice, and his expression, opened the door and said, “Good afternoon, soldiers.”

One of the guards posted at his doorframe nodded to him.

“Good afternoon, Your Imperial Highness,” replied the other, in the tones of one who procedurally strips themselves of conscious thought as they buckle on their uniform. Kale took a step into the hall, and both guards moved with him as if their ankles were tied to his. Kale stopped and regarded them balefully.

“Yes?” he asked. They said nothing, but stood and half-watched him and half-watched the hall with spooky attention. Kale took another step and they followed, their scale armor clicking and scraping against itself like pottery tiles. Kale shot them a razor-edged glare, and the one that had nodded to him took a step back. It looked slightly younger—though age was generally as hard to determine as gender or hair color or, really, any defining characteristic when the guard was in full uniform. Its face was a little rounder, at any rate. It was possible it even looked a little apologetic.

“There!” Kale tossed his arm wide in a triumphant, exasperated gesture. “*One* of you is able to learn, at least.” He stared at the other guard, this one’s face not apologetic in the slightest, and distinctly boulder-like, until it, too, stepped back. “Not great,” Kale admonished, “but we’ll work on it.” He stepped, and after a hesitation they both followed again.

“I take it back,” he said, “you are both completely worthless.” They waited patiently, and if they were offended they gave not a sign. Kale crossed his arms and observed them with narrow eyes.

“Stay,” he ordered, and stepped backward. They remained where they were. Kale took another step back. They stayed in place. With a sharp inhale, Kale turned on his heel and strode several lengths down the hall. The stone reechoed with a flurry of clinking and scraping. Kale threw up his hands and stopped again. He had not even made it as far as the next door in the hall.

“Alright,” he told them, “Fine. Whose orders are you following?” When they remained tight-lipped, Kale shook his head. “I know at least one of you is capable of speech.” The rounder one glanced at the other again, then seemed to realize what it had done and went back to facing straight ahead. Only its eyes kept flicking back, evidently waiting for instruction. Kale watched this play out for a minute, and then, when it became obvious that nothing was going to come of it, he made a sharp gesture and swore, “By *Caros*,” which made the rounder guard jump and shift its hand to its sword. Even the craggy guard looked slightly affronted.

“Can we move past the stoic facades and reach the point where you tell me whose command you’re under?” Kale requested impatiently. “I’m sure he expected me to ask, so you might as well go on and say what he told you say.” He met one, then the other’s, gaze with a glare of his own.

“We are ordered to protect the person of His Imperial Highness the Prince Kale, and to faithfully guard the portals through which He should retire, until that time that we should be replaced by the next watch,” spoke the guard formally—to Kale’s surprise, it was the rounder of the two.

“Under the order of—?”

“Under the order of His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince Træson.” The guard made a short bow.

Kale sighed. “That’s what I thought,” he said. He thought for a moment, then strode past the guards and back into his chambers, where he made no effort to close the door quietly after himself. After watching the door for long enough to be reasonably sure the Prince was not going to

reemerge, the guards took their places on either side of the door frame once again. Without turning its head, the elder guard reached out and cuffed the ear of the other.

Træson was lounged across a low couch, pleased to be doing nothing at the moment except resting. The day was made for lack of movement; it was generally assumed that there was too much activity at a revel to spend the day following doing anything but rest. Træson had taken full advantage of his slackened schedule and spent a goodly portion of the day in bed (though, admittedly, little of that time was actually spent sleeping,) before catching up with some training he had fallen behind on with his Warden. He felt pleasantly accomplished.

Or he should have. His mood was marred by a nagging feeling that he was currently trying to identify. There was nothing that needed to be done today, so it couldn't be that he had forgotten to do something. Absolutely no one had come calling with grievances. In fact, the only people he had seen were Elside, his Warden, and...was there anyone else...oh, well, the omnipresent servants, of course. In fact, Træson frowned, he had not heard a word from—

“Has the Prince Kale been about today?” Træson called to one of his valets, stopping the man in his tracks as he scurried from one door to the other. The man's thin face puckered in thought.

“I've no knowledge of such, m'Lord,” he admitted apologetically. He gave Træson a short bow. “Would m'Lord like me to send for His Highness?”

“No,” Træson sighed. “It's not my place to decide where he comes or goes, as much as I'd like it to be, sometimes.” He sank further into his couch, brooding. There was a soft screech of metal against stone as the valet continued on his business, and Træson broke out of his reverie. “Thank you, Aeven,” he added.

“Of course, m'Lord.” The door closed.

After another minute of struggle, Træson sat up, now thoroughly peeved. If he did not get rid of this nagging feeling, he would be sick to the stomach. Already he could feel his gut making a few preparatory twinges, limbering up for a full-on nervous cramp. He got to his feet and paced, every line of his body a sign and signal of his aggravation.

It was no use. He needed distraction.

“I could call Elside,” he mused. His mood lifted slightly at the thought, but it was still soured by the feeling he was forgetting to do something. “I *should* call Elside,” he continued/conceded/amended, and stopped mid-pace. He looked around, and found himself disconcertingly alone except for a single page, standing by the outer door. He gave orders that Elside should be sent for at her earliest convenience, and the page skipped away with a wave of his feathered hat. Træson watched him go. Elside would come, and he could forget all about this irritating sense of unease. His back of his neck prickled, and he rubbed it with his sleeve—his hair was still damp from bathing, but he was too content to be frustrated with the incompetent toweling of his bath attendant. Elside would come. He stared at the door as if expecting her to walk through it any second.

Anxiety turned to the warm thrill of rebellion. It was unspeakable, what they were doing. What did he care that he and Elside were not yet wed, and that it was dangerous to invite her so often to his rooms? What if the servants talked, or the nobles noticed? There would be repercussions, yes; scandal and loss of respectability; both of which could be ruinous for the Crown Prince. It made everything all the more exciting. And if all they did was sat near each other, just near enough to touch, and talked the night through...no one would know any different. It was horribly improper no matter what actually went on, on a level that made his old misadventures, sneaking out to public houses with the Guard or playing thief-catcher with real thieves, look like youthful pranks. This was

serious. He could lose everything because of it. Elside was the most exhilarating and terrifying thing he had ever known.

But was he pushing it too far, inviting her here again, alone? He ought to retain some appearance of regular courting, or people would become curious and start watching them closer. Struck by an idea, he summoned a serving girl and then sent her off with instructions to bring back entertainment. There were worse things than making opportunities to visit with Elsi.

“A few guests, tonight,” he decided aloud. “In the Grievances Hall.” His neck prickled again, and he rubbed at it absentmindedly.

“Well if you’ve made up your mind, I had better leave you to it,” a voice drawled behind him.

“*Phaen*—” Træson took a flailing step forward as if he had been pushed. “Damn you and all your kin to the Abyss!” he snapped, spinning around. “How long have you been sitting there?”

Kale raised his eyebrows. He was perched atop the liquor cabinet, looking suspiciously at ease there. “Is there a right answer to that question?” he asked.

Træson dragged his hands over his face. “No.”

“Then I’ll refrain from answering.” He tapped thoughtfully on the bottle of wine in his lap. “I will say I appreciate you sending away all the servants. It would have been most embarrassing for your Guards to have to explain my being here.”

“How did you—I sent—I mean; where are *your* Guards? How did you get in here?” Træson glanced around as if expecting he had only missed seeing Guards before. Then he realized that he had been facing the outer door, and that Kale was sitting behind him. “*Where* did you get in here?” he clarified.

Kale tipped his head in a shrug, his face all innocence. “Træson, you can’t expect a magician to reveal his secrets,” he chided gently.

Træson made a strangled noise, halfway between a chuckle and squawk of disbelief. “Since when do you associate with parlor-tricks and simple magics?” he accused, jabbing his finger at his brother’s too-open expression.

Kale shrugged. “Just giving in to popular assumption. If you can’t beat them—”

“You need a longer whip,” Træson finished, with feeling. [you fail to give them proper discipline? Something like that?]

“My brother, the Prince Træson,” Kale announced to a non-existent audience, “always so violent.”

Træson threw a cær at him without looking, and Kale lean casually aside so that it missed hitting him across the face. It hit the wall behind him and shattered. Kale looked at it, looked at his brother, and shook his head disapprovingly. Træson reached for another cær, this one lit. Kale raised his hands like he was preparing to catch it, but at the quick movement Træson dove off his couch, pulling his cloak over his eyes.

After a few seconds, he peeked up at Kale, who wiggled his fingers insolently and then extinguished the dim light playing around them. He grinned suddenly; all traits of innocence dissolved in an instant. “I’d forgotten how fun it is to tease you, Traes,” he said.

Træson picked himself off the floor and hid his embarrassment by busily dusting off his clothes. Once he was confident the blush had faded from his face, he granted his brother a glare that would have had courtiers on their knees, groveling. Kale raised his eyebrows and tilted his head apologetically, but his lips were twitching. *You’re fooling no one.* Heart pounding and his knees still trembling slightly from adrenaline, Træson suppressed another blush, threw himself back onto his couch, and crossed his arms over his face.

“Damn you to the Abyss,” he said, and Kale chuckled.

Træson watched his brother from between his arms. Kale traced a patter along the grain of the black oak cabinet he was sitting on; rare, expensive wood.

“Did this come with the Duchess?” he asked.

“It was a gift from Elsi, yes,” Træson replied.

“Very beautiful.” He paused. “And the cabinet is nice, too.”

Træson glowered at him, then sat up warily as Kale slid off the cabinet and landed lightly on the floor.

“What has put you in such a pleasant mood today?” he asked.

The younger Prince’s expression became gleeful again, and he threw his arms wide. “I’m a free man,” he proclaimed, and then shrugged. “And I slept well last night. Or today, I mean. I am not entirely certain *when* I retired, but I only rose a few hours ago.” He held the bottle out towards Træson. “I don’t remember much of last night, actually; just getting back to my rooms at an ungodly hour. Here: a gesture of apology for startling you.”

Træson looked between the bottle and Kale, eyes narrowing. “You don’t drink.”

Kale looked taken aback, as if nonplussed as to what that observation had to do with anything. “No,” he agreed.

“I won’t ask you about last night, mystery that it is; but I will question your taste in wines,” Træson said. “Or lack of taste, as the case may be.” He was rewarded by a pitying, parental look from his younger brother.

“Don’t mock me before you’ve tried it,” he warned.

Træson took the bottle, smirking, and turned over the label; a clay medallion attached to the neck with red string. His face registered mild surprise.

“This is a good vintage,” he admitted. He rubbed his thumb over the worn stamp on the medallion, then set it on the table beside him.

“This is too good to drink now,” he said, rubbing the neck of the bottle. “We’ll save it until a later occasion.” He cut his eyes at his brother. Kale’s expression had not changed, but Træson knew he was pleased.

“Then what shall we do to pass the time?” Kale inquired, looking around for a new place to sit. He decided on a chair, also black oak and plushly cushioned with crimson velvet, and was literally sinking into it as Træson answered.

“The Warden was here earlier—I could call it back, if you’d like. And Elsida should be arriving at anytime.”

“Ah. I’ll take my leave then—”

“No, not at all! Sit down. There are some players arrived from the Northern Districts, and I thought I’d have a few guests over, is all.”

“And Elsida,” Kale said, his serious tone in contrast to the amusement flickering in his eyes.

“Yes,” Træson replied unapologetic. “Problem, little brother?”

“Not with Elsida. Nor with you. But I despise players.”

“You don’t.”

“I absolutely do. If I must sit through a performance by some group of histrionic rabble in paints, I promise you, I will not make a good impression on your...” he caught the look on Træson’s face, “...Elsida.”

“Since when do you dislike players so much? You practically wanted to be one, at one time.”

“I would like to think I’ve matured since I was in my eighth year.”

“It’s not immature to enjoy good acting, now and again,” Træson protested. “It’s refreshing, after the Court.”

“Gods know there’s enough abysmal acting there,” Kale agreed.

“Will you come, then?”

“I’ve business to take care of,” Kale claimed. He smoothed his clothes haughtily and stood, but his usual grace was hampered a little by the lushness of the chair. Træson turned his snicker into dubious cough. Kale flicked sparks at him.

“Go away, then,” Træson shooed at him with a lackluster wave, leaning back on his couch. “I don’t need your melodrama spoiling the rest of an excellent evening.”

“Have fun,” Kale replied sarcastically.

“You’re a child, Kale.”

The younger Prince sent his brother a rather discourteous gesture over his shoulder as he strode to the main door—the main entry this time, Træson noted, watching him until he no longer could without turning his head. A second later, the bells by the door jingled a warning and a servant’s voice piped into the room.

“The Duchess Elside has arrived, your Imperial Majesty.”

Træson looked around. There was no sign of Kale.

“Let her in, of course,” he frowned. A second later, Elside swept in, as willowy and graceful as a reed in wind. The door was closed behind her.

“What is it, *tdircha?*” she asked of his expression.

“Oh, it’s...did you pass anyone on your way out?”

Her face brightened slightly, but she shook her head. Several locks of fine, silvery hair slid out of her braid. She was forever redoing her hair. “No. Are you waiting for someone?”

“Only you,” Træson replied, and opened his arms. She laughed and skipped lightly over to join him, and then curled up on top of him with her head on his chest. He tucked her loosened hair behind her ear absentmindedly. Kale was forgotten.

“What shall we do tonight?” she asked.

“I thought we might have some guests. And players. What do you think?”

“In here?”

“In the Hall.”

“That sounds nice.” She ran her fingers around the embossed buttons on his jacket. “How many guests?”

“No more than ten. Whoever you want, as long as you include me.”

“Must I?”

“Do you have someone else in mind?”

“I *have* thought about talk talking Aerian into getting me a companion.”

“Mm.” Træson rested his chin on her head. “Should I be jealous?”

Elsida giggled. “You tell me,” she teased, tapping on his chest.

“Girl or boy?”

“I am not sure.”

“Hm. Doesn’t really matter, anyway. Will I be meeting him or her?”

“I hope so.”

“Will him or her be sleeping with you?”

She punched him lightly. “That’s a very personal question,” she said, pretending to be shocked.

He chuckled. “Alright. Um...Am I bigger? Ow! ‘Es just a question!” He rubbed his shoulder. “You *are* talking about an animal companion, aren’t you? I wouldn’t advise getting one any taller than I am.”

“Furry, feathered, or scaled,” she said. “And that is not what you meant.”

“It is. If you’re looking for advice, I can recommend an excellent breeder of cats.”

She laughed, and then saw that he was serious, and her expression became worried. “Cats much be very different here than in my land,” she said at last.

“Probably,” Træson agreed.

“I was thinking a little Sap-Tongue,” she said, settling down again and picking at his jacket clasps.

“No,” Træson said forcefully. “No lizards.”

“Oh, Træson—they are so sweet,” she protested.

“No lizards. I forbid it.”

“Maerin even found me a glass box for it, and a cær that makes heat,” Elside continued, and sat up a little in her excitement. “And they have feet that stick to walls!”

“They don’t stick,” Træson grumbled. “They have tiny claws that find cracks in the stone. It’s disturbing.”

“It is nice,” she said forcefully, using emphasis where she lacked a more complex word.

“It won’t be nice when the little slimy thing crawls up between your sheets in the middle of the night and—” Træson cut off when he realized the look of horror on her face was not because of the lizard, as would be reasonable, but because of his chosen setting for his tale of terror. His face matched hers for a moment, and then he felt humor bubbling up. He tried to look properly abashed. “I didn’t mean—”

She slapped him.

“You are intolerable,” Elside announced, and then was almost pushed off the couch when Træson rolled over, shaking with gales of laughter. Eyes sparkling despite herself, Elside made like she was going to hit him again and Træson caught her hands, igniting a battle that was a great deal hampered by both of them giggling like youths. It ended suddenly when Træson jabbed forward to grab her shoulder and Elside twisted to avoid him, the result of which was that he caught his hand in the swoop of her neckline.

“Oo—I’m sorry,” he gasped between pants of laughter, but he did not remove his hand. Her skin was smooth, and even softer than her hair. He traced a path up to her shoulder. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to—”

Her eyes met his, bright with humor and something much more dangerous. Her cheeks were flushed with their tussle. He hesitated, she paused; the split second in a storm after the lightning strikes and before the thunder hits. Then she was pushing him back on the couch, moving slowly as if against a great gale. He did not resist. She paused, an inch from kissing him, and closed her eyes. Træson twined his fingers through her hair, pulled her closer, her breath cool against his lips—

The bells over the door jingled and they sat up hurriedly, moving apart, straightening themselves. Træson glanced down at himself and then hastily began doing up the various buttons and other clasps on his jacket. He missed a few and had to start over again, swearing under his breath.

“Yes?” Træson called after too long of a moment. His tone was practiced, cool and imperial; but as he said it he made a face at Elside that was vaguely embarrassed but not in the least apologetic, better fit on a mischievous youth than a Crown Prince. She paused in the midst shaking out her hair—it had almost completely come out of her braid—and gave him a chagrined grin back. Then the door opened, and Træson stood quickly, demeanor properly rigid.

“Your Imperial Highness.”

“Ah, Aeven. Have the players arrived?” He stepped slightly to the side, blocking the servant’s view of Elside as she adjusted her gown.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Then see that they are settled. And fetch a Page for me—I’ll have them gather the guests.”

“Right away, Your Highness.”

“Oh, and Aeven — what do the players intend to show for us tonight?”

“I believe they have planned a performance of “The Fyfe of the Graet Draegon,” Your Highness. A classic.”

The door closed again. Træson held a hand out to Elsida and she took it and stood. She gave him a mischievous look.

“No lizards,” she muttered to him, and led him, scowling, to the Hall.

Here ends the novel so far. This is a work in progress, and the story will span several books. I have included some of my next section of work, which is still in need of transitions and polishing.

***Several weeks later: Series of Vignettes**

“You are a terrible liar.”

“On the contrary, dear brother—I am an *excellent* liar,” Kale retorted smoothly. “If I wasn’t, you’d never know when to trust me and when not to, and would thus come to the accurate conclusion that I am untrustworthy. I, of course, don’t intend to let that conclusion occur.”

“I don’t trust you now.”

“But only because I don’t want you to. Were I actually lying, you would not be able to tell. I could, in fact, be lying about being a good liar, but I’m not—it sets a good precedent for me to break later.” Kale crossed his legs, and his lips twitched up. “In fact, I challenge you to think of a time when I have *ever* been caught in a lie that I did not intend to be caught in.”

Træson frowned. “As if you would admit that anything I think of, you didn’t *intend* to be caught in.”

“I will fully admit to any examples you can remember,” Kale promised.

“I don’t believe you will.”

“I *swear* that I will admit to any instance you can think of when I was discovered in an honest lie.”

Træson raised his eyebrows. “I’ll need that signed.”

“In blood, I presume?”

“Preferably; as long as you don’t bleed on my carpets.”

“I’ll be sure to.”

“You bastard.”

“Really, though—” Kale leaned forward. “Think of a time.”

Træson squinted at the ceiling, sat back on his couch, rubbed at his chin. Then he tilted his head in a shrug. “Alright. You win for now. But I’m going to keep thinking.”

“You do that. Would you like alcohol to help your mental process?”

“Sounds like a counteractive plan. Yes.”

Nocix poured. *description of wine* *approval...very drunk*

“I assure you, I might not drink wine, but I’m well-versed in the theory of it,” Kale said. Træson burst into laughter.

“Kale— you cannot seriously believe that knowing the theory of something is the same as knowing it altogether,” he said, once he had recovered himself. Kale gestured to the wine in answer.

Go to the Temple. Still very drunk. Receive summons to the Emperor; Removing weapons.

The Guard looked wary as they mounted the summit of the path, though that could be less to do with its news and more to do with its dislike of heights. It was sitting well back on his chosen rock, gloved fingers tapping nervously on its leg.

“Nocix,” Træson greeted, panting from the climb. He raised a hand as if apologetic for his lack of elegance. “Keeping the night?” he continued once he had his breath back.

“Well enough,” Nocix replied. It nodded to Kale, who had clambered gracefully to sit atop a rock over its head, and then turned back to Træson. “You’ve been summoned,” it said.

Træson did not try to hide his surprise. “...who?”

“Who do you think?” it asked. Træson had known Nocix long enough to recognize the ways that it fretted over things, and impatience was one of the most significant tools in the Guard’s defensive arsenal. For Nocix to be this nervous, it could only mean the Emperors. Træson swallowed.

“When?”

“Now,” Nocix replied edgily. It looked up at the dark mass on top of the rock above him. “You as well, Prince Kale.”

Kale’s shadow jerked in surprise, and then leaned forward. Træson could sense his brother staring at him, despite the almost nonexistent light. He studiously kept his gaze on Nocix.

“We’ll come,” he said, motioning Kale to come down from his perch; but when he looked up, his brother was already gone. Nocix swore loudly.

“It’s fine. He’ll be there,” Træson assured his friend, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Walk with me.”

Nocix obliged, slipping a little as it stood up again. Træson pretended not to notice Nocix’s hand clutched on his arm—it would be immensely embarrassing to the Guard to admit it needed assistance. Together they made their way around the widening curves, heading steadily back to the City. It gleamed ahead of them, immense and white, appearing to float in the darkness over the low curves of the cliffs between. The path to the Temple led down an outcrop on the tor that supported the great City, and from certain points it looked as if the sculpted towers and domes were on a different island. Windows glittered, some open, some glazed with crystal or glass, some colored, some not. Where the windows blinked in the highest towers, where the stone was capped in black granites, marbles, and onyx, it seemed that the stars were descending in a vertical veil over the City.

Night had truly fallen now. As the moon reached quarter-sky, the wind dropped as if the doors to the heavens had closed, and the gods stopped breathing. For a moment, all seemed silent in the absence. Then the listeners became aware of a different howling, closer and more sinister. It rose from the Abyss like a deadly miasma. There was something feral about the shrieks, and something human, as well—sometimes they rose in high, wheedling pitches, like the screams of a newborn, and other times they growled and guttered and hacked like the breath of a thousand deathly ill, all inhaling and exhaling in tandem. Though he had spent his childhood listening to the sound under the wind, Træson still felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. He saw Nocix suppress a shudder, as well.

“I’ve never heard them so close to the edge,” it said weakly, and Træson felt a twinge of sympathy for his friend. Nocix did not do well with being near the edges of the tors to begin with, but to hear the River Glories’ voices rising from the depths, practically beneath one’s feet, was an experience more blood-curdling entirely.

“Order number three,” Træson said, and Nocix chuckled. It was an old joke between them, one that Nocix had started back when the report of Dæslin’s death had elevated Træson to heir. Træson had had lost his temper while inspecting the servants that afternoon, ripping through several silk sheets and reducing no less than three laundresses to tears. Nocix had been called to quell the disturbance, only to find the Prince in a state of nervous collapse in the sitting room. It had not coddled the Prince, and eventually Træson was incensed enough to throw a punch, the result of which found the Prince sprawled on the floor, his friend’s foot on his chest. In exchange for being let up, Træson had promised that, after being throned Emperor, that he would send all of his forces to find a way to rid the Abyss of River Glories—after raising his brother to Counsel and Nocix to First Duke. True to form, Nocix had never let Træson forget the promise.

Now, however, mirth was overtaken by the eeriness of night on the tors, and the two headed back to the City at a quick pace, acting as nonchalant as they could manage. Once inside the gates, Nocix shivered and drew its hands into its cloak sleeves.

“I’m almost ready to take Gwenir up on his offer,” it admitted, glancing around the quiet street as they strode towards the center of the City.

“What is the criminal selling now?” Træson asked with a snort.

“Old jangles it claims are Aenien protection talismans.”

“With crystallized giant tears, I presume?”

“And phoenix feathers,” Nocix answered with a grin. “Though they looked suspiciously similar to the ones Gwen mucked off of the floors of the aeries last week.”

Træson laughed appreciatively.

Inside the Palace, the two were divulged of their cloaks and gloves by a litany of gray-liveried servants. The wind had picked up again just as they had entered the innermost gates encircling the Palace, and their outside-garb was stiff and crackling with frost. Træson exchanged his dark, afternoon jacket for the pale blue evening one proffered to him by a servant. He brushed his hair back from his face and grinned at Nocix.

“Do I look presentable?” he asked rakishly.

“Stunning,” Nocix replied with a twinkle in its eye. “I should hate to be Elsida tonight. She’ll be positively jealous of your attention.”

“Alas that I go to less sympathetic company,” Træson sighed. “Well, Nocix—lead on.” Nocix bowed and, exiting through doors held wide by demurring servants, lead the way through the busy halls towards the Center of the Palace, and the Emperors.

The wind dropped. The River Glories howled. And in the Temple to the Goddess Phaeneros, the Priests and Priestesses began to sing.

*Phaene, Phaene, Phaeneros abpeiche
E lorim kache forit duonm
To you, Goddess of the Eternal Depths
To you, Possessor of the Last Kindness
We call in Awe, to your Terrible Glory
A feirim, tase nirum
Te neire, Te neire, aese kirifi
Your Word is greater than all
Your Judgment is greater than all
You are all
And your completion is yourself
Phaene, Phaene, Phaeneros abpeiche
E lorim kache forit duonm
Here in the Temples we pray to the Many
Yet in you even Gods find their renewal
Goddess of Darkness, Goddess of the Deep
When we quail before you
You give us no relief in Your Name
A feirim, tase nirum
Te neire, Te neire, aese kirifi
And so we worship, as you have taught us
Hoping our hands, reaching out in the Dark,*

*Will not fall on blades too sharp.
 Phaene, Phaene, Phaeneros abpeiche
 E lorim kache forit duonm
 A feirim, tase nirum
 Te neire, Te neire, aese kirifi*

Kale strode across the white rocks, even his shadow invisible to the world. He knew he could reach the Palace before Træson and Nocix had made it so far as the gates by taking this high path above the road. The summons to meet the Emperor had come as a surprise, and he had business to attend to first. Despite what his brother might think, he was well adjusted to his place in the sunlight—such things suited him. Træson was misled by the years of Kale lurking behind him, working quietly in the shadows while their elder brothers basked in their public roles. He had seen Træson's worried looks, his concern that Kale would not adjust well to his new-found fame. This, Kale thought with a grim smile, was because Træson himself was frightened by his own popularity, and would—or could—never admit such a thing, being the one who loved all his people and was similarly loved by all.

The youngest Prince had no such liabilities. While Træson had always been open-hearted and kind, retaining a sort of lovable innocence even when raging fierce enough to blow a sitting room to shreds, Kale had been the patient one; and so he was now. For years he had sat in the meeting halls of the Provincial Ambassadors, listening to them, learning from them. He had picked up a quick wit and an excitement for politics, manipulation and intrigue. Only once, as a quite young child, had he spoken up in one of these diplomatic meetings—the resulting memory of which still made him flush, and had earned his *gaeta* several hard slaps and banned the Prince from future events of the kind. The threat had lasted a week and a half, after which Kale had returned, invisibly, to sit in the corner of the room. When he had made his official debut as a student of diplomacy seven years ago, he had set many courtiers on edge by his impossible knowledge of their pasts.

Now, he was one of the most valuable members of the Court—a fact that no one else but he knew. Officially, Kale was still forbidden from making any final decisions. That was the realm of his Father, his Mother and, eventually, Træson. But it was not coincidence that three-quarters of the compromises reached by the various Imperial diplomats aligned with the agenda of the Royal Family.

At the moment the Monarch's agenda was hazy. Kale's self-appointed task was to make sure no one became too heated while his family came to a decision regarding the Carotine Crisis. It was none too easy. The Courtiers were antsy, as the powerful become when reminded of their own frailty. There came a point when even the threat of the Emperor's disagreement could go no further, and it was at this point that Monarchs were toppled and institutions overthrown. Kale had no intention of allowing this to happen. His presence in the conferences had a dampening effect on the diplomats' ire, but he was one man, albeit an influential one, and they would realize this eventually. Even now, they were meeting to discuss the nobility's response to the Carotine. If Kale was correct, the Princes had been summoned to the Emperor because a decision had been reached—but if Kale did not make it to the courtiers' conference in time, there was sure to be conflict. He needed to distract them, keep them from reaching a decision, before he could receive the Emperor's official Word. It had been months since he had been called to the Emperor's presence, and their meetings were never this unexpected, so there was a fair chance the Emperor was planning something subversive.

Inside the City gates, men and women, mostly women, were hurrying about the darkened streets. Some packed up their stalls for the nights, while others kindled the *crae* globes outside of their doors to signal their houses or businesses open for the evening. Wisps of smoke, soft and blue and bitter, rose from the latticed grates in the top of the *crae*, before being whisked away by the ever-present wind. The Prince strode through the middle of the cobbled street, which was reserved for royalty and, as such, almost always empty, even though the Imperial Family rarely walked the streets anymore.

Soon, however, Kale found his way blocked. A gaggle of shopkeepers were crowded around one merchant's storefront, the result of which stretched all the way across the narrow street. The Prince's brow creased at the delay, and briefly he considered unveiling himself in order to force his way through—but this was likely to turn on him, as eager citizens begged for news and requested audiences, if not with him, then with one of his family. For a minute, Kale simply waited for the people to move. Someone pushed past him without bothering to look to see who they had shoved, and Kale followed them. The person, well-cloaked against the wind, brushed through the crowd to the center, where the unfortunate merchant was struggling to light her *crae*, while yelling at one of the other merchants

"Fool! Idiot! Daughter of a e'Shœni *dama!* Trying to sell me cheap *Cal* imitations! Look at this crowd! They all witness your incompetence!"

"I am most sorry, Miss," a woman replied, eyes trained on the ground in front of the irate merchant's feet. Her clothes were well-made but simple, and she had her long, curled hair tied in a pile on the back of her head. Her voice had the muffled, subdued tones of one close to tears. "Perhaps if you brought it out of the wind to light it—"

"What kind of fool do you think I am?" the merchant screeched. "Take it inside, and burn the place down?"

The younger woman bit her lip. "I did not mean—"

"Of course not," the merchant snarled sarcastically. She drew back her head, and then spat at the woman's feet. "Good-for-nothing girl! You can take your trade somewhere else!"

Ah, so that was the issue. Kale stepped closer, winding lithely around the front of the crowd, and stepped across the circle to take a closer look at the plainly-dressed woman. Her cloak was too thin, and she was shivering in the night air. She wore no gloves, her reddened fingers twisting in anxiety and humiliation. She was, doubtless, a labor-worker or apprentice in the merchant's house, almost certainly under orders to bring her Mistress proper lighting while not given enough money to buy *Cal* from the reliable sellers. Judging by the state of her dress, she had sacrificed her own pay on numerous occasions before to provide for her Mistress—but this time she had succumbed to the calls of the shabby street-sellers, and now found her thrift being thus rewarded. In several quick looks, Kale took in the neat, almost unnoticeable patches on her gray cloak, her calloused fingertips, the defensiveness with which she held her basket of offending *Cal* nuts. Then he turned to the merchant, who was shoving the *car* lamp under people's noses for them to witness the lack of burning taking place inside.

"See!" she barked. "*Cal* shells! The girl brings me the husks, and expects me not to notice! How am I supposed to keep a business when my customers cannot see my door?"

"Ah, Lessi, give the girl a break," one man suggested with a jerk of his under-hat.

"I shan't! She's a right little fae child, and I won't be responsible for her anymore! You see!" she pushed the glass globe into his chest. He held it up and inspected it, frowning. It was a fine *car*, made of a thin, fine crystal, engraved around the rim and lidded with a steel grate. "Barely even smoking!" the merchant continued, in full rant now. "These *Cal* wouldn't catch if the flames of the God descended on them!"

At that moment, there was a flash of light in the lamp and an explosive popping sound. The merchant shrieked and fell back backwards to the cobbles, leaving the shocked crowd member holding the globe. The rest of the watchers pulled their arms down slowly from their eyes, blinking away the after image. Breast heaving, the merchant waved away help and she pushed herself to her feet. She gaped at the light, her lamp now burning steadily in the bewildered man's hands. She approached cautiously, then snatched it away, face starting to flush.

This, Kale decided, was an excellent moment to take his leave. He stepped under the eave of the merchant's house to avoid the sudden rush of people coming to gawk at the sudden light, and then headed back across the circle towards the Palace. Kale felt mischievously content. He had been as surprised as anyone at the *Cal's* dramatic lighting—he had compensated for the poor quality of the nuts by compressing his magic more tightly than was needed—the reaction was one of good quality, high-end *Cal*. The merchant woman, unless completely incompetent, had been lying about the poor quality. Well, she could come up with her own explanation as to the lamp's sudden lighting. He had wasted too much time here, and was guaranteed to earn some very pointed looks from the other courtiers. Still, as he neared the other side of the circle, he allowed a smile to pull across his wan face.

Just as he passed the unfortunate apprentice, who was gaping along with everyone else, there was commotion from behind. The merchant had overcome her shock, and was now reeling mad.

"Witch! Child of the Abyss!" she screamed, and hurled the lamp at the younger woman. Fortunately for her, her Mistress had a poor arm, made even worse in her emotion. The *cær* hurdled past her by a footlength to strike Kale's turned back. He stumbled a step into the crowd and then flickered into visibility. There was a sudden, shocked stillness as the crystal shattered on the cobbles, and the Prince turned slowly around to face the merchant. A murmur went around the circle, those close enough to see whispering excitedly to their neighbors, and the circle knelt in ripples outward. Soon, the only ones standing were the Kale, the merchant, and the cringing apprentice girl. Arm still outstretched in the act of lobbing the lamp, the merchant woman was frozen in place; it made the dawning realization of her crime wonderfully obvious. She had, for all practical purposes, attacked a son of the Emperor. Her face turned a moldy shade of white, and then pink, before progressing finally to a blotched and ugly green.

"My...my Lord," she stammered, and then her rational conscious kicked in and she fell to her knees in obeisance. Kale stared at her coldly for a long moment before turning to the young woman. She looked up, started, and began to drop to her knees as well, but Kale touched her shoulder with a shake of his head.

"Are you alright?" he asked quietly. She stared at him for a moment, and then nodded, wide-eyed.

"Good," he said. He scrutinized her face, double-checking that she was telling the truth. Then, walking back across the eerily silent circle, Kale bent down in front of the merchant woman. In shock and horror at the turn of her night she was crying silently to herself with her head resting between her outstretched arms. She looked up fearfully at the Prince's approach.

"My Lord, please—you know I meant no harm," she sobbed. Her chin was flecked with spittle, and her nose was running in her fear, mucus sparkling on her upper lip. She wept, open-mouthed, so that her well-kept teeth were bared in deference. "Please, have mercy on your servant!"

Kale resisted the urge to role his eyes. He had much more important things to do than to deal with this woman's inane blubbering, but he was, after all, a Prince, and a certain decorum was necessary. He reached out a hand, and the merchant recoiled with a shrill squeak reminiscent of a roc chick falling from its nest.

“Your ring,” he said, unable to conceal all of his impatience. Despite her evident fear that the Prince was going to order her drawn and hung from the City gates at any moment, the merchant frowned at this request.

“...My...my ring? Oh, no, m’Lord—this ring has been in the family for centuries, I couldn’t possibly—” she faltered, swallowed. Kale had not moved, and it was clear there was no compromise forthcoming. She fumbled with the ring, a sapphire-studded band with the crest of her family’s guild set into the top stone, and handed it shakily to the young Monarch. Kale nodded, rose, and returned once more to the young woman. He placed the ring in her hand, and closed her fingers around it. A murmur rose from the crowd in recognition of the act.

“Your name?” he whispered.

“Saera Eleth.”

“Let it be known,” Kale announced to the crowd at large, “that on this eve, Saera Eleth becomes Mistress of her own house, and this House is the House of her ancestors and of her descendants. She wears her honor on her brow, leading always with wisdom, and on her hand, working always with justice. So have you witnessed.” Kale looked around the circle, matching his gaze against each of the silent watchers. No one met his eyes. No one moved. Kale was not entirely certain how he was supposed to get out of the middle of this crowd.

He raised his eyebrows. “Well? Let the Lady enter her House.”

There was pause, and Kale nodded to the young woman, who was still staring at the sapphire ring in her hand. At his nod, she took a step forward. Immediately the crowd whirled into activity, several merchants dashing up to take the basket from her arm and others helped to pick up the fallen merchant. Before he could turn away, the young woman, Saera, caught his eye, and made a very deliberate gesture; hand in a fist, she drew a line through the air over her breast with her thumb. Then she disappeared from view under a bundle of other merchants, ushering her into the house. Kale slipped out through the back of the crowd, feeling a little shaken but making an effort to acknowledge those who noticed him with a brief pressure on their arm. Finally, he passed through the outermost ring of onlookers and was back on the street. He centered himself, drawing a deep breath of the chill night air, and then strode up the road to the Palace without looking back.

Kale glanced at the moon, calculating quickly. Træson and Nocix had probably passed him by now, due to his little delay. If he hurried, he could catch them; maybe Træson could distract the Emperor until he could—no. It was an idiotic idea. He would simply have to wait until after meeting with the Emperor to speak with the diplomats.

It took some time to change. His cloak was removed by the servants, who he then dismissed. After a few minutes he emerged again, dressed in cream silk Royals and soft leather gloves, cheeks still burnt from the cold and otherwise as pale as ice. He set a steady course for the Emperor’s rooms, trying not to needle himself too much about missing the diplomatic meeting. For the sake of the Gods, it was not as if the Empire was going to fall due to his absence at one, single—damn.

Drawn by the spur of the moment, Kale took a sharp right, scattering servants. At the end of the hall he paused to straighten his jacket, and then waited for the guards to push open the stone doors. As soon as he walked in, he was impressed by a sense of uneasy silence, fresh fallen. Unperturbed, Kale let his eyes roam slowly around the room, accounting for each presence, gauging the climate. There were seventeen Courtiers in attendance, not counting him or the servants: two or three from each of the four cardinal districts of Usiana, with one representing the district as a whole and the others representing subdivisions; three Carotinian Ambassadors; and two from the Outer Districts, which were really provinces in and of themselves.

He recognized the Carotinian Ambassador at once, and winced inwardly. She, alone, had not seemed to notice his entrance. Instead, she was continuing to talk quietly but intently to the man next to her, her face turned towards him and the velvet tapestry behind him. The tapestry was a shield for the crystal-glazed window that formed the entirety of the Northeastern wall, now covered against the dark. Upon its folds the story of the Anaoedhin lineage slashed and warred and treated, culminating in the transformation of the kingdom to an Empire. The visage of the current Emperor glowered sternly at the top of the tapestry, reminding them all of his ever watchful presence; Kale shivered involuntarily under the black gaze of his Father, and then gestured for the doors to be closed behind him.

As soon as the doors thumped safely closed, the air in the room grew colder—not in the sense that something cold had entered, but rather that heat had dissipated, evaporated under a hot sun. Several of the statue-like courtiers shifted in their chairs, glancing at each other across the long slab that occupied the center of the room. A servant drew Kale's chair out, and the Prince sat with a nod of acknowledgment to him before he faded back into the shadows around the edges of the room. *Car* sat down the length of the black slab, reflecting like spirit lights in its polished surface. Courtier eyes glittered like flecks of mica in the gloom.

"Continue," the Prince demurred with a wave of his hand. There was a pause, and then—

"We ought to act *now*," a man insisted in a surprisingly smooth, persuasive voice. He had a face like a pile of mud, layered with fat and thinner as it went up, so that the top of his head was nearly the same size as the first of his chins. "There is little time to lose. The people must be protected. If action is not immediately undertaken, the populace will surely begin to notice. We cannot protect them forever."

"Protect *them*?" snapped the man sitting next to the Carotinian Ambassador. Like her, he was dressed in the tight fitting garb of the Carotine; unlike her, his dusty-tan jacket was marked by only one stripe of black, next to her three. "What about *us*? Just who are you referring to, Maethen?" There was a murmur of dissent around the table at this outburst, seemingly undirected toward either party.

"Lord Lin, I'm sure the Lord Jaen did not intend to insult the Carotine in such a barbaric fashion as it appeared," the Carotinian Ambassador murmured to her companion, eyes slicing across the table with such dislike that it was clear she meant her words to be heard by more than just the Lord Lin.

"Who do you imagine is fighting your wars, Lord Jaen?" an Outer District representative was demanding smoothly, leaning forward on the table so that he could see the offending Courtier. "If not the people, then we must assume you want to raise an army of Nobles?" There was some laughter at this, tittering and mirthless, while Jaen attempted to salvage his point.

"Of course...of course not—I simply would like to draw attention to the fact that innocent lives are going to be lost whether or not we return the rebel's fight, and if such loss of life is to be stalled as soon as possible, there is no other viable option than a quick and *decisive* strike *now*, before the situation gets out of control!" He banged his fist against the stone for emphasis. The *car* across from him jittered.

"This is exactly *why* we cannot forsake diplomacy! You would see the Carotine burned to the base of the Abyss! What of the people then?"

"Are we sitting here to watch as the Empire crumbles? After nearly **forty** years of peace—"

"Forty years of peace! Is this what you call peace? Constant fear of **Pharsi** invading the city, of rebels still lurking within the walls, of patrols disappearing on the road to Usiana?"

"Sit down, Lady Tara—you are quite burnt, I believe—"

“How *dare* you insinuate that I am incapable! We of the Outer District must work for our living, unlike the privileged of the White City. Have you checked your wine for mold, lately, Lord Saent?”

Kale sat back and watched the chaos beginning to bubble over. At least one ambassador was looking positively murderous, and the others were not far behind. He should probably step in before murder was committed. The Prince closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, placing his gloved hands splayed on the table surface for balance. The Courtiers on either side of him noticed and fell silent, sitting back in their chairs and waiting with something like apprehension on their faces. Kale opened his eyes again, and, staring into the flame of the *car*, let the pieces form in his mind and then fall into their places, slotting together like mosaic tiles, ready to drip from his mouth in a miniature painting of the much larger portrait always being completed in his mind.

He cleared his throat, quietly. “The Emperor,” he said, “has made a decision concerning the matter of the currant uprisings in the Carotine.”

As soon as they realized he was speaking, the Courtiers began sinking back into their chairs, some still frozen even in the act of refuting an opponent, their hand raised to make a point. It was evident they had forgotten that he was there—which was exactly what the Prince had hoped for. Now, he had seen enough. Though he was not apt to repeat himself, this time Kale waited until they were completely attentive once more, and then again made his declaration. A new tension fizzled into life in the room. It seemed even the *car* burned brighter, fueled by the excitement in the air. Kale took another moment to gather his thoughts—he knew it would increase their interest, and his next words had to be chosen with the absolute care since, of course, he had not yet been told what the Emperor’s decision concerning this matter had been. The Carotinian Ambassador crossed her arms, and Kale was sufficiently galvanized by the movement to continue.

“The Emperor will be calling an official meeting to explain the situation clearly,” he announced, meeting their eyes stare for stare. “He asks that you are *prepared*.” He let the connotations of this word ring for a moment, then directed his gaze to the Carotinian Ambassadors. “The Empress,” he said significantly, “will, of course, be an integral part of the proceedings.”

The Ambassador nodded once, lips thin.

Kale stood, and the servant emerged from the shadows to pull his chair back and rearrange the cape around his shoulders.

“I will personally call on each of you when the Emperor decides to make his announcement to you,” the Prince said smoothly. “For now, we only ask that you find sleep expansive as the sky.” He turned to go, his hands fidgeting. He was undoubtedly late, now. If his Father had been someone different, he might have hoped the he would understand the circumstances of Kale’s lateness—but as it was, Kale would be lucky if he could escape a loss of rank, besides the inevitable humiliation before the Court.

“My Lord!” One of the Courtiers—Saent, he thought; no one else had quite that ability to annoy so profoundly in so few syllables. Kale half-turned, looking over his shoulder. For the sake of the Gods, the man had actually stood up. Once again, Kale reigned in his impatience. He did not bother prompting the Courtier; the displeasure surely noticeable on his face would do. Sure enough, Saent looked a little sheepish as he continued, “How long will we wait, if it pleases my Lord? Surely time is of the essence.” He trailed off, coughed nervously, and generally looked like he would give his entire tor-land estate to sit down and not be noticed for at least a week.

Kale looked around the room once more, eyes flicking from one Courtier to the other like a snake’s perusing a nest of mice. Only the Carotines remained stolid, meeting his eye with all the intensity of their warrior **stereotype**. Saent sank slowly back into his chair, humiliated. Normally, Kale would leave the room at that, but he was feeling particularly stressed that evening, and he could

not help but add, as a parting statement, **“Something really snarky and profound that I can’t think of at two am.”**

Outside the door Kale vanished once more, not wanting to deal with Guards following him about. He made it safely down several halls before finally sinking back against a wall, gasping a little for breath. There was cold sweat under his high collar, and his knees were shaking. He had overcome the urge to disappear whenever a roomful of people turned their eyes towards him, but it was still hardly pleasant. This had been the first time it had happened since he had returned from the Temple. There had been the revel, of course, but it did not count—he had had a script, then, and was still running on a good amount of excitement from his adventures that day. Now, though...he rubbed a hand across his face. He had someplace to be. **And so do I, so this part ends here.**

It was broken, but she was determined to fix things now, before the Empire came to a crisis from which it could not recover. The Empress moved around the square table with the concentration of a strategist planning her next move in ‘tors.’ Set in the center of the polished granite block was a map in shallow counter-relief, dotted with metal figurines clutching rubies or sapphires to their armored chests. These she tapped and prodded into various positions, her red-gold eyes flashing.

“No,” she would murmur, and begin again, this time with the ruby figurines advancing in an arc while the sapphire stayed in a huddle in the center, and again, this time with the sapphire fanning out behind the engraving marked *the Carotine Acropolis* while the ruby figurines split into three groups, advancing from the desert in different directions. She paused, fingers hovering over the map, brow creased and still. Then, without any passion, the Empress tipped over all the figurines, one by one. Cloth, or soft-souled boots, shuffled behind her.

“Enter, Træson,” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

“Mother,” Træson greeted. He looked around, as if expecting for someone else to appear out of the war tapestries or simple chairs. He was fiddling with his fingers, the Empress noticed.

“It is of poor respect for a Prince to have nervous habits,” she scolded, and Træson jumped and put his hands forcefully to his sides, flushing red.

“My apologies, m’Lady,” he mumbled, eyes downcast. She turned back to her map and sighed. It was of no use; it was already too late. If the reports of a new rebellion were completely accurate, then the Carotine would be lost before she could so much as summon the army. Her homeland...It had been so long since she had walked the pale, limestone roads of the Acropolis, since she had smelt the freshness of wind off the sea...

“M’Lady?”

The Empress blinked slowly against the memories, regretful at the forced return to the present. “Yes?” she asked, a little testily. Træson shifted uncomfortably, catching himself at the last moment before his hands began fiddling again.

“I was told that the Emperor had requested to see the Prince Kale and I,” he explained. His eyes caught momentarily in the Empress’s, and he shifted them away again with haste.

“Where is your brother, then?” The Empress left her map, and walked over to a low couch with a briskness that could only be explained by the fact that she was wearing trousers beneath her layered gown. This had been a trait of the Empress’ that Træson could remember back to his earliest days in the nursery—and it had been quite shocking to him, as well as to his women friends, that this trait was quite eccentric to his mother and not most courtier girls, discovered quite by accident one afternoon when he was thirteen. Since then, Træson had always kept a private game running in the back of his mind when in the presence of the Empress. Eventually, he invited Kale to the game

with him, and together they attempted to determine whether their mother was actually dressed fully in her finery or if she was preparing to dash off and lead the Usianian military at any available second.

The Empress had no knowledge of this game, and she was not in the mood for trifles today. “Well?” she asked again, coolly impatient. “Have you left the Prince Kale in the hall, or has he deigned not to attend to the Emperor’s wishes tonight?”

Træson winced. “I have not seen him, m’Lady, since we received the summons from Nocix on our way returning from the Temple.”

The Empress looked sharply at Træson’s arms; and so pointed and sharp was the glance that the Prince looked scared lest his bandages be cut open and his wounds refreshed under his light blue cloak.

“I see,” was all she said, and sat. Her gaze turned to the corner of the room as her thoughts began to wander once again. She would contact the Ambassador tonight—hopefully she would have warmed to the Usianian culture by that point, the Carotine having a stereotype of not liking change, and were thus notoriously difficult to sway... The Empress had scheduled a stress-free day for the visiting dignitaries, with plenty of opportunities to exert their competitive natures before reaching the benches. They would never be malleable, but if she could just melt their shells a little in order to reach the most important matters quicker...

Prince Træson was still standing in the doorway, looking like a lost kit. “Visit your Father!” she snapped, and he jumped and bowed.

“Yes, m’Lady, right away,” he demurred, and crossed quickly through the sitting room to the door near the windows, through which lay the Emperor’s study. He opened the door, glanced back at his mother, and then entered quickly, face flushing once again. The Empress barely noticed. Her mind was whirling, tasting different words, conjuring different scenarios that might arise with the Ambassadors. The figurines were haunting her, with their rubies and sapphires, reminding her how far she had come, how far she had to fall. No matter how delicately they were made, those figures symbolized death. They represented all those who had already died in this bloody, always simmering war. They represented her sons, taken from her by her own people. She had betrayed them, and, in their turn, they had returned the favor. What she would give to upset time, drag the days and minutes from the Abyss where, even now, the corpses of her children doubtless lay. She would not see any more of her people die.

The Empress had just made a resolution to fix one more phalanx positioning when there was a knock at the door. The Prince Kale, no doubt. Her lips grew thin with annoyance; not so much because of the interruption but at the lack of integrity and punctuality shown by her two sons. They had so far to go. There was a pause, as the knocker waited for an answer—well, he did not need her permission to enter a room. After another long moment, the Empress shook her head and began replacing the figurines upright between Usiana and the Carotine. Træson’s nervousness she could understand; after all, he was heir, and the Emperor did not pile rocks beneath that meal of responsibility in order to make it look more or less like what it was. Kale, however, had always seemed discomfited in his Father’s presence. Perhaps he sensed the distrust the Emperor tried to hide in regards to his sorcery. The Empress alone knew how deeply her husband feared magic, almost comparing it to a wild and innate superstition, a work brought forth from the Abyss—but, of course, he could not deny their family’s connection, almost legacy, to sorcery. Aoedhin had been called mage, after all. Usually, though, the Prince Kale was not so nervous about her.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the door pushed open and her dark-haired son sidle inside, glancing around apprehensively.

“The Emperor is expecting you,” she announced without turning around. “Træson is already inside.”

She saw her son start in surprise.

“After all these years, do you really think you can sneak up on me?” she taunted, turning around. But it was not Kale standing in the room behind her. The Empress’ smile sank back into her face with the rapidity of windswept sand filling a hole, and her eyes widened.

“I...how...” she stammered, uncontrollably stepping backwards. Her heels hit the solid map table, and she pushed around it, not taking her eyes off the man in the room. “Impossible,” she breathed. Her son shook his head.

“Never impossible,” he said, and a smile stretched slowly across his pale face.

“If you giggle any louder, Træson, you’ll be heard you through the door.”

Træson’s heart slammed against his sternum and he spun around.

“...Kale...” he gasped, massaging his chest. *Every damn time.* His brother was standing in the middle of the tiny entry room, as cool and unflappable as ever. “Damn you twice to the Abyss! You’re lucky I’m not armed, or I might have shot you. And I was not giggling!”

“Then it is a good thing that weapons are not allowed in the Emperor’s presence,” Kale replied smoothly, unbuckling the parrying dagger he wore at his belt and tossing it to the single bench in the center of the room, set there for that purpose. “And you certainly were. Chuckling. Does that make you feel better? It’s much more manly to chuckle.”

Træson shook himself of his surprise and unbuttoned his jacket, pulling out the extra bolts that he kept inside and placing them next to Kale’s arsenal. Neither were fully armed, having come only recently from the Temple, and their items looked tiny and pathetic in the middle of the bench.

“What do you know about manliness?” Træson griped, defensive in his embarrassment.

“Plenty.”

“That was a rhetorical question, and anyway, that was the wrong answer.”

Kale blinked wide eyes, looking like a kicked kit. “Let’s look at this,” he said practically. “I’m a better lead than you.”

“Five years ago, maybe.”

Kale continued as if he had not heard, tallying on his fingers. “My sparring record is quite as equal as yours or Nocix’s, *and* I have spent the last three weeks meeting with the Ambassadors from the Provinces, which—remind me again? What do you actually *do* all day, Træson?”

“You can hardly count sparring,” Træson said. “You use magic, and trickery. It’s not any sort of real technique.”

Kale’s eyes flashed. “I use my resources,” he said. “If I am blessed in abilities beyond your might and understanding, Traes, you can hardly blame me for taking full advantage of them.”

“You’ve also left out a major qualifying figure in your tally of malehood,” Træson continued smugly. He rebuttoned his jacket, waiting for his brother to ask. It did not take long.

“What did I leave out?”

“When,” Træson asked, hiking a foot up on the bench and leaning forward on his knee, “was the last time you so much as looked at a woman and thought, ‘my life is good and I am perfectly content, but my pleasure would be double if that fair miss would join me for our own sparring practice tonight?’”

To Træson’s satisfaction, he saw that he had actually shocked his brother. Kale stared at him, agape, then cleared his throat.

“You’re drunk,” he said.

“Answer the question.”

“...What?” he demanded faintly, a blush blooming magnificently in his pale cheeks. He had gone very still. “You want to know...the last time I...”

“Not any details, no,” Træson assured him, stifling his laughter at Kale’s discomfiture. “Just tell me you at least remember what lust is, and I’ll be satisfied.”

“I...I don’t see how that is any of your business,” Kale replied, still looking faintly horrified. He closed his eyes and gave his head a little shake, as if clearing sand from his ears. When he reopened his eyes, he had regained some of his usual coolness. “And I certainly do not see how chasing women is a defining figure of a man, let alone a gentleman of our rank. It’s crude.”

“You’re not going to guilt me out of this one, Kale,” Træson replied stubbornly, grinning. “I know you like to keep your own matters, but I have never seen you so much as tell a girl that she’s lovely since you’ve come of age. And you have met plenty of lovely girls, so do not try and tell me otherwise.”

Kale was looking vexed—Træson’s taunts were evidently hitting their mark.

“Just because I do not have a new companion every night does not mean—”

“I never said you had to be a rogue. I just want to know that you are still satisfactorily human. It’s as if you do not even recognize that there is an entirely other sex walking around these halls.”

“Of course I know!”

“Prove it.”

Kale was losing his patience. “I will compliment the next woman I see, if that would satisfy you,” he promised through thin lips.

“Only if you did so and meant it,” Træson said. Kale rolled his eyes. “In fact,” Træson continued, “I’ll go farther. Get a Courtier, one you’ve never spoken to before, to kiss you, and I’ll have my proof.”

“You want me to go up to some random Lady and kiss her?” Kale asked disbelievingly.

“Or Lord, if you’re so inclined,” Træson allowed, and Kale choked on his water. “Alright, Lady it is. And no, I do not want you to kiss her—I want *her* to kiss *you*, willingly and without coercion, because *she wants to*,” Træson explained. He took a moment to relish the panicked look that had settled into his brother’s eyes, and then continued, “I’ll do it myself, in fact. We can make a contest of it.”

“I don’t see how finding a woman who wants to lay her lips on yours proves *your* manliness,” Kale muttered. “Just the fact that she’s conscious enough of social status to see an advantage in it.”

“There is more to life than politics, brother,” Træson reminded him.

“Not for us,” Kale retorted. He patted down his pockets, making sure that he had not missed any hidden weapons.

“Check your sleeves,” Træson recommended. Kale did, and a moment later pulled out a sheath of slipdaggers.

“Pity,” he said, as the slipdaggers joined the pile of weapons. “There goes my plot to assassinate the Emperor.”

“Don’t joke about that,” Træson snapped, a bit harsher than he had meant to; but after all, Kale really should not have said such a thing. Kale, at least, had the decency to leave the subject, instead of trying to further distress Træson’s patience. The elder Prince bent over his shoes, hiding his momentary loss of control behind the pretense of checking the ornate lacing. It was as if Kale had no gauge to measure the propriety of his comments—and yet he was still the very image of gravity and self-control in Court! Sometimes Træson suspected the Kale acted so just to annoy him, but his brother’s posture was often so sincere when stating his ridiculous notions that it was hard to tell how much Kale really meant what he said. It was discomfiting.

Træson looked up to see his brother smiling at him in his ghostly, almost-amused sort of way.

“What?” he asked suspiciously, and Kale’s face cleared to one of perfect innocence, as if to prove Træson’s thoughts.

“What?” he returned the question, green eyes round.

“Why were you smiling, just now?”

“Just a thought I had,” Kale said, too sweetly for Træson to believe him in the slightest. The elder Prince scowled.

“Well, come on, then,” he said gruffly, sure that he was being laughed at for some reason and completely in the dark as to why. Kale nodded and turned gracefully to the door, rapping six times against the stone with the square, iron knocker. There was a long pause. Kale rolled his shoulders as if trying to work a kink out of them, though his eyes were fixed on the door. He looked troubled—no doubt he was trying to imagine the possibilities waiting on the other side.

“I hope that look on your face is not because you’ve strained yourself walking?” Træson broke the silence. Kale glanced at him, and a rueful look came over his face.

“A merchant hit me with a *cær*,” he admitted. “Would have been an Abysmally good shot if she had been aiming at me.”

Træson frowned, distracted from his excitement by this tale. “Perhaps you should have a healer look at it.”

“I’m fine,” Kale shook his head. “I sorted things out—so don’t you go thinking you have to do an investigation for assault,” he added with a pointed look. Behind the door, footsteps could be heard approaching, padding along on the stone.

“When have I ever done that?” Træson protested.

“Never,” Kale said. “Because I’ve always taken care of things myself.”

This was blatantly untrue, but Træson was cut off by the door swinging outward into the little room.

Behind it was revealed a dark passageway and two guards. The guards were dressed in crimsons and creams, with thin, **gauzy material** hoods wrapped around their faces like e’Shœn. They bore scabbards at their sides, and their left sleeves bulged at the wrist, where armbows were concealed. The two Princes passed into the hall in single file, flanked by the guards, until they reached the door at the other end where two more guards waited. They saluted and bowed. The first pair of guards walked back to their post, footsteps padding with surprising silence back down the dim hall. One of the second pair of guards held up a large, round object covered in black cloth, and ceremonially pulled it away. Træson squeezed his eyes closed against the sudden light that flared from the overlarge *cær*. Far in the back of his consciousness, a headache threatened to bloom—he had Kale and his light shows to blame for that. He wished the guards would get over with their task and put the light away. For the sake of the gods, he was the heir Prince! It was not if he was hard to recognize! Finally, the guards finished with their scrutiny of the faces of the two Princes, blinking through their dark goggled eyes, and the light was covered once again. The guard not holding the covered *cær* knocked twice on the door, and then without waiting for a response pushed it open.

Træson strode into the Emperor’s study. The room was surprisingly small and dim for the private study room of an Emperor. What it lacked in space and natural light, however, it made up in a richness of unusual and expensive furnishings. The walls and ceiling were paneled with thick, dark wood from over the mountains—the only place in all of Usiana where there was so much wood in one place. There were no windows, but spaced equally around the eight walls were pillars of smoky crystal, carved in fluid curves like the contours of a woman’s body, or the waves of the wind. All were lit from the inside with as with Cæl, but there was no smoke or smell of burning—though the organic, damp smell of the wood was more than subtle.

Unlike most rooms in the Castle, the ceiling was low and flat. Træson always ducked automatically when entering the space, even though there was still a good five footlength’s clearance above his head. Even today, when he was prepared for the unusual room, he bent his head. Hoping

the Emperor would see it only as a sign of respect, he kept it bent; meanwhile, he sent Kale a threatening glare, daring him to chuckle, but his brother had turned a interesting pale green and had not seemed to notice Træson's faux pas.

The object of Kale's consternation was sitting behind the fantastically carved desk that spanned most of the room. The desk, like the pillared *car*, formed a gentle wave. It was made of wood so ancient and dense it could very well have been considered stone by the people over the cliffs, who had given it as a gift to the Emperor when they had traded many years ago. From the doorway, the wood appeared unmarred; only when one approached within a few footlengths could the delicate swirls and circle-like writing, shapes uncommon to Usianian artisans, be made out.

If the room was filled with objects of transient and fluid natures, they only served to emphasize the straight, unforgiving lines of the man who owned them. The Emperor's face was as full of crags as the Usianian cliffs, deeply lined and scarred in equal measure. His nose jutted from his face with the confidence of a granite outcropping, overhanging the stern path of his mouth. Only starting to gray, the Emperor's hair was cut short and neat. His beard, equally well-kept, was still the coppery color of his youth while elsewhere it had darkened, almost as if it had tarnished with age. Despite his hardness, or perhaps because of it, the Emperor still struck a striking figure. At the moment, his attention was focused on a three-by-four piece of slate, upon which blue numbers and words were running. The Princes bowed. Their Father did not look up, only sighed and began shuffling through a pile of epistles. Kale glanced at Træson, signaling him with a tick of his head to say something. Træson took a step forward.

"My Lord," he greeted, and waited. The Emperor's hands stilled, and he looked up, as if noticing his sons for the first time. There was a pause, and then Træson continued, "We were told you wanted to see us?"

The Emperor paused again, and then slowly arranged the letters in his hands, tapped them into equal height on his desk, and set them deliberately aside. Then he smiled.

"Yes," he said, in a voice trained for commanding armies. The fact that it was now warmed underneath by gruff paternalism did not make it any less formidable. "Yes. You're late."

"Ah," Træson said.

"No matter," the Emperor continued briskly. "Though I would have expected my youngest, at least, to observe some punctuality." His eyes flashed to Kale, who stepped forward.

"My apologies; I was—" he began, but the Emperor had turned his gaze back to Træson.

"Your studies are progressing adequately, I presume?" he asked over Kale's attempted explanation. The younger Prince flushed and closed his mouth, stepping back again. Træson glanced at his brother, not sure if his Father was addressing him or Kale; when Kale remained tight-lipped, Træson replied, "More than adequately, my Lord."

"History? Geography? Stewardship?"

"Yes, all are going well," Træson answered, wondering uncomfortably what the Emperor was getting at. A discussion about Træson's studies hardly warranted a late-night call to the Emperor's private study.

"And diplomacy?" the Emperor asked. His fierce, blue eyes razed over Træson, until the Prince felt raw and exposed. He hesitated.

"My Lord, I hope it is not too bold to say that my skills in all of these areas are enough to satisfy your trust in me," he said finally. Kale coughed softly behind him. "And if I do lack in anything, the Prince Kale is more than adept in all of these areas as well, particularly in the department of diplomacy; in fact—"

Kale cleared his throat loudly and gave the barest shake of his head.

“—he is certainly more skilled in this field than I,” Træson finished, bemused by his brother’s glowering response to his praise.

The Emperor was rubbing his hand over his beard. When Træson had finished speaking, he paused for a moment, considering, and then stood.

“Prince Kale,” he said, and Kale stepped forward again, looking wary. “If you would wait in the weapons room, I would speak to your brother—and then there is a conversation between us that is long overdue.”

The younger Prince seemed to freeze for a moment, then bowed and walked straight-backed to the door. Træson watched him go with a sense of foreboding. When the door had again closed, the Emperor gestured Træson nearer. The Prince approached, footfalls falling too softly on the carpeted floor, until he stood directly on the other side of his Father’s desk. The Emperor fixed his roc-like glare onto his son’s eyes, and Træson resisted the urge to step back. Even as the heir, he was rarely so close to the Emperor, and so had never had the opportunity to become adjusted to his stripping gaze. Træson kept his head up, boldly staring back into his Father’s eyes, until finally the Emperor nodded, as if reaffirming something to himself, and chuckled.

“Well, Prince Træson,” he said, sitting back down again. “Well. I am impressed by your confidence.”

Træson said nothing, not sure if this was a compliment or not.

“I am sure,” the Emperor continued, “that you would like to know why I called for you, when already it is nearly half-past moonrise. This timing is not, as one might expect, due to some great symbolism—though I am sure some minstrel will find a pretty turn of phrase for it one day. No, I have called you here so late because I have been deliberating, and I have not come to a decision. You will help me find it.”

“I...I am honored to be of service to you, my Lord,” Træson replied, humbled with surprise.

“Good,” the Emperor said confidently, and stood again. He circled around to the back of his chair and rested his hands on it, if anything the Emperor did could truly be considered resting. Always there was a sense of movement around him; when he walked, it was the restless pacing of a caged demon; when he stood, it was inevitable that he would step; when he sat, it was with the air of an aggressive and wickedly intelligent predator waiting to pounce. The nervous excitement that had started growing in Træson’s chest took another step up the column of his being at the thought of being distinguished by this man. “This is an extremely sensitive matter, Træson, as I am sure you understand. The replications may well last for generations after my fall. For now, you will remain in my confidence. Eventually, the Courtiers will have to be told; I will depend on you, and your tact.”

My tact? Træson thought, his excitement tripping on a rock and teetering dangerously close to the edge of disappointment and failure. There were many things that Træson was good at; there were many things that Træson was perhaps *too* good at; but diplomacy, whatever he might have told his Father, was not one of them. Certainly he could speak and order and decree—but such things did not lay out little traps to snare him somewhere down the road. He had a great enjoyment of genuine conversations, of the kind not offered by Lords and Ladies. Whatever he had expected the Emperor to have him do, it had not entered his imagination that *he* would be the one convincing the Court of the wisdom of the decision. The headache that the Prince had been holding back throbbed menacingly.

“Perhaps your Majesty will allow me to call for Kale to return,” Træson offered, emboldened by the dropping of his title and still quite certain that his Father had him and his brother confused. “He is much more skilled in the art of speaking than I, and would certainly be of great service to you.”

The Emperor's eyes grew colder as Træson spoke, until the very glance of them sent shivers crawling up and down Træson's spine. "The Prince Kale," he said, with deliberate articulation, "is not involved in these affairs, and you will not discuss them with him."

Træson stared at his Father in shock. "My Lord, forgive me, but—"

"He is not involved!" the Emperor repeated, banging his fist onto his desk with a reverberating *thung* that was unique to its wooden surface. "Is that understood?" His voice crescendoed to a roar appropriate for the discipline of a soldier. The strictness, the hard lines of the Emperor's displeasure, were comforting. In their bounds, Træson knew where he stood, and he knew that he had crossed a line. If the Emperor did not want Kale to know, Træson was honor-bound to respect that. The trick would be to sate Kale's curiosity without actually revealing anything.

"Yes, my Lord," he bowed.

The Emperor nodded once. "Enough," he said, and Træson raised his head again. "We have much work to do." He handed Træson the slate he had been working on when they had come in. "Tell me what you see," he ordered.

Træson looked. Numbers trickled down the face of it, while in the opposite direction words would occasionally flash and then disappear again. It took only a second for Træson to recognize the chart.

"It's a lunar plan," he said, glancing up. The Emperor lifted his chin, waiting. "It's..." he studied it closer. "It's..." His eyes widened. "Gods," he whispered under his breath. The numbers changed, and he fell back to studying it again, face pinched in concentration. Træson ran his finger along the lines of flowing numbers, and then looked up at his Father uncomprehendingly.

"I don't understand," he said. The Emperor's granite face tightened in disappointment.

"With all your accomplishments, I would have thought the reading would be easy enough for you," he said coldly.

"I can read it fine," Træson defended, "but it does not make sense. This..." he tapped one of the rows, where the word "flight" was flashing again and again, "this row is incorrect."

The Emperor's face relaxed into somber approval. "No, Træson," he said quietly, taking the slate back again, "the readings are correct."

Træson began to blink rapidly, and quickly stood up and began pacing the room. "Does Mother know?"

"Yes."

"But Kale is to be left without any warning." Despite the Emperor's glare, Træson pushed on. "You cannot believe that you can protect him from this."

"Protect him?" the Emperor let out a barking laugh. "Ha! No, I have no concern for his protection. It is *our* safety for which I am concerned."

Træson, in the midst of rubbing his eyes, raised his head to stare, flabbergasted, at his Father.

"He is the youngest member of the Anaedhin line," Træson stated, bewildered.

"He is a sorcerer," the Emperor returned in a hiss. The tone was so unlike him that Træson took a step back. "While we, brave warriors, defend our people, his kind resorts to magics and unnatural trickery. When your brothers went to the Carotine, I was foolish. The land that I had defeated so many years before—it was unthinkable that such a place, hard-won as it was, could pose a threat to men such as they. I recognized my folly too late. After they fell, and the inheritance of the Empire fell to the shoulders of you and your brother, I thanked the Gods and Goddesses that you were the elder."

He looked shrewdly at Træson, who was struggling to take in the words his Father was handing him. Træson remembered all too vividly the day that he had learned of his brothers' falls; the terror, the grief, the weight that had descended and had since never stopped trying to pull him into the Abyss. His comfort was that he was not alone to face the climb ahead—that whatever

transformations he must undergo in order to lift an Empire on his shoulders, he could at least depend on his brother to share the load. Was this comfort, too, to be taken from him?

The Emperor seemed to see the struggle, for his voice raised again in his passion and his anger. “Listen to me, Træson! I can see that you think me harsh and unloving. Believe what you will. Know, however, that the decisions of an Emperor must be made in the blazing light of the Great Scale, not the cool dampness that leads to emotion and impetuosity. I had softened, caught in this drafty Palace, into affection and conceit—this cost your brothers, my heir and my sons, their lives. You, too, must learn not to underestimate anything, because it is the small weights you do not consider that tips the scales against you.” The Emperor returned to his place behind his desk and sat, pulling his papers back towards him, covering the winding blue marks on the slate. Træson became aware of an ache in his temple, and realized that it was because he was gritting his teeth. His fists were clenched so tightly that his arms were rigid at his sides.

“We will speak soon,” the Emperor said, his voice once more calm and cold and powerful. “In the meantime, think; and do not let your affections lead you to overlook the dangers that face the Empire. You are dismissed.”

Træson bowed and left without a word, unable to loose his jaw. He knew, without a doubt, that the dangers the Emperor spoke of had nothing to do with the blue numbers on his Father’s slate.

Appendix

From Scripture to Midrash to Postmodern Fantasy:

An Explanation

The world is a continuously evolving place. For many people, Scripture is a rock amidst a whirling sea of change; for others, it is a rock upon which a great many ships of progress have foundered. While the writings of the Hebrew Bible have stood the test of time, the postmodern reader has expectations that are vastly different from the expectations of a sixth-century Jewish audience. Two of the greatest challenges to the postmodern appreciation of scripture are the loss of the original context, and the postmodern reader's distrust of absolutes and anything even vaguely institutional. Faced with this issue, especially relevant amongst my peers, I wrote a creative, novel-length work adapting the first three chapters of Exodus, which follows the life of Moses between his discovery in Nile until his exile. The result is a feminist, postmodern fantasy novel that is rooted in, and reflects back, the original text. By transporting scripture to a fantasy setting, I provide a space in which stagnant, traditional interpretations have an opportunity to evolve and flourish, and the reader feels safe to challenge and re-interpret.

Though based in scripture, my focus is upon the gaps in the original text, and so the work is grounded, also, in Midrashim, contemporary adaptations including films and novels, the theological and literary context of the writers of the Book of Exodus, and in the historical/anthropological Egypt in which the writers understood the text to be set. The importance of this work is twofold. Firstly, it brings to light the original context of the writers and of the scripture itself, which is often lost in reading the text alone. Secondly, the work allows the postmodern reader to gain a different perspective of a story that is so well-known that it is in danger of losing its potency. I argue that adaptations of this kind are not only a part of tradition,

but they must be continued in the modern day if we are to expect scripture to remain relevant and alive in the world.

I will begin by explaining a little about the passage I chose and why; the importance of Midrash, ancient and modern, which have influenced my reading/interpretation; and the changes I made specifically for a postmodern audience.

BUT FIRST: I'd like to acquaint you with the world in which I have been working for over a year.

The Story

My novel follows Kale, a Prince of the Usianian Empire, as he struggles to balance the life he once knew and the world he is thrust into following the deaths of his eldest brothers. Of the six Usianian Princes, only two now remain; Kale and his older brother, Traeson. The two depend on each other in many ways, but where Traeson's primary concern is his unexpected ascent to Heir to the Throne, Kale is challenged not only by the shifting political sphere but by his identity as a sorcerer. Magic-users of Usiania are both prized for their skill, and feared for their Otherness. They are a people enslaved not in the traditional sense, but by the society which does not allow them to prosper or give them voice.

As for the magic of this world, it is very limited. Each sorcerer is capable of one type of power; weather, glamour, prediction, etc. Kale's ability is the manipulation of Light. Sorcery is passed through a complex combination of bloodlines and birth order, and it is unpredictable even then. It is not until later (in perhaps a second or third novel) that magic becomes associated with the Fae, which is my representation of God. The Fae is a power source similar to the Force in Star Wars, a race of beings (Faeries) similar to angels, and an entity in and of itself. That is for

later times, however. For now, sorcery is associated only with individual power/ability and with Usianian deities.

The Scripture: Exodus 1 – 2:15

For those who are familiar with the story of Exodus, and those who are not, a refresher:

We begin, as we so often do in the Bible, with a genealogy. This is a reminder of the story's roots; fleeing famine, Joseph invites his brothers to join him in the well-stocked land of Egypt. When the book of Exodus begins, we find that the Israelites, the Hebrew people, have not only prospered, they have multiplied prolifically. A little too prolifically. In fact, when a new Pharaoh ascends the throne, he becomes troubled by the might and numbers of the Hebrew people, thinking that if they ever were to rebel against him, Egypt would surely be defeated. The obvious course of action to prevent this, of course, is to enslave them.

Unfortunately, this plan backfires, and the Hebrews multiply even *more*. Getting a little desperate, Pharaoh and his advisors settle on an even more fool-proof plan; every male child born to the Hebrew people will be killed. To achieve this end, Pharaoh orders the midwives Shiphrah and Puah to take care of business. Instead, the two women save the children, claiming that Hebrew women are too vigorous, and have borne the children before the midwives can arrive. At this point, Pharaoh orders his soldiers to round up male Hebrew babies and toss them into the Nile. Enter Jochebed, Moses' mother. She hides her son for three months, and then makes a basket for him – the Hebrew word is “ark,” the same word used to describe the boat that Noah built – and then sets him afloat on the Nile (*Exodus 2 Interlinear*). Moses' sister, Miriam, watches over him from the bulrushes.

Baby Moses is discovered by an Egyptian Princess and her handmaidens, upon which Miriam comes out of hiding and offers to find a nurse for her from among the Hebrew women. She returns with Moses' own mother, who the Princess then pays to nurse/raise her own son.

At this point, I'd like to talk about some of the important points of the text. First of all, we have five women controlling the scene, with men notably absent. Certainly, there is Pharaoh, but he is not really the success story so far. And we have Moses, but he's busy being a three-month old, and cannot offer much as of yet, except, presumably, being adorable.

Secondly, *Moses knows his roots*. One of the most common paths that most modern adaptations of Exodus take is that Moses is blindsided by the fact that he is actually a Hebrew. In the scripture, however, we find that he has been raised, at least for a little while, by his own family. When he is old enough, he is returned to Pharaoh's daughter, and she names him Moses.

In my novel, I take a very different path. It is perhaps one of the most notable differences between Exodus and my novel that Kale, my Moses character, is not the rescued child of a Hebrew slave, but the full son of the Usianian Emperors. This is one of the main factors that makes my story focused on a postmodern audience. Anymore, we are inundated by stories of magical adoptions, of orphans miraculously discovering their true origins, and of the betrayal of family loyalties. One has only to look to our movies and literature; Tangled, Harry Potter, Marvel, etc. Moses' life is unique in that it is a rags to riches and back to rags story, but I wanted to get away from cliché completely.

One of the reasons these stories are so popular, I believe, is that people often feel isolated, that no one understands them; that they are somehow different, and that this difference

is bad. How many children believe, secretly or not so secretly, that they are actually a Princess or a Knight or whatever else, and that one day their *real* family is going to find them and take them back? And how often does that actually happen (and would we really want it to?)

I wanted Kale to be a part of the Imperial family because although he feels different, *is* different from everyone else, it is not his blood that marks him out. Instead, it is something deeper than blood, something tied up in his very identity as a person, which cannot be changed no matter how he is raised. It is a story, then, of all those who feel isolated not because of their literal adoption into a different society, but because their personal discovery and struggle with their identity.

Kale is a full son of the Empire, but he is inherently different, inherently a stranger, and, as such, inherently dangerous. I could have just as well have said that, rather than being marked by sorcery, Kale was gay, or that he was a woman. His is a story of the marginalized; and those who are marginalized do not have the option of not-knowing the structures of power in their society. No African American woman is going to tell you she doesn't notice skin color.

Moving back to Scripture: We now flash forward, from Moses in the Nile, to Moses as an adult. One day, he decides to walk amongst his people – the Hebrew says “brothers” – and see their labor (*Exodus 2 Interlinear*). He comes across an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, which incites him to act. Here we get a first taste of Moses' character. He looks this way and that, and, seeing no one, proceeds to murder the Egyptian, hide his body in the sand, and then go on his way pretending nothing has happened. Semi-impulsive, semi-planned, and certainly for justice.

The next day, he is again walking about, apparently convinced that he got away with murder, when he comes across two Hebrews fighting. Moses' sense of justice prevails again, and he intervenes. One of the irate Hebrews then taunts him, saying "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Are you going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian?"

At this point, Moses realizes that his deed is public knowledge. Pharaoh seeks to kill him, and Moses flees Egypt to Midian. At this point, it can be imagined that Moses is pretty jaded by his experiences. *So much for social justice*, he thinks. *I think I'll stick to sheep from now on.*

I chose this section, Exodus 1-2:15, because of possibilities for expansion, its emphasis on women, and its first hints at the character of Moses. These can all be identified within the different tenants of Midrash. But what is Midrash?

The Midrash

In overly simplistic terms, Midrash is Biblical fanfiction. Midrash is a Jewish tradition dating back to before 500CE. A great deal was written by the Rabbis in the Middle Ages, but writing midrashim is a tradition that likely dates back to the very creation of the original Scriptures themselves (Holtz 178). These stories served a number of purposes: to fill in gaps in the Biblical narration; to relate ancient rules and commandments to the current time; to explore scriptural texts in a new way, thus revealing new truths; and to fix discontinuity (Holtz 180-186).

There are two main types of Midrashim: Haggadah, which (again, over-simplistically) is the more traditional storytelling kind of midrash; and Halakah, which is concerned about the law and the interpretation of the law (Holtz 178). Both are important parts of the tradition, but for my project I focused on the Haggadah, and especially the Shemot Rabbah, the collection of

Midrashim on the book of Exodus. I'd like to share a few examples of Midrashim, and their importance to my work.

There were four main stories that I drew upon for my novel. In the first, Moses was still a baby, and quite beloved of everyone, including Pharaoh. One day, as Pharaoh held Moses in his arms, the baby reached up, plucked the crown off of Pharaoh's head, and put it on his own. Pharaoh's advisors and magicians explained that this could be a sign that Moses was going to one day defeat Pharaoh—or, it could be as meaningless as a baby reaching for something shiny.

To discover which category Moses fell into, two basins were placed before him; one filled with gold, the other with smoldering coals. If the baby reached for the gold, it was a sign that he was, indeed, reaching for power. If he reached for the coal, however, he was harmless. Moses began to reach for the gold, but the angel Gabriel guided his hand to the coal instead, which Moses promptly put into his mouth, burning it. This was the reason behind the excuse Moses later made to God in the burning bush, claiming he was not good with words and could not speak (Ginzberg, "Moses Rescued by Gabriel").

In my story, Kale also suffered as the result of a family member's fear that one day, Kale would prove to be powerful enough to bring the Empire and its rulers to their knees. This incident also costs Kale some of his ability to speak, and is behind much of his distrust of other people, even (perhaps especially) his family. At first, the incident is referred to only as a mysterious illness, five years prior to the story's beginning. Later, it is revealed that Kale was physically assaulted while extremely drunk, that his attacker was his older brother, Tain, and that Kale is continuing to suffer post-traumatic stress response. He is both literally robbed of his voice, and, as many assault victims are, metaphorically silenced by shame and society.

The second Midrash that I drew heavily on for my novel is explanation of Egyptians as “masters of magic.” This is backed-up by studies of Ancient Egypt, which suggest that magic was of huge religious and social significance in the everyday life of Egyptians (Wilkinson, John). My challenge, then, was to somehow incorporate this Egyptian familiarity with magic into a novel where sorcery was possessed only by the ‘Hebrew’ characters.

I resolved this issue by looking closer at what magic represents in the Bible and in Midrashic literature. It was not that magic itself was evil, but its source in other gods. The ten plagues are in many ways representative of God reclaiming power from the Egyptian gods, proving them to be no more than stone and wood. Yes, even Egyptian children can do magic, as Pharaoh claims, but, ultimately, we find that the power comes from God, and God can take that power away (Ginzberg, “Moses and Aaron Before Pharaoh”).

It’s notable that the Egyptian magicians’ magic works at first; they are able to successfully recreate the first few plagues. Similarly, some of the sorcerers in my novel attribute their abilities to the Usianian gods, or to themselves; mistakes that do not, in and of themselves, keep the sorcerers from using their power, but which later leads to their downfall.

Thirdly, we have the tales of Baby Moses. Midrash is where we first discover the names of Moses’ parents, Jochebed and Amran. While valuable, many of these stories worked directly at cross-purposes to my work. My biggest focus in writing this novel was to express the humanity found in the characters of Exodus, from Moses to Miriam to God. The tales of Moses’ infancy focus on his inherent divinity, and how he is *not* like other human beings.

On the opposite end of the spectrum we find the last of the major Midrash which I drew upon for my novel. This story actually takes place after Moses has led the people out of Egypt. I somewhat hesitate to name it as Midrash, as there has been a great deal of debate between Jewish scholars over its validity; but I personally enjoyed the story, and think it adds a great deal to Moses' character (Leiman 92-96).

When the nations of the world heard of the Hebrews' miraculous escape from Egypt, they were amazed and curious. One Arabian king was so curious he sent artists to get Moses' portrait, so that his physiognomists could analyze what the traits were that made Moses so spectacular. When the artists returned, the physiognomists reported that the man in the portrait was filled with every vice; greedy, arrogant, capricious, etc. The king was enraged, having heard so many good things about Moses and sure that the physiognomists must simply be bad at their job. The physiognomists immediately blamed the artists, the artists blamed the physiognomists, and the king finally decided he would just have to meet Moses himself.

Even from a distance, the king could see that the artists had, indeed, done excellent work. Upon speaking to Moses, he explained why he had come, and that his physiognomists apparently did not know what they were doing. Moses then told the king that neither group was wrong, but that he did, indeed, naturally incline to all of the vices the physiognomists had seen in him. Through wisdom and self-discipline, Moses had overcome his nature and become blessed. He explains; "Know that if I were naturally virtuous, I would be no more deserving of praise than is a block of wood. For it too has no human faults."

Whether or not it is 'real' Midrash, I enjoy the story for its emphasis on natural humanity over natural divinity. It is a feature of the postmodern generation that we are sick of perfect heroes; we crave flawed, tragic, Byronic figures, people we can both look up to and commiserate

with. For a generation that has a hard time believing anything is black-and-white, a character without any shades of grey is simply too unreal to be interesting. This leads neatly to the section: postmodernism.

Postmodernism and the Millennial Generation:

I used three main sources to generate a definition of postmodernism which covers the subjects of my project. These were *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* by Christopher Butler, Pew Research, and my own observations.

According to Butler, postmodernism began somewhere between 1966 and the 1980's (Butler 5). Often, those with a postmodern mindset are also members of the white, liberal, intellectual middle-class, but postmodernism is in no way limited to such people. One of the main marks of a postmodern thinker is their tendency towards the theory of relativism. Relativists do not believe in the existence of transcendental signifieds (metanarratives) such as Truth, God, etc. (Butler 13-14) Relativism is one of the main concepts that leads me to define the Millennial Generation (approximately, those born between 1982 and 2002) as the first true postmodern generation (Rouse). This is backed by both my own observations as a member of the Millennials, and by the Pew Research which has recorded the symptoms of a relativist culture.

Included in the Pew Research is the observance that the number of “nones” - those who claim no religious affiliation – is growing. Included in this group are atheists, agnostics, and the completely unaffiliated. Strangely, a majority of these “nones” also claim to be spiritual or religious in some way, but are not looking to join a religious institution. “Nones” do not necessarily believe religious institutions are evil – but institutional religion is something for other people, not them (“Nones”).

This is a huge marker of a postmodern society; a symptom of postmodernism's waffling, individualistic disconnection between a single person and any other single person or group. "Nones" cannot bring themselves to believe that there is a single Truth accessible by a single religious institution, and so live happily in the unaffiliated world of the "spiritual but not religious," the non-institutional and Earth-based religions, and the non-religious paths of self-actualization (such as the purely scientific). In true postmodern fashion, however, these "nones" do not want to press their beliefs (their unbeliefs?) upon anyone else, and thus are willing to admit to many of the good aspects of institutional religion ("Nones").

This way of living between the lines fosters creativity, but it also falls prey to cynicism. Postmodern Millennials do not only doubt religions, they also doubt the validity of History, Science, Politics and Patriotism, and even literary texts (Butler 16). History is a narrative, a conglomerate of perspectives, and almost always written by the victors; so how can it be true? Science is not necessarily distrusted, but the Enlightenment belief that science is the path to Truth has only led to disappointment and new questions. The increasing polarization of the political world has cost many Millennials their faith that politicians actually do anything useful, or that citizens can make a difference on a National scale. And in the increasingly global world, it is difficult to drum up the same amount of patriotism that marked generations of the past. (American) Millennials tend to view themselves as members of a world rather than a country, and so lack a firm identity as part of a continental community.

It is not only institutions that fall under the postmodern Millennial's suspicious gaze. Important for this work is the fact that Millennials are increasingly dissatisfied by 'flat' characters in stories. From modern adaptations of fairytales, to the world-famous *Harry Potter* series, to the recent Marvel films, characters are increasingly flawed and 'humanized.'

Millennials have gone beyond the Byronic hero, or even the anti-hero; they crave Byronic *villains*. Fallen, unsure of the truth, Millennials ache for characters who are as disillusioned as they are.

Despite their skepticism, or perhaps because of it, Millennials remain hopeful. Their cynicism produces curiosity rather than melancholy. Now, these are my own observations, and some may disagree, but I believe Millennials are desperately searching for something to believe in. As members of the Information Age, it is part of Millennials' natures to always be looking for a better, more efficient way to get something done. The ultimate goal would be to find the absolute best method, but it is inconceivable for a postmodern person to actually reach such a method; they always distrust that their answer could be *it*, that there is nothing to improve on. Postmodern Millennials cannot quite imagine that there is an absolute top level, even if they wish (or claim to believe) there could be. They are desperately looking for truth and connection, for a new and better way of understanding themselves and the world, and at the same time they are doomed by their own disbelief in Truth. They cannot be satisfied with any single answer.

This is the need that I hope to answer through my work. Scripture is infinitely multifaceted, infinitely interpretable, and infinitely relatable. It belongs to everyone, not just those who are 'good' enough or religious enough. In the same way, God belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to God. God is not just the God of believers, but the God of doubters, of the searchers, and of the godless. Whether they believe in God or not, everyone should feel free to read Scripture and to find themselves in it.

For many postmodern Millennials, however, Scripture is negatively associated with fundamentalist religions and literalists. An invitation to the Bible appears only as an attempt to

convert, or to preach about how a religion is the ‘only’ path to Truth. How, then, to bring postmodern Millennials access to Scripture, and to the fantastic lessons and themes it contains?

Fantasy is an ideal genre for an adaptation of Scripture because it, like the original text, is full of both rules and fantastical elements. Because the story takes place in a world other than Earth, readers are allowed to make their own connections and draw their own conclusions without feeling that they are being prodded there by an obvious allegory. The world of the fantasy novel is supposed to be somewhat confusing and foreign, and so a version of the original, Biblical world can be introduced without it seeming dry and academic. People read fantasy because they enjoy the genre; it is accessible to a wide audience; it leaves room for the miraculous. On top of these qualifications, I am a huge Fantasy aficionado, and I have seen the affect a good Fantasy story can have in the life of a young adult – both in my life and the lives of my peers. As Butler states, for the postmodern thinker, “the apparently literal is also really metaphorical” (24). And if the literal is actually metaphorical, how much richer the metaphorical world can be!

References

As the final section, I’d like to point out just a couple of the points when I give a nod to the original text, to the Midrashim, or make a change specifically for a postmodern audience.

The Burning Bush

My story does not and will not contain the famous Burning Bush of Exodus 3, as it is one of the most recognizable aspects of the Exodus story, and my goal is to be as subtle as possible.

However, I give homage to the miracle in the scene on pg. 26, when Kale creates a ball of light and the Duchess Elside asks, worried, if it will burn her.

Egyptian Royalty

This is definitely a subtle reference. In Egyptian society (as described by John Gardner Wilkinson in *The Ancient Egyptians: Their Life and Customs*) Egyptian Princes usually trained to become a Military General, or to become a High Priest. Both occupations were directly related to the roles they would assume as Pharaoh; head of the state and head of the religion. In my novel, Traeson (the elder son) was apprenticed to the Guard, while Kale was apprenticed to the Temple. This is also a reference to the fact that Moses returns to free his people as an agent of God, and not as a military force (in contrast to Pharaoh's chariots and charioteers.)

The Women/Feminism

The Hebrew Bible is heavily characterized by male protagonists (and antagonists, for that matter). As a feminist, I was interested in both revealing the prominent roles of the women already contained in the story, and in expanding those roles. My character Mirim is a composite of Miriam and Zipporah, Wendi is a representation of Jochebed, and the Empress is in many ways the Egyptian Princess Batyah. In addition to the direct translation of characters, many of the characters in my novel are women, and their prominence will continue to grow as the story progresses. Usianian society is, like Ancient Egyptian society and like today's American society, a patriarchal society that, in theory, recognizes women as equal. The Egyptian Pharaoh Hatshepsut was a woman Pharaoh, but she still wore a ceremonial beard. American women are assumed by the greater society to be equal to men, yet they are still paid less in the workplace

and hold fewer positions of power. In Usiana, women are less likely to be respected by their peers, and there are still elements of patriarchy. I did not want to write a Feminist Utopia; I wanted to reflect a feasible world, in which women have gained at least a little more authority.

Gender

I could have changed the genders of the main characters, or even told the story from a different character's point of view. However, I decided not to do any of these things.

I kept the genders the same because I think there is a great amount of value in how the characters act because of or despite their gender. I decided to keep my Moses character male because I wanted it to be clear that he possesses many human weaknesses. If I had made the character female, these weaknesses might have been interpreted as being due to the character's gender and not her humanity. To compensate for the perspectives of women as being weaker, more nurturing, etc, I would have had to focus on the strengths of the character. Women do not need more self-deprecating heroes; but seeing a self-deprecating man is rather refreshing.

My Pharaoh character is also male. At first, I was interested in gender-bending Pharaoh, but this would place a woman in the position of the "evil Queen," another position that she has held in too many tales.

Finally, I felt that gender-bending the male characters to female removes some of shockingly prominent roles of the women in the Exodus story. For the first few chapters, in fact, the women are the ones who are moving the story along. The Egyptian midwives Shiphrah and Puah protect the Hebrew children, and trick Pharaoh into believing that Hebrew women simply are too strong, and have delivered their children before the midwives even arrive. Jochebed hides her newborn son from Pharaoh's soldiers, and then hides him in a basket in the reeds of the Nile.

The Princess Batyah (named in the Midrash) recognizes that the child is a Hebrew boy, and saves him despite the many risks involved. Miriam, Moses' older sister, watches over him until the Princess draws him from the river, and then offers to find a nursemaid, bringing the Princess Moses' own mother. The Princess then pays Moses' mother to raise him—a task she could have demanded of the other woman without having to pay. Thus, there is a network of women fighting to keep Moses alive, while men are notably absent from the story.

In fact, the only character I do gender-bend is Aaron, whose role I simply combine in my Miriam character and, eventually, will place into Kale and Mirim's eldest daughter. That, however, is a story for a later time.

I make a somewhat failed attempt to completely remove gender from the Guards' characters. I did not want impressions of gender to influence the reader's interpretation of these characters; instead, I wished to write a group of people whose genders simply did not matter to the plot. Unfortunately, there is not a widely-accepted pronoun for those of a non-binary gender, and so I used "it," which turned out to be distracting at best and provoking at worst. I have not given up on the idea of gender-neutral characters, but I have decided to let the matter rest for the moment.

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