

## Chapter One

“Van,” Savil said irritably, “this is *not* what I invited you over for.”

*:M’sorry:* He was sitting against the wall with his head in his hands.

“Sorry doesn’t take back the fact that you vomited all over my favourite rug.” She was currently trying to scrub at it with a towel, fruitlessly. “Gods, and you know you can’t get wine stains out of Whites.”

It was very annoying of him, but she supposed she had invited him over to ‘get nastily drunk’, then refilled his cup along with hers, and had only herself to thank for the consequences. *Why do I always hold my drink better than any of my friends?*

She blinked away tears as, yet again, it hit her.

Elsbeth was dead. They’d been expecting it, yes, but not for years. The brainstorm had taken her peacefully, in her sleep – and the Death Bell had wrenched all the rest of them out of their beds. Now the sky was lightening to grey, and she knew she ought to snatch a candlemark or two of sleep before the inevitable meetings. And sleep off the wine she’d drunk, she wasn’t past tipsy but she had to sober up before they needed her to speak before the Council.

“Now I need to figure out what to do with you, don’t I?” She thought about the distance to his rooms, nearly the whole length of the new Heralds’ Wing – no, she didn’t feel like dragging him that far. “Why don’t you sleep here? I’ll fetch you a bedroll. Take off your shirt, it’s disgusting.”

She got him tucked in under a blanket on the floor. Then, yawning, she weaved her way to her own bed and slipped under the covers, fully clothed, just as the sun peeked above the horizon.

*:Kellan?:* she sent drowsily.

*:Yes, love?:* Her Companion surged into her mind. She could feel his exhaustion, worry, and a deep tide of grief; the Companions had lost one of the herd tonight as well.

*:Wake me in two candlemarks:* She hesitated, then lowered her shields fully for him.

*:And, stay with me?:* It wasn’t much, but even as tired as she was, she didn’t want to close her eyes when she was alone.

#

Vanyel knelt on the stone floor.

“King Randale, I pledge to you this day my sword.” He swallowed; his throat was dry. “I pledge you my heart, that we may build and preserve our land and people together. I vow to obey our Laws and seek the Truth in every thought and deed, to heal the wrongs and bring aid to those who suffer, and by the strength of my hand to restore and keep the peace.” Damn it, what was next? He had memorized the words of the Herald’s Creed once before, when he made his oath to Queen Elspeth, but he hadn’t expected to need it again so soon and there hadn’t been much time to review it. His head ached abominably.

Right. Deeds, legends... “The deeds of those who lived before, the legends of our past, have shown me the way, and my Companion has opened a door in my heart. It is upon

love that we build this foundation, and for love that I will serve Valdemar as long as there is breath in me. This is our sacred trust. My path stands clear before me, and where you lead, I cannot be afraid.” He closed his eyes, breathed in and out. “Upon my soul I vow this to you, that the light that is our people may never fade.”

Silence.

“Herald Vanyel, I accept your oath.” He felt Randle’s hand on his shoulder – and the brush of his mind, Randi wasn’t much of a Mindspeaker but he could manage at short range. *:Gods, I hope you’re as hungover as I am. This is awful. I’ve got to take fifty more oaths at least, and all I want to do is lie down in a dark room:*

He managed to stifle the snort of laughter before it escaped. Trust Randi. *:I’m probably more hungover:* He didn’t remember much of the night before, but Savil wasn’t going to let him live it down anytime soon. *:You’re doing great:*

“Rise, Herald Vanyel.” Randi held out a hand, and Vanyel took it and pulled himself to his feet. The man looked like a King, he thought, for all his youth and in spite of the dark circles under his eyes – every stitch of his Whites was perfectly in place, and the crown, a simple gold circlet, rested easily on his immaculate brown hair.

He bowed, managing not to wince; the movement made him very dizzy; and moved aside, letting the next Herald in line move up.

Tantras reached to clasp his arm briefly as he passed. He looked tired, too. No one had gotten much sleep. Elspeth’s formal state funeral was tomorrow, and there was a great deal of preparation to be done before Randi’s public coronation. It was exhausting.

*We’re not ready for this.* Tantras had been the Monarch’s Own for only a few months; he was putting a good face on it, but Vanyel knew he still felt overwhelmed by his duties. At least Jaysen and Keiran were experienced in their roles. They had Savil’s expertise to fall

back on, and she was rising to the occasion, but he knew she didn't have the stamina for too many more days like today.

*Honestly, neither do I.* Sleep-deprived as he was, it was hard to keep his thoughts in line, and his emotions were raw. A year ago, this would undoubtedly have been one of the days he stopped by Lancir's office, and Lancir would have made time for him... But he didn't have that option anymore. He was on his own.

*:Love, you should really think about seeing one of the other Mindhealers:* Yfandes prodded.

He couldn't face the thought of it. *:'Fandes, I can't. I just can't right now:*

She didn't push further, though he felt her disapproval. *:At least talk to someone about how you're feeling, please?:*

*:I can't put this on Savil:* She was hiding it well, but she was grieving the Queen she had served nearly her whole life.

*:Shavri?:* A pause. *:Randi's Sondra says she's in their suite, with Jisa:*

Poor Shavri. She couldn't have been having an easy time, either; he knew how much she had been dreading this day. He couldn't burden her with his feelings, but suddenly he did want to see her. *:Where am I supposed to be next?:*

*:Nothing till the meeting tonight:*

*:All right. I'll go:*

#

"Come in."

Shavri was sitting on her bed, while three-year-old Jisa played on the floor. Her voice was thick, and he could see that her eyes were red, but she managed a wan smile.

“Uncle Van!” Jisa leapt up and flung herself at him. “You came! Look at my doll.” She was a lot more articulate than Brightstar at that age, he thought, as she waved the rag doll in his face. “Her name is Mona.”

“Mona. That’s lovely.” He forced a smile. She lifted her arms, and he picked her up and swung her around. The movement made him light-headed, and he winced. “You’re bigger every time I see you, Jisa! What’s your mother feeding you?”

“I like apples!”

Shavri shook her head. “It’s all she’ll eat this week. Last week it was bread with jam, and nothing else.”

“Wow.” Trying to remember if Brightstar had been a picky eater, he set Jisa down, and she ran to her mother and scrambled up her knees. Shavri took her in her arms, squeezing her, and he saw her eyes go a little unfocused as her fingers stroked her daughter’s hair – it was a habit she had, looking Jisa over with her Othersight. He couldn’t blame her; seeing living things through a Healer’s Sight was always captivating, especially young children, their bodies a teeming hive of growth and change.

He sat down on the bed and dropped his head into his hands. *:How are you holding up?:* he sent. Mindspeech with her was as effortless as speaking, even with a headache, and he didn’t want to have this conversation out loud in front of Jisa. Gods, was she even old enough to understand what was happening?

*:It’s hard:* Complex overtones wafted along with the words – grief, bitterness, confusion, a hint of pride. *:He looked so handsome in his Whites. I know he’ll be a good king. But... I don’t know. I’m scared:*

*:I know:*

Jisa wormed her way into his lap and prodded at his face. “Uncle Van, play with me!”

“Please don’t do that right now, Jisa.” His head was still pounding and his stomach wasn’t especially happy with him.

*:Hungover, huh?:*

*:That obvious?:* He straightened up, reluctantly. *:It was stupid of me:*

*:I can help:* He felt her hand on his shoulder – and a moment later, the cool touch of her Gift, easing the pain in his head and the queasiness in his gut.

He pulled away. *:Don’t waste Healing on something that’s my own damned fault:*

*:I don’t mind. You should drink more water:* She gestured at the jug on her table.

*:Yes, Ma:* He stood up, though, and went to pour himself a glass.

*:How about you?:* she prompted. *:How are you holding up?:* Of course she had noticed something wrong; he had to be leaking a lot, with Mindspeech, and she knew him very well.

He shrugged. *:You know I get maudlin when I don’t sleep enough. That’s all it is:* He sat down heavily and sipped from his glass. It went down easier; that little touch of Healing had helped more than he wanted to admit.

He closed his eyes. They sat in companionable silence. Shavri was easy to be around, and he appreciated it.

A brush against his shields. *:Van?:*

*:Tran?:*

*:I’ve got a candlemark free. You?:* The overtones were very clear.

Was he in the mood? Five minutes ago he would have said no, but his head was feeling a lot better. *:Sure. My room?:* He opened his eyes. “Shavri, I’m off. Going to see Tran for a bit.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Have fun.”

He felt his cheeks grow warm. He still felt weird about sleeping with the new Monarch's Own...but, well, Tantras was unusually in need of stress relief lately, and his on-again, off-again arrangement with Herald Liana was off now that she was out on circuit again. *You're the only man I want when I'm sober*, Tran had said once, which was probably supposed to be a compliment.

*'Lendel, what would you think of it?* He pushed the thought away, trying to ignore the sharpening ache in his chest. Not productive.

He levered himself up from the bed. "Take care. Jisa, you be good to your mother, now."

"Come back soon, Uncle Van!" She wriggled out and jumped down, running over to hug his knees. He patted her dark brown curls and then disentangled himself, and closed the door carefully behind his back.

#

Randi leaned forwards across the table. "Van, what is this about? My Companion wouldn't tell me anything."

They were in the King's private meeting room, with permanent soundproofing and privacy spells embedded in the walls, and Vanyel had added a few of his own. Shavri was there, holding her lifebonded's hand, and Tantras sat beside Randi. Five days had passed in a blur; he had been trying to fit this in for days, but this was the first time he had been able to block off three candlemarks with all of them free. He expected it to take at least that long, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

"Randi. There's something you need to know. I—" He hesitated. "It's up to you, what you want to do with it. Elspeth wanted it kept a secret. Savil's the only other one who knows, right now."

“Spit it out!”

“It’s going to take a while.” He took a deep breath, steeling himself. “You know that I have the Gift of Foresight.”

Randi raised his eyebrows. “You do? Oh, I guess you do – it’s in your file. You’re not on the list of Foreseers to consult, though.”

He shook his head. “It’s not reliable. I’ve never had a short-range Foresight vision, and I can’t induce it.” He had tried plenty, and never found any tricks. “I’ve only ever Seen one thing. It– We weren’t sure of it at first, but we’ve had outside confirmation.” He hesitated.

“Tell me.” For just a moment, Randi’s voice rang with authority. Vanyel blinked. *He sounded like a King just then.* Maybe it ought not to be so surprising, but it was.

“It’s a recurring dream. I’m in the far north, it’s all snow and ice, I’m standing in a mountain pass – there’s an artificial path carved with blood-magic. I’m alone. There’s an army that I’m facing, with a powerful bloodpath mage leading them, coming in to conquer Valdemar, and...and in the dream, I know I’m the only one left who can stop them. I’ve sent someone away for help–” still Tylendel, it was always Tylendel, he never saw him but he always remembered his face, looking over his shoulder as Yfandes galloped away, “–but I know the Guard won’t be there in time. I have to stop the army before they cross the pass, or it’ll be too late, and I always know I’m about to die. Final Strike, probably.” He shook himself a little. “The mage calls himself Leareth. It means ‘darkness’ in Tayledras.” Maybe. Or a night sky, full of stars. He had asked Moondance once, and the Hawkbrother wasn’t familiar with that meaning, but clearly Leareth spoke a much older dialect of their language. Moondance thought the ‘Kalada’in’ people were spoken of in legend, the tribe that had split into Tayledras and Shin’a’in after the Mage Wars. Could Leareth really be that old? “His followers call him Master Dark.”

Dead silence. Tantras gasped. Shavri's lips were pressed together so hard they turned white; she looked like she might be about to faint, but she held herself erect and steady.

Randi had gone pale as well. He licked his lips. "...You said you have outside confirmation?"

"When I'm on the northern border, I've been able to See the place with Farsight. It's real, and the passage is there. We've tracked down rumours of a Master Dark; he sponsored that group of hedge-wizards that kidnapped all those children in seven ninety-one," gods that was seven years ago now, "and a number of other groups. Provided them with materials, magical artifacts. My friends from k'Treva did some investigating, and we believe he hired a mercenary mage to kill Herald-Mages, and mage-gifted children before they could be Chosen." No need to tell them the corollary. If he talked about 'Lendel he was going to cry, and he would rather not do that in a formal meeting with the King even if they were friends.

That wasn't the only evidence. He didn't want to tell Randi the rest, at least not yet, not until he had a better guess at how he would react. Still – Randi trusted him, deeply, in a way that Elspeth hadn't. He had thought a lot about how to give as much information as he could. "I found a cache of supplies that bore his name—" not literally true, but close enough, he was sure some of the ciphered books now hidden in a magic-locked trunk in his room bore a name Leareth had used once "--and artifacts that matched those we found with the northern bandit groups. The cave had been sealed for hundreds of years. Whoever he is, he's figured out how to extend his life by a great margin." He shook his head. "That information was classified, by the way. Even Savil doesn't know." Again, not quite a lie.

He fell silent.

"Gods," Randi said finally. "Van, I..." he trailed off, lifting a shaking hand to his temple and nervously smoothing back his hair. "I didn't... You should have told me sooner."

He shrugged. "I wanted to tell you. Elspeth said not until you were crowned. This is the soonest I could fit it into your schedule."

More silence.

"When?" Tantras said after a moment. "Hellfires, Van...when is this going to happen?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, I forgot to... I don't know when exactly. My hair's mostly silver in the dream—" he tugged at a lock, it was streaked throughout but still mostly black, "and that won't be for, I'm guessing at least another ten years, unless I spend a lot of time in a Tayledras Vale or use node-magic more than I have been. I try to Farsee the pass at least once a year, when my duties take me up north, and there's no sign of anything there yet. Other than that... I don't know. I've tried thinking about the date in the dream, or looking in my pockets to see if I have any dated letters, but I don't."

"That's clever. I wouldn't have thought of that." Tantras twisted his hands together on the table. "It's awful. I can't believe it." He shook his head. "You've known the last eight years?"

Nine, nearly.

Randi leaned forward. "Foresight doesn't always come true, though, right? We can avert it."

"Sometimes. I still have the dream, and it's always been the same." Well, mostly. "If it changes, or stops, then maybe we've figured out a way to avert it, and you'll be the first to know."

"But I'd best assume war is coming." Randi slammed his fist down on table. "Dammit, Van! I'm not losing you. Not in ten years. I need you!"

“I’m the strongest mage you have. Which is why I’m the only one who can stop him.” He turned away; he couldn’t bear to see their faces. “Maybe. Even in the dream, I – I’m never sure if I’ll succeed.”

“I’m not letting you die alone. I’m not letting you die *period!*”

He stared down at his clasped hands, then forced himself to look up. “Everyone dies.” Well, almost everyone.

Randi swiped at his eyes; they shone suspiciously. “No. Not like this. I’m not going to just accept this. We’ll find a way. I’m the King, damn it! What’s that even good for if I have to send one of my best friends out to die?”

Vanyel bowed his head again; the look on Randi’s face hurt too much. “I made a vow, Randi. I pledged my sword and my power to you. To Valdemar.”

He heard another thud on the table. “Van, I don’t– How can you talk about it like this! You just, you’re talking about calling a Final Strike like, like it’s what you had for lunch!”

He shook his head without looking up. “I’m not afraid.” Well, he was afraid of failing, but not of dying; what would be the point? “I know what a Final Strike feels like.” *The fire was made of everything that had ever been ‘Lendel, going up like a candle; his hopes and dreams, his rage, his determination, his love, but no pain, and no fear..* “It doesn’t hurt. Not for the person calling it, anyway.”

Horrified silence. A moment too late, he realized that probably *wasn’t* a thing he should have said to try to be reassuring.

“Sorry.” He looked up, tried to smile. “I don’t *want* to die, and I’m happy to do whatever we can to find another way. But if it comes down to me or Valdemar, I know what my choice is.”

The quiet voice in him niggled. *Do you?* Was stopping Leareth even the right thing to do? Was it what the gods wanted of him, or was their path to survival something narrower and stranger?

*We never have certainty*, he reminded himself, *not for anything in this world.*

Randi nodded, and something shifted in his face. His eyes were – not calm, but focused. Vanyel felt like he wasn't looking at his friend anymore.

“I know,” the King said quietly. “I hate it, but I know. Still. We have this warning. We can plan. Gods, Van... Maybe we can find a way.”

#

They sat on the stone bench around the stone table, in the room at the heart of the Palace. It was always unnerving being here; he couldn't feel anything through the shields, it felt like being half-blind. You couldn't even hear the Death Bell in here.

*:Ready, ke'chara?:* Savil rested her hand on his shoulder for a moment. She had been a Web-Guardian for five months now, since Lancir's death.

*:Here goes nothing:* Vanyel laid his hands on the stone table, and opened his Othersenses fully. The Web was there, blossoming in his Sight, a net of blue and silver splayed out and out. It felt like holding all of Valdemar in his palm.

This time, though, he reached for the bench next to him and drew out the focus he had chosen for this, a flawless tiger-eye, setting it next to Savil's rose-quartz. It wasn't his primary or even his secondary focus, but he could work with it well enough – he hadn't been able to find a piece of unflawed amber big enough for the Web, and fire-opal was too fragile. Then he took the second item – a large piece of quartz, clear as water. Not empty, though; he had put quite a lot of fiddly and delicate magic into it already. Well, mostly Sandra had done it, she was much better at that sort of thing.

There were already four Web-Guardians, for the four cardinal directions. For the first time, they would be trying to add a fifth. And making some other changes. It was the most difficult working he had ever attempted.

*:I have the calculations:* Yfandes. He opened his shields to her, slipping into close rapport. *:Ready?:*

*:As ready as I'll ever be:* He closed his eyes, to focus solely on his Othersight. Reached to tap the node under the Palace – he and Savil had been augmenting it, after Savil came back from k'Treva with a Tayledras technique for moving ley-lines. Creating a Heartstone, if they decided it was even possible, would have to wait until he'd had more time to plan and test his ideas, and ideally to spend a few months at k'Treva playing with them, but this was a start.

He dove headfirst into the Web.

It was dizzying. Yfandes clung to him, providing an anchor; without that, he would have been lost.

He had the oddest feeling that the spell *recognized* him. It wasn't a person, or a mind of any kind really, but it knew what he was.

He could have made a single modification, splitting Valdemar into five rather than four quadrants, but that wasn't enough. It would take another, equally difficult modification every time he wanted to add a new mage, and he didn't want that; he wanted the spell to scale easily. And he didn't want fixed quadrants. Ideally he wanted an area for which each mage was responsible, sized proportional to the power they could feed in, that moved with them if they went to a new location. It was a complex problem, even to do the calculations once for a given arrangement, and he didn't want that either – he wanted the spell itself to update.

The answer to that, it turned out, was a *lot* of maths. Fortunately Yfandes was better at it than he was, and he had spent many candelmarks letting her ‘borrow’ his eyes and hands, scratching out calculations. He must have been driving the Palace clerks mad with how much paper he went through, but they had eventually distilled it down.

He grabbed a thread, followed it to the dense, tangled center, the core of King Valdemar’s guardian spell. Feeling the power of the node behind him, he took the thread carefully in his mental fingers...and tugged.

It moved. :’*Fandes?*: he prompted, and he felt the tickle as she looked through his eyes, well, his Othersenses – and saw a dotted line, ‘drawn’ in place with her mind, where he needed the thread to land. They had practiced that trick a great deal before perfecting it.

Drawing steadily on the node, pouring in power to fight the resistance of the ancient spell, he moved the thread until it lay in the new position. Then – and this was the trickiest part – he held it there while he reached for another thread. Yfandes showed him the placement, and he moved it, until they nearly touched – and linked them with a burst of power.

He felt the change propagate – felt the Web tremble, it wasn’t stable in this new configuration, and felt as Savil leapt in, steadying it. She couldn’t pull enough power to change the spell, even she wasn’t strong enough, but she could hold and prevent it from falling apart while he finished his work.

Focus. Move on to the next. There were nearly fifty such modifications to make, adding complexity, rules to follow, the ‘intelligence’ that the new Web would need to allocate the Guardians and their placements.

Set an entry-point, an open loop where new mages could be added, easily, by any existing Web-Guardian. Set a variable for power input; the Web could read the strength of

mage-potential of any Herald, and he had set a formula for how much of that could go towards feeding the Web, based on a logarithm. Very powerful mages wouldn't be able to cross the physical distances that the spell would otherwise assign them if the model was linear – no point being the one to hear an alarm if it was a hundred miles away and you couldn't get to it. *If I didn't discount it like that, I would end up responsible for half of Valdemar.*

In trance, he didn't notice the time passing, until suddenly Yfandes withdrew a little from his head. *:That's everything:*

He surveyed the Web. *:Savil, it should be stable now. Let go?:*

She did. The Web wobbled, but settled into its new configuration.

*:I think it worked:* He could feel the distant ache of a reaction-headache as he pulled back out of the net of silver; this was a lot even for him. *:Now to add myself properly. Savil?:*

He wasn't fully a member of the Web-Spell – Savil had 'introduced' him to it, and it had let him make modifications, but he didn't have an assigned quadrant.

*:Trying now:* He had the strangest feeling – like a cord being tugged in his chest. A question, wordless.

*Yes,* he thought.

–And it was there. It felt like a new pair of eyes opening in the back of his head, except not in his head at all, it felt like the soil itself had sprouted eyes and they belonged to him.

*:I think I'm in:*

He felt 'his' quadrant shifting, as the spell tried to update its configuration, shifting away from the original four quadrants. It would be mostly random right now, since all five of the Web-Guardians were closely colocated in Haven; no one had much of an advantage in any

given direction. If Vanyel moved to a Border, though, his segment would follow him. The spell was set to only trigger updates if a Herald in it moved more than about ten miles. Otherwise, it would constantly be shifting around slightly, which would be confusing and would drain the mages unnecessarily – the spell needed to pull a little extra power every time it redid the calculations.

*:We did it:* Savil’s mindvoice was full of tired satisfaction. *:Gods, I’m wiped:*

He pulled fully out of the spell, dropping back into his body – and put his head down between his knees, as his vision darkened and he felt on the verge of passing out.

*:Ke’chara, are you–:*

“Don’t.” He managed to lift a hand, waving helplessly. His head felt like an army of toy soldiers was trying to dig its way out. “M’fine...need a minute...” He took deep breaths until the dizziness had receded a little, then cautiously tried to sit up. “Wow. We did it.”

“We did it. Now to add about ten more people, and it’ll actually start to make a difference.”

The ‘denser’ the Web was, the more total power it would have available, which meant he could come back and change the threshold for alarms, making it more sensitive. He wished he’d been able to figure out how to have it do *that* automatically as well, but the maths had been too complicated.

“I need to go fall on my nose, but tomorrow we can try adding others.” Currently the other Guardians were Jaysen, Deedre, and Sandra. He wanted to add Kilchas as soon as possible – the older mage had plenty of power to offer, he would have been Adept-level if he’d mastered finer control. Mardic and Donni, too, as soon as they were back from their circuit in the south. Arina, Daren, Kat... This was an unusually good time to modify the spell,

because all the Heralds on circuit would be coming in over the next month, to make their vows to Randi.

*And I can tell Randi we did it.* Oddly enough, he felt prouder of this than of anything he had ever done before. Maybe because it would endure, long after he was gone.

*I couldn't have done it without Leareth.* Ironic, that. He would have figured out something eventually, he was sure, but a lot of the ideas had come either from their conversations or from books the man had recommended.

Seven years of conversations, of the cautious, fraught dance between them, trying to learn what he could without giving too much away. *All information is worth having.* Leareth had changed him, deeply. But only because sometimes he said things that were true.

#

*A frozen path, blowing wind—*

(Vanyel blinked to awareness. He wasn't surprised to find himself in the dream; if anything, he had expected it sooner, with all the recent changes.)

*"Herald Vanyel." Leareth bowed to him, the polite and guarded bow of an equal. Not hostile; his eyes were calm, a hint of curiosity, as always.*

*"Leareth." He waved his hand and shaped the snow into a stool, sat, called a small heat-spell.*

(He had tried a Tayledras weather-barrier at one point; it didn't work. Only simple magics seemed to work in the dream. Odd, that, but it wasn't like it was the oddest thing about the situation.)

*He spoke first. "Queen Elspeth is dead. King Randale was crowned some days ago."*

(He put even odds on whether Leareth already knew. It had only been a week; the news had been sent out by Mindspeech-relay, but Leareth was a long way even from the northern border; how fast could his spies move?)

*“My condolences.”*

(The worst part, Vanyel thought irritably, was that he sounded like he meant it.)

*“That’s not my point. We had an agreement. You vowed that as long as Queen Elspeth lived, you would leave Valdemar alone. I thought that I ought to check in about what your plans are now.”*

(Not that he could believe anything Leareth told him at face value – but, as far as he could tell, the mage really had left Valdemar alone for the last few years.)

*Leareth smiled thinly. “Yes. I do not currently have plans that would infringe on your territory; you may believe that or not, as you wish. I will not make any additional promises, Herald Vanyel, unless you are willing to offer something in return.”*

*“Like what?”*

*“That will depend on you. We have been doing this for a long time. I have come to respect you, Herald of Valdemar, and I have constrained my activities greatly as a show of good faith. If it is possible for us to come to trust one another, I do not expect it to be quick, or easy, but you must offer an olive branch of our own.”*

*He nodded. “I understand. I’ll think about it.”*

(And he would. He had a lot of thinking to do.)

*“In the meantime, Herald of Valdemar, do you wish to continue our previous conversation?”*

## Chapter Two

*:Van! Chosen!:*

Yfandes. He dragged himself out of a deep sleep; it felt like swimming up through quicksand. *:What?:*

*:Emergency meeting:*

*:Why?:* He sat up, rubbing at his eyes, which felt gluey. It was pitchy dark in the room. *:It's the middle of the night:*

*:There's been a border attack. The Karsites:*

That sent a jolt of panic through him, doing quite a lot to shake out the cobwebs in his head. *:Gods! I'm coming:*

One of Randi's first acts as King had been to promote Vanyel to the senior Heraldic Circle. He knew opinions on it were mixed. There were people who thought it was favouritism, that he was still too young – only twenty-four. Others had been expecting it years ago. He was the most powerful mage in Valdemar, after all.

He sent a mage-light above his head and dressed hastily, throwing on the first pair of Whites he grabbed. They hung a little loose; he had probably been forgetting to eat again. He

belted the tunic, tugged it straight, dragged a comb through his hair, and stuffed his feet into his boots before heading for the door.

Crossing the darkened, silent hallway, he passed Tantras' door just as it opened. The King's Own, looking just as rumpled and groggy as Vanyel felt, smiled tiredly, and they exchanged a quick one-armed hug before leaving the Heralds' Wing.

Mid-spring. Not the worst time for a war, but damn it, this was inconvenient. He'd known, intellectually, that Elspeth's hard-won alliances were liable to fall apart when she died, and that they hadn't succeeded at brokering another agreement. With Rethwellan, yes, but not Karse. *Were they planning to attack this whole time?* That might be why they had stalled so much in the talks.

At least they weren't totally unprepared. Elspeth had discreetly reinforced the Guard placements on the southern border a year ago, and one of Randale's first legal orders as King had been to send another two companies. One of them was Lissa's. *I hope she's all right.*

They met Jaysen at the entrance to the administrative wing. He held the door, nodding to both of them, and let it fall shut. Keiran was leaning against the wall; she straightened up, hiding a yawn behind her hand, and led the way.

They gathered in the smaller Circle meeting room. A page was already there, setting out jugs of water and pots of tea from the sideboard. Katha was the only one there ahead of them; she sat forward with her elbows on the table, rubbing her temples.

Vanyel picked a random seat at the round table. There was enough room for twenty, here, but they weren't nearly that many. Jaysen pulled Tantras over to a seat next to him, and they put their heads together, speaking quietly.

Kilchas and Deedre came in together. Deedre had aged a lot in the last year, Vanyel thought. Her iron-grey hair looked thin and dull, and pouches of skin hung under her chin. She was, what, in her late seventies now? He knew she had been older than Elspeth.

Randi arrived. *Gods, did he have special classes in how to get dressed in the middle of the night?* He looked, as always, immaculate, not a thread or hair out of place.

He exchanged nods around the table, holding each Herald's eyes for a few seconds, then sat. "Are we all here?"

"We're missing Savil—" Vanyel started to say, but then she was there, striding through the doorway. She moved stiffly; he knew she woke with aching joints, these days, and needed half a candlemark to get moving in the mornings.

"All right, that's everyone. I'm calling this meeting to order. As I'm sure you all know, there's been a Karsite attack on the border. Specifically, the Guard outpost in Horn, on the South Trade Road." He looked at Vanyel. "Van, would you be able to give us Farsight on the area?"

He fought the urge to rub his eyes. *:Yfandes, is that even in my range?:* It was well over two hundred miles away. "I can give it a try," he said out loud. "A map would help." He had been to Horn, but hadn't spent much time there.

Keiran was already unrolling one; she slid it across the table to him. He held the corners down with his fingers, stared at the dot that represented Horn. Taking his time, he centered and grounded, slipped into a light trance, and reached for a node, he would need it to boost his Gift. *Which means I'll have a godawful headache for the rest of the meeting.* Oh well. He was used to focusing through pain.

He thought to try something. Closing his eyes, he reached for the Web, that new sense that lived in his head. Drew on that strange feeling of holding Valdemar in his hand. Orienting himself, he centered and grounded, and then leaned into his Farsight and Reached.

...And he was there. It took less concentration to maintain, and he thought it was draining him less as well.

“I See the post,” he said, hearing his own voice as though from a great distance. “It’s on fire. There are – I See bodies.” He shifted his perspective, dropping closer to the ground, trying to get a rough count; it was hard to pick them out, the the only light came from flickering firelight. “At least fifty men down, at a guess. I See Karsite soldiers.” In their rust-red uniforms, they stood in groups. “I See their standard.” The Sun-in-Glory was carried on a pole, the cloth rippling.

Where was the rest of the Guard? There had been two companies garrisoned in Horn, nearly six hundred men and women. Some of them, at least, must have managed a retreat. *Gods, Lissa, you had better be all right...* No time to think about it now. He packed his fear away into a corner of his mind, compartmentalizing. Pulling his viewpoint higher again, he scanned the land – it felt easier, he thought he was picking up information from the Web as well as Farsight. “I See the rest of the Horn Guard. They are approximately two miles north, holding the South Trade Road.” Torches flickered in the darkness. He counted quickly. *:Yfandes, multiply some numbers for me?:* She was better at mental arithmetic. They had clumped into formations, twelve men wide, three deep, and he saw other, smaller groups, distributed further from the road. Hopefully there were other scouts, invisible in the darkness.

*:I’m guessing three to four hundred:*

“Three or four hundred alive,” he relayed. That meant there had to be more casualties than he’d seen, maybe inside the remains of the burning outpost. He resisted the urge to drop lower and look for Lissa – instead, he moved his viewpoint towards the town of Horn itself.

Karsite soldiers in the streets. Torches. Bodies. Houses burning. Knots of people, kneeling...a woman holding her children...a man crying over the body of a girl that lay in the road. Blue uniforms, here and there...he caught a glimpse of a Valdemaran soldier, crawling on the ground, dragging a leg that gushed blood. It was black in the firelight.

His concentration faltered; the image grew hazy, then sharpened as he regained focus. “Horn is taken.”

“That’s enough.”

He sighed and, with relief, let go of his Farsight and slammed back into his own body. Ow. He managed not to actually clutch at his head.

“This is bad news.” Randi’s face was grim, but calm. “We need to pass down orders. Keiran, what are our resources?”

The Lord Marshal’s Herald leaned forward. She had been scribbling on a piece of paper. “Herald Shallan is the nearest Mindspeech-relay. She’s in Dog Inn.” About twenty miles north of Horn. “Herald Efreem is on courier-circuit near Three Rivers. Horn should be within his Farsight range, but he’s not a Mindspeaker, so we can’t easily send word to him. Herald Janna is near Victrin Fell.” She was the strongest Fetcher out of all the Heralds, and had a minor mage-gift as well. “Herald Navine is in Crescent Lake.” She was a short-range Foreseer and a master-level mage. “Heralds Mardic and Donni are on Hardorn South circuit.” That was where the Hardorn and Karsite borders intersected. “Herald Tavri is in Tindale.” He was a moderately powerful Firestarter and Empath – a weird combination of Gifts, but it had served him well. “Herald Jarek...”

Vanyel felt a tap on his shoulder, and looked up. Tantras was holding a small bottle.  
:Willowbark tincture. You look like you've got a headache. I know that's long-range for you:

:That obvious?: He took it, gratefully, and measured a few drops into his cup, then poured himself some of the tea overtop.

“Thank you, Keiran,” he heard Randi say – voice unruffled, though he could read the tension and fear in his brown eyes. “We need to pass down orders. It sounds like we can go through Shallan. Tantras, is she within your range, or do we need to relay through Herald Farah?” Farah was in Kettlesmith.

A pause. “Taver can boost me.”

Vanyel blinked, surprised.

“Good. She can get a message to the ranking officer. Let's figure out what to tell her, first. Ideas?”

“If we get a message to Efrem–”

“Move Janna to the Terilee–”

“How fast can Tafri reach the Border–”

Randi raised a hand. Silence fell. “One at a time, please. Savil, what do you think?”

She stroked the tip of her nose, thinking. “Hmm. Mardic and Donni are the strongest mages within a day's journey – working together, they're about Adept-equivalent. If we get a message to them and can confirm a secure terminus location, they can Gate to Dog Inn, and bring over a company from the South Hardorn garrison. We'll want Navine on site as soon as possible, as well, she has more combat experience and her Foresight will be very helpful – but she's at least a two-day journey. Getting a message to her is a priority and she's not a strong Mindspeaker. It might be best to send a message to Efrem, first and have him pick her up – it's out of his way, but not by much, it'll add maybe half a day to his travel time.”

“Agreed on all counts.” Randi nodded to her. Tantras was already scribbling notes.

“Keiran?”

“I’d like more mages down there as soon as possible. We know the Karsites have Adepts – no way to know which of them are participating in the attack, but we have to assume all of them.” She tugged at her blonde braid. “I think we should send Kilchas and Vanyel, by Gate if possible.”

Vanyel raised a hand. “I can’t Gate that far,” he said apologetically. Well, he could, but he would be out for a week afterwards.

He saw a few looks of surprise. Clearly Deedre in particular had forgotten about his difficulties with Gating.

She nodded briskly. “Understood. It’s easier on you passing through someone else’s Gate, right? Savil, could you Gate them to Dog Inn?”

“If we have a secure terminus.”

“We’ll confirm that through Shallan,” Randi said calmly. “Who else should we send from Haven, if we’re Gating anyway?”

“Jores and Umbria are here...”

Vanyel leaned back in his chair, listening to the conversation and trying to wrestle his mind around the concept of Gating to a battlefield. He really, really wasn’t looking forwards to it. *I’ll be out half a day.* He hated the idea of being that vulnerable when Savil wasn’t there. Reminding himself that Mardic and Donni would be there soon helped, a little.

*‘Lendel, ashke, I wish you were here.* The pointless thought, unbidden, started a violent ache in his chest. Gods, he was tired, and it hadn’t fully sunk in yet, *but we’re at war now, aren’t we?* He should have been prepared for it, they had half known it was coming.

He made himself focus on Randi's face, even if the words of the discussion drifted past his ears. He wasn't wearing his crown, that was only for public appearances, but somehow he gave the impression of it anyway – maybe in the way he held his shoulders, maybe the expression in his eyes. *He's even younger than me, gods*, but he was King, and he wore it like a mantle.

*Where you lead, I cannot be afraid.*

#

Vanyel huddled on the stool, shivering despite the blanket over his shoulders, hands wrapped around the cup of tea with a generous four drops of willowbank tincture mixed into it – he had grabbed a bottle for himself at Healers' before leaving, along with more of the sleeping-herbs and the other remedies he liked to have in his medical kit when he travelled. He longed for a stronger painkiller, the lingering pain of the Gate was like acid in his skull, but he needed to be clearheaded.

“As far as we can tell, they've gathered most of their forces here.” Major Alban, a weathered man in his fifties who was even shorter than Vanyel, tapped a spot on the map, spread on a folding table inside his tent, in the rough Dog Inn camp. “Our scouts are reporting about a thousand men in the initial attack, maybe another four thousand camped on the Karse site of the border, and we believe they have at least one Adept-class mage and probably a number of hedge-wizards.”

Vanyel barely hid a shudder. Five thousand, against four hundred survivors. If the Karsites chose to advance in force, there was nothing Valdemar could do about it.

But, for now, it appeared they were holding their ground. They had taken Horn, and the guard-post, but it had been a pyrrhic victory – Major Alban had ordered those supplies that they couldn't carry away destroyed before they evacuated.

Kilchas, standing beside the major, nodded. “If we were to lead in a few platoons here, by the creek—”

Major Alban shook his head. “We can’t go on the offensive, they’ll flatten us. So we’re stuck giving them all the time they need to regroup.” He glanced over. “Lad, sure you’re all right? You’re white as a sheet.”

Vanyel, embarrassed, tried to smile. “I’m fine. Just sensitive to Gates.”

“If you say so.” The man looked dubious. “Anyhow. We’ve got six Heralds, Jarek just arrived, and we’ll have Heralds Mardic and Donni very soon, and another four in the next two days. Plus reinforcements from the Hardorn South garrison, but I can’t imagine they’ll be able to spare more than two companies, so no matter what we’re outnumbered. Which means – Come in?”

There had been a quiet stomp outside the tent, the replacement for a knock when ‘doors’ were made of canvas.

“Captain Lissa! Exactly the person I wanted to see.”

Vanyel jerked his head around – immediately regretting it, when the motion made him so dizzy that he nearly fell off the stool, but gods it was good to see Lissa. He managed to bite back an entirely unprofessional greeting, and just nodded to her. She looked unhurt, which was a relief, though her uniform was smudged with dirt.

“Major.” She bowed formally. “Herald Kilchas, Herald Vanyel.” There was a twinkle in her eyes when they paused on him.

“Come here, captain. I’d like your opinion.”

#

Dawn showed the extent of the destruction.

Vanyel had grabbed a candlemark's rest on someone else's bedroll – he hadn't actually been able to sleep through the pain, but had gone into trance, which was almost as good and let him do some focused self-Healing on his mage-channels. Moondance had taught him the trick of it – he couldn't do as much as the Healing-Adept, but his channels weren't damaged, just irritated. Another dose of willowbark, and he felt almost ready to face the world.

The evacuation of Horn and the Guard post had been hasty and disorganized, but they had finally managed to count up all the survivors. Four hundred and twenty-one soldiers, nearly all infantry. The Healer who had been stationed at the post was a casualty; fortunately, Randi had sent three Healers through the Gate, but none were combat-experienced. Seventy-three townspeople, more than half women and children. Horn had a population of nearly a thousand; Vanyel hoped that most of its people were prisoners, and not dead.

They had no idea when Mardic and Donni would be there. Neither of them was a strong Mindspeaker, and they were over three hundred miles from Haven; both Tantras and Vanyel had made attempts to reach the from the capital and been unable. A message had been passed to Herald Ruvi, the Mindspeech-relay on the East Trade Road Border circuit, but even he was ninety miles away. At worst, by pushing his Companion to her limits he could ride that distance in a day, and then Mardic and Donni might need another half-day to prepare...

*We should have redirected more forces, sooner.* But was that just hindsight speaking? They shared over a hundred miles of border with Karse, and the Karsites could have attacked any part of it. And there was the rest of Valdemar to worry about. Everyday work didn't stop just for a war.

They still didn't have a plan – not one that had any chance of success. At worst, if the Karsites attacked, Vanyel thought he could throw up a mage-barrier broad and strong enough

to hold them back – but the Karsites had at least one Adept. Probably the man couldn't use node-magic, few people other than the Tayledras could, but he didn't know that for sure, and a clever mage could take down his barrier anyway.

*This is bad. This is very bad.*

Oddly, though, he felt calm. The constant bustle made it easier to keep his thoughts in line and emotions at bay, too. *Distraction. Lancir never liked it as a strategy, but it works.*

He stood just outside Major Alban's tent, watching people move around, speaking in small huddles. A group of soldiers was drilling with pikes off in the distance; above their heads, smoke stained the horizon black.

"Van." It was Lissa; she stopped two paces away, and he could feel how she wanted to hug him, but she didn't. She bowed to him, formally.

*Oh, right, I outrank her now. Technically.*

"You should eat something," she said, holding out a chunk of travel-bread.

He took it gratefully and gnawed on it; it was hard as a rock.

"Alban's giving me charge of both companies," she said after a moment. "What's left of them. Temporary promotion to major, says he'll try to make it official later."

"Wow. Congratulations."

She shook her head. "Don't congratulate me. Means I'll be leading the counterattack, when we think of one." Her eyes were bright, though, and his Empathy picked up only anticipation, without a hint of fear. There was anger there, too, a simmering bloodlust he'd never felt from Liss before. She would have lost some of her people, he thought. Maybe seen them die in front of her, or left the injured behind. He knew it wasn't the first time, and she was normally much better at compartmentalizing than he was – but, gods, no wonder it got to her a little.

“Lissa.” Major Alban stuck his head out of the tent. “In here. Herald Vanyel, you too.”

Someone had found a better map and pinned it to the wall of the tent. Three folding tables were set out. Kilchas was sketching out a diagram on one of them.

“We can’t move until Heralds Mardic and Donni arrive with reinforcements,” the major said, “and I’d prefer not to wait long after they do. Meaning the Karsites will be warned, since I’m sure their Adept will pick up on the Gate-energies. So we’ll need to move fast. Herald Vanyel, is that going to be a problem for you?”

Vanyel shook his head. “If I’ve got enough warning to shield, I should be all right.” It wouldn’t be fun, but Yfandes could buffer him if they were in physical contact – in case they weren’t, he had his own shields fully reinforced.

“Could be a problem for Mardic and Donni,” Kilchas pointed out. “They’ll be worn out from Gating.”

“We’re not counting on them for this attack – it’s the Guard forces we need. They’ll be coming in at the Temple of Kernos, if they received our instructions, and I’ve asked for at least two platoons of cavalry. In the meantime, I want to stage our main forces over here, and here.” He pointed to two spots on the map. “Lissa, you’ll be leading the main advance here on the east side of the road, with three hundred and fifty infantry, and I’m sending Herald Umbria as your Mindspeech-relay and keeping Herald Shallan here with me. I’m giving Captain Terin the platoon of skirmishers and bowmen; they’ll creep in along the north side of Dog Creek, here, and harry any of the Karsites if they try to come around and flank us that way. Herald Vanyel, if you could take out the bridges for us, I’d be much obliged. It won’t stop them fording the river but it’ll slow them down, and maybe persuade them to stay on the south side of the creek.”

Vanyel nodded. “I can do that.”

“We can’t spare much of a guard–”

He shook his head. “I can do it from here. I’ll use my Farsight. Want me to do it now?”

Major Alban looked surprised, and pleased. “Not yet. I’d like us to keep the element of surprise – but that’s excellent, it gives us a lot more flexibility. You just need somewhere safe you can go into trance, I’m guessing?”

“Preferably.” He could do it from Yfandes’ saddle if he had to, but he would be a lot less aware of his surroundings.

“We can give you that. I’ll have you stage with Lissa’s forces, then. Lissa, I can give you Herald Jores as well, he’s a decent Fetcher.”

Vanyel nodded; he remembered Jores. *Gods, that first mission feels like a lifetime ago.*

“Kilchas, I’d like to put you right here, where the main road crosses the creek. There’s some decent tree cover. You ought to be able to, er, dissuade any of their forces that try to take a shortcut up the road.”

Kilchas nodded. “Yes, sir. I can do that.” His eyes were bright. *This is where he’s most alive*, Vanyel thought. *This, and watching the stars.* Kilchas was such a bundle of contradictions. *If it were him instead, what would he talk about with Leareth?* Pointless woolgathering – he dragged his thoughts back to the conversation.

“All right. What we’re actually hoping is that the Karsites will realize we’re bringing in reinforcements, and attack as soon as they detect the Gate, hoping to hit us before we have time to prepare. Vanyel, you’re our best counter to their Adept. Take him out if you can. Captain Terin’s group will try to make it unappealing for them to cross the creek and come at us from that direction, and Kilchas will hold them off at the road itself. Lissa, on my signal I’ll want you to take your company across the road and head west, straight for Horn. At the

same time, I'm going to send a full company of the Hardorn South infantry along the north side of the creek, all the way to the border, and the cavalry straight down the road – we'll hold one platoon at the creek crossing and send the rest to the border itself, in case the Karsites try to bring more forces up the road. Kilchas, I'll decide when the time comes whether you'll peel off with the border group or stay – contact Shallaan if you still don't have confirmation. I want you to drive hard for the border and then spread out, try to make it so they can't bring any reinforcements into Horn. Lissa, at this point we'll have them pinned from on three sides. Terin's people and the South Hardorn infantry will pick off anyone who tries to cross the creek, and prevent them from bringing more men across the border on that side. I want you to take Horn back, and hold it." He shook his head. "Don't cross the border. We didn't start this war, and it's possible there might still be a diplomatic resolution."

Doubtful, Vanyel thought, but he said nothing.

"I'm sending Jarek with the South Hardorn people. He'll do as a Mindspeech-relay, at least for the distances in question. And he has Animal Mindspeech, so he ought to be able to wreak havoc if they make the mistake of bringing in cavalry." He paused. "Any questions?"

Head-shakes all round.

"Kilchas, Vanyel, get some rest. Lissa, stay, I want to talk tactics with you."

Vanyel bowed formally to the major, and left the tent. The sun was properly up now; it looked like it would be a clear day, aside from the smoke that smudged half the sky.

*:Yfandes? Where are you?:*

*:Over here:* She sent a sort of schematic image of the camp.

He started walking, trying to ignore the heaviness in his legs; fatigue was catching up with him. She was standing under a rough lean-to shelter of branches, nibbling at a trough of

hay. He sighed and leaned against her neck, closing his eyes. Gods, he was exhausted, but he didn't know if he could sleep. *I don't feel safe here at all.*

*:I'll help you. Here, come lie down in the corner:*

He hesitated. *:I'm going to look silly:*

*:No you won't. Everyone knows to sleep when you can. Have you eaten?:*

*:I had some bread:* His stomach was churning uneasily.

*:That won't do. Go to that tent and get some stew, and come back here:*

#

Yfandes prodded him out of a deep, dreamless sleep. *:Chosen, wake up:*

He swatted ineffectually at her; the inside of his head felt gluey. For a moment he had no idea where he was.

*:We're moving out:*

Oh. Memory caught up with him. Groaning, he sat up. "How long was I asleep?" The sun wasn't much higher in the sky.

*:About a candlemark:*

No wonder he felt awful. His mouth tasted like old sawdust.

*:Where's your waterskin? You should make sure you're drinking enough:*

"Yes, Ma." He yawned and stretched, feeling his spine crack.

He was still only half awake as he put on her tack; it took him twice as long as usual.

It was a relief to settle himself into her saddle and get his weight off his feet.

Lissa was at the edge of the camp, speaking to two of her lieutenants. She bowed to him. "Herald."

"Major." He tried to sit up straighter.

“We’re marching out in five minutes. Don’t know how long we’ll have to wait in the staging area, I’m afraid.”

A long time, he hoped. Maybe he could snatch another nap. He had tied a blanket to the back of Yfandes’ saddle, though he’d left his saddlebags behind, better not to have the extra weight. He did have extra water with him, and some more of the awful travel-bread. *I could really learn to hate Guard rations.*

*:Belt yourself in and take a nap: Yfandes suggested. :We won’t be moving fast. I’ll have more than enough time to wake you if something happens:*

*:Are you sure?:*

*:Positive. Rest while you can:*

He woke more easily the second time, when Yfandes stopped moving. Blinking, he stretched and yawned. They must have reached the designated staging-area. All around him, men and women in Guard-blue were stretching, sitting down, taking out waterskins and food.

Herald Umbria waved to him. She was an older woman, short and stocky with nut-brown skin and greying hair. He didn’t know her well; she had spent most of her career on the Delcaire circuit, in the north, since she was local to that area and fluent in the local dialect of Valdemaran, which Vanyel could barely understand. She was a very strong Mindspeaker, nearly in Tantras’ league; he didn’t know if she had other Gifts.

He dismounted and went over to her. “Herald Umbria.”

“Herald Vanyel.” She gripped his arm for a moment. “Pleasure to be working with you, lad. Heard a lot of good things about you.”

He nodded, feeling self-conscious. “Should we plan?”

“Let’s wait for Jores. In the meantime, what are your Gifts?”

“Um. Pretty much all of them.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

He shrugged. “I’m not a strong Fetcher, and my Receptive Empathy is pretty unreliable. I can boost any of my Gifts with mage-power if I need to, though.” His weakest Gifts were Healing and Bardic, but those weren’t useful in combat anyway.

“You’re a strong Mindspeaker? I remember, didn’t you contact me all the way from Polsinn once?”

“...Yes, I did.” He had forgotten that.

“Good. Jores isn’t, unfortunately, so we’ll need to relay through his Companion. Captain, sorry, Major Lissa is going to want me with her at the back of the formation, since I’ll be relaying updates and orders from central command.” She tugged at a lock of hair, thoughtfully. “Hmm. Can we try something?”

“Sure.”

“Would you Farsee that ridge?” She pointed.

“Um, all right.” He centered and grounded, then Reached. “Done.”

“Now link with me and Send me the image.”

Oh. He’d never tried to do that with anyone but Yfandes. Closing his eyes to focus only on his Sight, he reached for her with his mind. She parted her shields for him, letting him into much closer rapport than the usual Mindspeech-protocols allowed. He tried to offer up the image of the ridge to her, like holding out a hand.

*:Excellent:* she sent. *:Can you do that and fight at the same time?:*

*:I have no idea:* He dropped the Farsight and opened his eyes. “I can try leaving the connection open, but Farseeing is pretty distracting.”

“Well, we could do it in quick flashes. How fast can you See an area?” She pursed her lips. “Let’s try something. Let me in again.”

He reached for her mind.

*:Good. Show me this place?:* A small flashing dot appeared, superimposed on his ordinary vision. He was startled; no one but Yfandes had ever been able to do that. He switched to Farsight again, setting his viewpoint where she’d pointed – just above a dense stand of elms.

*:Good, that’s enough:* He dropped it. *:There:* Another dot. *:There:*

After a minute or two, they could manage the whole process in less than five seconds.

“Good!” She grinned; her teeth were very crooked, but it shed years from her face.

“You’re very skilled.” He smiled back. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“I’ve been a Mindspeech-relay for thirty years. Picked up a thing or two. Oh! Jores. Good to see you, lad.”

Herald Jores pulled himself up. He nodded. “Herald Vanyel.”

“We’ve been doing a bit of planning,” Umbria said. “Major Lissa hasn’t given us any specific orders yet. Jores, you’re a pretty good Fetcher. I’m sure you can make the Karsites’ lives very difficult, but unfortunately you’ll need to be quite close to the front to see what you’re doing, and I’d rather you weren’t so exposed. Unless... Hmm.” She pursed her lips again. “I don’t do this often, but – I can Mindspeak even to the un-Gifted.”

Vanyel blinked. He knew Yfandes could do that, but he hadn’t realized any Heralds could.

She noticed. “Maybe you can as well, lad. It’s not just a matter of having a strong Gift, but most really strong Mindspeakers can. It’s not something we spread around, but it can

be very useful. And almost all Heralds have a tiny bit of Mindspeech – even if they didn't initially, we think it's something that comes out of the Companion-bond. Jores, may I try?"

The pale-haired Herald nodded. A moment later his eyes widened. "That worked."

"Vanyel, you try."

Vanyel hesitated, but he centered and grounded and then tried to reach for Jores' mind. The man's natural shields weren't like those of a Mindspeaker at all; they clearly weren't under his conscious control, and his surface thoughts drifted on top of them. Vanyel rested a mental 'hand' on the surface of his mind. *:Jores:*

Jores nodded again. "That worked as well."

Vanyel shrugged. "Don't think I can Send you images like I can with Umbria." He couldn't get a close enough rapport. "I can give directions though. Do you have to be able to see what you're Fetching?"

Jores fidgeted with his belt. "I have to have seen it. Can Fetch something from another room, if I know exactly where it is."

"Good," Umbria said. "My thought is, we send you forward to have a look, with some cover, then pull you back before we press the attack. Vanyel can signal you when it's a good moment to wreak some havoc. What's the maximum weight you can Fetch?"

"Fifty pounds or so. Two or three times and I'll be tired out, though. Ten pounds or less, I can keep going just about forever."

"Very good. If you can arrange to Fetch some swords and pikes away right before we meet their lines, that would be excellent... If you've seen a man, can you Fetch his sword even if he's moved around a bit since?"

Jores scratched his head. "Don't know. Never tested that."

"Well, worth a try. Vanyel, can you give him cover to scout? An illusion?"

Vanyel tried to think. “I’m not very good at illusions. They’ll know something’s there, but I can make it nearly impossible to aim at him. Oh! And I can give him physical shields. I have an extra talisman I made, and if we’ve got time to prepare I can do one from scratch. Would you like one as well?”

“Please.”

He nodded. *I ought to give Lissa one too.* Gods, why hadn’t he thought of it earlier? He felt like an idiot.

*:No one asked you: Yfandes sent, reassuring. :We’re new at this. Don’t be too hard on yourself:*

It would have been nice to have a lot more talismans. They each took a good ten hours of work, and he’d never made time to build more than three – he had two, and had given one to Savil. No helping it now.

“Heralds.” He heard Lissa’s voice, and jerked his head up. “Glad you’re making plans. I have some ideas, but I’d like to hear yours as well. I’m thinking we put Vanyel with the front ranks – sorry, Van, but you’re the best able to look after yourself.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“Did you bring anything except Whites?”

“What?”

“You’re awfully visible.” She made a face. “I know it’s traditional for Heralds to go into battle in Whites, but I think it’s stupid. I can probably dig you up an extra uniform.”

He stared at her. It would never have occurred to him. “Yfandes is pretty conspicuous,” he pointed out.

*:I can go roll in some mud or something: she suggested. :And white horses aren’t all that rare. The uniform’s what really stands out. I think it’s a good idea:*

It still felt uncomfortable, but he couldn't argue. "All right."

### Chapter Three

Savil stifled a yawn. *Gods, I can't cope with being dragged out of my bed at midnight anymore.* At least the Council meeting was over, and they had pushed through a formal declaration of war and approved the initial redistribution of forces. Randale had handled it more deftly than she'd expected from him. He was surprising a lot of people, she thought.

Still. For all that he'd spent his whole life educated for this, he was twenty-two; he didn't have the experience a King needed. The less scrupulous members of the Council knew that, and would see it as an opportunity for power grabs. She would keep an eye on it, and try to warn him if anything especially nasty seemed to be brewing – but she wasn't good at this sort of thing, and knew it. *Damn it, Lancir, we need you so badly right now, and you aren't here.* Tantras was a good kid, but he wasn't even thirty, and she didn't think he would ever have that skillset.

“Savil?”

Jaysen's voice jerked her out of her reverie. “Sorry.” She smiled apologetically.

“Woolgathering.”

“I understand.” He looked tired, she thought, and his age was starting to show; he was almost fifty now. His pale hair had gone grey almost without her noticing, and worry lines scored his forehead. “Keiran put together some numbers on which Guard-posts can spare people, wanted your input. Can’t afford to strip the Hardorn border too much, the Karsites could well decide to cut through their territory and attack that way. But the north—”

She shook her head, irritably. “We can’t leave the northern border unguarded.” Jaysen didn’t know about Leareth; she had wanted to tell him, more than once, he was one of her closest friends, but Elspeth had vetoed it, Randale wanted to continue that policy, and Kellan agreed. Not yet. *How long until we can bring this out into the open?*

She wondered how Randale had reacted, when Vanyel briefed him; he’d come to her afterwards, but hadn’t spoken of the actual conversation. She thought he wanted to plan a lot more proactively than Elspeth had – maybe not surprising, he had the energy of youth. *And Van’s one of his best friends.* Was that bad? It might mean that he couldn’t be objective about what was best for Valdemar...

“Savil?”

“Sorry.” She reached for the papers he was offering her. “I’ll have a look. We might be able to spare a few platoons from each post in the north. And we could cut the Hardorn North garrison by half, if we need to.” Leareth would have to go through Iftel if he wanted to approach Valdemar that way, and she didn’t think much of his chances at it.

Jaysen frowned. “Even if we cut *every* post by half, that’s barely three thousand men. The Karsites have five thousand. And that’s just on this attack.”

She shook her head. “I know. We need to request armsmen from the major landholdings.”

“The Council hasn’t approved that yet.”

She massaged her forehead. “Well, Randale has to ram it through somehow.” If this looked to turn into a real war, they would have to start raising a larger army, conscripting farmers and townspeople. She didn’t even want to *think* about the hours of debate it would take to get that through the Council. Randale could use his veto, of course, but it was better to avoid that – like or hate it, the smooth functioning of Valdemar’s government depended a lot on the goodwill of the Council.

And even if they could get it approved, it took time to train farm boys and turn them into soldiers. Time, and manpower, and more coin than she wanted to think about... *Gods, do we have enough in the treasury to finance a war?* They would have to increase taxes. Maybe do a re-minting, debase the coin.

“All right. I’ll tell Keiran you said that. We’re going to start moving people as quickly as we can, but it’ll be at least a month before we can fully redeploy our forces.”

She closed her eyes. Pinched the bridge of her nose. “I can raise some Gates. If you’re willing to cut down my regular duties, because I’ll need a day to rest after each one.”

“Hmm. It might well be worth it, for any post where we’ll be reallocating more than a hundred men. I’ll draw up a list and run it by Randale.” He stood up. His pale eyes settled on her, and he reached out a hand and brushed her cheek. “Get some rest, Savil.”

She leaned into his touch. “Only if you do, too.”

“I’m twenty years younger than you.”

“You didn’t have to say that out loud.” She smiled, though. “I’ll take a nap.” *:Kellan, I’m not supposed to be somewhere else right now, am I?:*

*:No, love. Tantras wants to see you a candlemark before sundown. I’ll wake you for it:*

She stood up and followed Jaysen to the door. Damn it, she missed Van. *He’ll be fine*, she reminded herself. He was plenty able to look after himself out in the field.

#

“You asked to see me?”

Tantras stood in the doorway to King Randale’s new office, uncertain. He had barely gotten used to serving as Queen’s Own to Elspeth before she died. At heart, the Monarch’s Own was supposed to be the monarch’s closest friend and confidante. He barely knew Randale. *Gods, why didn’t Taver choose Van?* Vanyel was one of the King’s closest friends.

Maybe because Van was already claimed, for a future duty that none of them wanted to think about. Taver must have known of it already – and he had the feeling his Companion still knew more than he was saying.

“Yes. Come, sit.”

He closed the door behind him, then moved cautiously across the room and perched on the edge of the offered chair.

Randale smiled crookedly. “Want a drink? I know it’s early, but I’ll feel more relaxed with a bit of wine in me, and I’ll feel weird if I’m drinking and you’re not.”

Tantras stared at him.

Randale ran a hand over his hair. “Figured I can say this to my King’s Own. I’m completely out of my depth. People say ‘your Highness’ and I’m still looking behind me to see who they’re talking to.”

That startled a jolt of laughter out of him. “I feel the same.”

Randale smiled. “I wondered. Gods. Here we are, pretending to be adults...” He poured wine for both of them from his decanter.

“For what it’s worth,” Tantras said tentatively, “I think you’re doing great so far.”

“You do? Thank you.” Randale took a long sip of wine. “I didn’t have anything in particular to discuss with you tonight. Just wanted a candlemark or two where I could stop

trying so hard to look like I know what I'm doing." He steepled his fingers together over the desk. "Well, there is one thing. You know Vanyel pretty well, no?"

Tantras blinked at him. "I mean, I guess so. Aren't you close with him?"

Randale shook his head. "I thought I knew him. Until our meeting the other day. He – he's been carrying this for almost nine years! And he never told me. Never let anything slip."

"Not to me either." Tantras grimaced. "I wondered... I thought maybe I should've guessed. Van's good at keeping secrets, though." *He wouldn't thank me if I had guessed*, he thought but didn't say.

Randale's eyes were fixed into the distance. "The way he looked... When he said he knew what a Final Strike felt like. Like a man who's seen the Havens and been turned away. I don't – it scared me, Tantras. I hate it."

"I know." It had frightened him too. He remembered when Vanyel had first come back to Haven, and they worked together on the Mindspeech-relay. Even then he had been diligent in his duties, but gods, he looked like someone half out of the world. Eyes that never quite seemed to focus on anything, a shell of duty wrapped around a core of pain.

Randale shook his head. "He's willing to go out there and die for Valdemar. For me. I almost think he *wants* to."

Tantras looked away, uncomfortable. "He'll do the right thing." *Of course he wants to die ever since he lost Tylendel*. He could almost feel those unspoken words, hovering in the air between them.

Randale smiled; it looked a little forced. "I know. I'm acting the mother hen, aren't I? He can look after himself."

#

“There you go. Now, remember, no picking at it.” Shavri held the little boy’s solemn eyes, still a little glazed with fever, for a long moment, then glanced up at his mother with a smile. “Make sure he keeps the bandages on for three days. Afterwards, you can leave it open, but use the salve I gave you twice a day. This packet of herbs is for pain, and this one is for fever. A pinch each, steep in a cup of water, no more often than every four candlemarks.”

“Thank you, Healer Shavri.” The woman nodded to her, then took her son’s shoulders. “Come on, Arvi. You heard the nice Healer.”

Shavri narrowed her eyes at him. “No more trying to make pets of wild dogs, either.” She ushered them out the door, then made her way to the central station and sagged into a chair, smoothing down her Greens. Her eyes burned with exhaustion. She hadn’t been sleeping well, not for weeks, and last night Randi had come home badly rattled from the evening’s Council meeting. He’d done just fine, as far as she could tell from his recounting, but she knew he still found it very stressful, and she’d comforted him for candlemarks even though she longed for her bed.

*I’m not Elspeth*, he had said to her at least twenty times. *I’ll never be as good a ruler as she was*.

And, at least twenty times, she had told him it didn’t matter, he would be good enough. She’d reminded him that Vanyel had said the same thing, once upon a time – maybe he would take Van’s words more seriously.

In theory the role of the Monarch’s Own, along with their many other duties, was to provide this kind of support and reassurance to their monarch. *Maybe that’s why Taver tried to Choose me*, she had thought – and she’d doubted, for a moment, that her choice had been the right one. But only for a moment. She knew herself. Supporting Randi was the only thing she would be good for, and she was going to do that *anyway*, hopefully leaving poor Tantras

more room to focus on his myriad other responsibilities. She had pushed Randi to try to get to know Tran better – she didn't know him well either, though she'd helped treat his burns eight years ago, but Van liked him, so he had to be all right.

*:Shavri: She felt Gemma reaching out to her. :Finished?:*

*:Yes: She leaned into the older Healer's mindtouch. Healers used different Mindspeech protocols than Heralds, generally a lot more open. :His mother should've brought him in sooner, the wound was infected. I cleaned it out, but it took a lot of my energy:*

*:We should put out another advisory. I heard your Randale wants to sponsor us to provide free Healing for those who can't afford to pay. If the Council approves it, maybe their parents will start bringing them in sooner:*

She sent a gentle acknowledgement, along with pleased surprise; she hadn't known Randi was considering that, he certainly hadn't told her. Well, he had a thousand things on his mind, he didn't have time to discuss all of it with her.

*:Go home, Shavri. Get some rest. We can spare you:*

It was odd. She would have expected her life to change more, now that her lifebonded partner was King. People did treat her a little differently, but not much – after all, she wasn't married to him, and thank the gods, she wasn't in the line of succession. She still had her own quarters in the Healers' Wing, with a second bedroom for Jisa, and the Queen's suite was empty. Waiting for the alliance-marriage that, someday, might still be their best option for peace.

The thought made her shudder. She already hated the war, that kept Randi in strategy meetings from dawn until after midnight every day; they only saw each other in snatched moments. The war that had taken Vanyel to the border. Gods, she missed him. It wasn't like they had seen each other all that often even when he was in Haven, they were both kept so

busy, but she hadn't realized how much she leaned on those occasional evenings when he would come just to play with Jisa and ask her about her day.

He rarely talked about his own feelings, but she knew he came to her when things were hard. It felt good, that she could make his life a little easier just by existing. She was trying not to worry about him too much, he wouldn't appreciate it – but he was in danger. And a long way from home. Things were so much easier for him now than they'd been at the start, but even so she knew traveling was still stressful for him.

If he were here, she could talk to him about the patient she'd lost that morning. Randi wouldn't understand, and she couldn't burden him with it anyway. Gemma would only tell her not to let it get to her.

Maybe she would light a candle for him tonight, alone in her room after she'd put Jisa to bed. She had already added his name to the list in her bound notebook. Forty-seven names. Forty-seven lives she had guided out of this world and into the Shadow-Lover's arms.

She pushed the thoughts aside, to deal with later, and felt a smile coming to her lips as she approached the nursery where Jisa stayed when she was working. It was time to think about finding a governess for her, she thought, even if she was only three – she was already speaking in full sentences and trying to teach herself to read. And she was a handful for the nursery staff, full of constant questions, unwilling to sit still longer than ten minutes, constantly getting herself dirty.

“Mama!” When she opened the door, her daughter jumped up from the miniature chair where she sat with two other children, and ran to her. “Mama, look!” She waved a drawing, or rather a painting on a simple canvas frame.

“It's lovely.” Her daughter's brown eyes were still the most beautiful thing in the world, and it felt like the whole universe fell into alignment with her smile. “What is it?”

“Uncle Van ride to fight!”

She frowned, it didn't seem like the happiest choice of scene, but then made herself smile. “Well, it's very good.” The watercolours had run, making it hard to tell that the stick figure was meant to be a person, let alone Vanyel. “What's over here?” She bent and touched the smear of red and orange paint with a fingertip.

“He make a fire!”

She scooped Jisa into her arms, inhaling the familiar smell of her hair. “We'll have to keep it, to show to him when he comes home.”

“Mama, when I grow up can I make fire too?”

She kissed the top of her daughter's head, then smiled at the nurse before turning towards the door. “I don't know, love. Maybe.” It was still too early to tell what Jisa's potential Gifts would be, much less if any of them would activate. With two Gifted parents, it was more likely than not.

That didn't mean she had to like it. *I'll be happy if she's a Healer, but gods, I don't want her to be Chosen.* She knew it was selfish of her, and that most parents would be bursting with pride if a child of theirs became a Herald.

She blinked, surprised at the tears that sprang to her eyes. *Am I that afraid of it?* She knew she wasn't exactly being rational about the whole matter. Valdemar needed its Heralds, and mostly they were happy to play their part. Randi hadn't wanted to be King, but he'd never shown the least doubts about being a Herald. *Gods, he always wished he wasn't in the line of succession, so they'd be willing to risk him on circuit.* It bothered her, a little, she had never wanted him in danger either, but it was his life and she couldn't deny him that.

Jisa squirmed in her arms and chattered about her day, the words drifting past Shavri's ears; she tried to murmur responses at the appropriate moments. It was a relief to reach her

own quarters, and lock the door behind them. She set her daughter down, and deposited the little painting on the side table; she could ask a Palace servant to hang it for her later. Or maybe have them hang it in Vanyel's suite, as a coming-home surprise. *No, better not, he doesn't like people going in his room when he's away.* At least he had started deactivating the nastier wards when he left Haven, so that the Palace servants could get in to clean. She knew Savil checked the rooms thoroughly when they heard word he was coming home; the older Herald was still very paranoid after the last assassination attempt, even if it had been nearly four years.

*He's only going to be more of a target once the Karsites see him in action.* She knew Van's mage-gift was a lot more powerful than the Heraldic Circle had let on to the public – he'd talked about some of his missions, ones that were classified, and she'd seen their notes on him when she helped Randi go through all the Heralds' dossiers. *Est. 5-10x stronger than Herald-Mage Savil (Adept).* That wasn't even taking into account his ridiculous laundry list of other Gifts. Savil had been the only Adept-level mage in Valdemar, though Kilchas and Lissandra were close and Mardic and Donni combined were near that level. There wasn't even a word for whatever Vanyel was.

*Why does it feel like all my closest friends have targets painted on their backs?*

She knew the thought was an overreaction, and unhelpful, but it wasn't false.

#

“Donni, calm down,” Mardic said, more sharply than he'd intended. She had been pacing back and forth across the room nonstop for nearly a candlemark, and it was grating on his nerves.

She shot him an annoyed look, but plopped into a chair. “I'm calm.” Her leg started bouncing.

It was a lie; he could feel her nerves through the lifebond. Not just nerves, either, but a tense thrill of anticipation. Donni loved action. He'd teased her that she felt most alive when someone was trying to kill her.

"We're not fighting," he reminded her. "Not on the first attack."

"Maybe they'll let us if we're not too tired."

He shook a lock of hair out of his eyes, irritably. "We're going to be tired. You know that. It's a long way to Gate, and we'll have to hold it awhile." Nearly four hundred men would be crossing from the South Hardorn post – stripping it the next thing to bare. He hoped that wasn't a mistake. It wasn't his responsibility to decide, he reminded himself.

"We could use nodes."

"Donni, you *know* it's not safe using node-energy when we're already exhausted."

Their concert work had gotten much, much better since their time spent training with the Tayledras, and that was the only thing that enabled them to safely channel node-energy at all – but it took perfect rapport, and all their concentration. They'd never tried it in a pitched battle.

"I know." She glowered at the floor. "Just, we could be useful..."

"We will be useful. Us Gating in reinforcements is the only reason the counterattack's possible. And this won't be the last battle."

She brightened. "That's true."

It galled him, that she looked forwards to fighting, when it was still his least favourite thing in the world – but it was an old argument and there was no point in rehashing it now. He sighed. "At least we'll get to see Van." They'd been on the South Hardorn circuit for nearly a year now, with only a few brief visits home, and on all of them they'd missed Vanyel because he was away on other missions.

“Wonder how he’s doing.” Donni’s leg was bouncing again. “He never tells us anything in his letters.”

Vanyel was a good letter-writer – better than either of them, Mardic had to admit – but he knew what Donni meant. Van’s letters were full of news and chatter about Haven, Savil, Tantras, Randi and Shavri, and next to nothing about himself.

He shrugged, picking at his nail. “We’ll find out soon. Please stop bouncing your leg?” She was making his chair vibrate.

She stopped, but drummed her fingers on her knee instead.

He groaned. “Donni, we’re out of sync. Need to be in better rapport than this to Gate.” It was already late afternoon; they had only another candlemark to prepare. “Want to do some of Starwind’s trance-exercises?”

Donni grinned. “I have a better idea. Come here.”

When he didn’t move, she stood up instead, and plopped herself in his lap, grabbing two fistfuls of his hair and pulling his head down to kiss him.

He went along with it. He wasn’t exactly in the mood – but it would make her happy, he could already feel her desire radiating down their bond. And they did have a whole candlemark.

#

“Sorry, Andy.” Savil stifled another yawn. “Hoped I’d be better company.”

“It’s all right.” The Healer raised his glass, and she halfheartedly raised hers. “To King Randale.”

“To Randale.” She drained the wine. “Counterattack must be happening soon. Got word back through the relay, Mardic and Donni are preparing to Gate.” They would be fine,

she told herself firmly. Vanyel would be fine. It still made her chest ache, that her students were out there, in danger, and there was nothing she could do to protect them.

“You’re doing the most good you can right here,” Andrei said, and she knew he’d guessed the direction of her thoughts. “And you are protecting them. By having taught them so well.”

She nodded, wishing her emotions would believe it. He was probably right, and it wasn’t productive to sit here feeling guilty that she was too old for fieldwork.

“And you’re too important to risk out there,” he added.

She shook her head. *Vanyel’s too important to risk, but we have to anyway.* It didn’t matter how powerful he was, he could still die – and then who would stop Leareth? *Don’t be morbid*, she told herself. “I know. Andy, I want to talk about something that isn’t this. How was your day?”

“More wine?” She nodded, and he poured. “Busy. We got a big influx of trainees this year, so I’m teaching three. They’re all quite good. Still, it’s a lot of extra work. Once I’ve got them trained up a little, they might save me time, but they can’t do anything unsupervised yet, and I’m still trying to teach them the basics of shielding and Sight.”

She nodded. Healers needed to learn shielding even if they didn’t have strong Mindspeech or Empathy – untrained, their Gift would pick up on imbalances in the bodies of those around them, making them feel as sick as their patients. “How much are the numbers up by?” she said quietly. There were a lot more Herald-trainees than usual this year, too – yet again, every adult Companion in the herd was bonded, and there were twice as many foals as usual. Given past patterns, that wasn’t a good sign. *Hopefully it means we’re about to expand our borders, and not that we’re about to lose a lot of our people.* With the war, the latter was far too likely.

Andrel rubbed the back of his neck. “Hmm. We’ve got thirty or so. Think we only had twenty last year. That’s in Haven. We’ve started sending Healers out to train Gifted students locally, for when they can’t be spared to come to Haven. Especially weaker Gifts – often enough by the time we identify them, they’ve been picking it up on their own for years and become indispensable to their towns.”

“I didn’t know that.” It was interesting. *I wonder if that system could ever work for training Heralds – no, it’s different.* The Heraldic Circle was a lot more centralized.

## Chapter Four

*:Gate!:*

*:I feel it:* It was late afternoon; they had been waiting all day. Vanyel, who had been sitting against a tree gnawing halfheartedly at some travel bread, swore out loud and poured energy into his shields. He resisted the urge to clutch at his head. It burned like acid.

*:I'm here:* Yfandes cantered towards him, and he managed to reach out and lay a hand against her withers as she sat next to him. The relief, as she brought up her shields over him, was an incredible relief – he could still feel the Gate, but he could think through the pain.

*:Umbria:* he sent. *:Gate's up:*

*:That's our signal:* She could take care of passing it on, he thought. *:You all right?:*

*:I'll be fine once it's down:* Gritting his teeth, he focused on breathing through the pain; his mage-channels still weren't fully healed from the last Gate, it was like scorching heat on skin already sunburned and tender.

The Gate-energies lingered for quite a long time, which he had been expecting – hopefully several companies of the Guard were coming through. When it finally subsided, he just sat for a minute, trying to catch his breath.

Footsteps around him. Someone was talking to him, he thought, and raised his head, blinking to clear his vision.

“We’re moving out.” Herald Jores held out a hand.

He let himself be pulled to his feet, even though it made him a little dizzy; he could recover on Yfandes’ back. She was fully tacked up and ready to go, like they all had been for the last four candlemarks. He had been too keyed up to sleep; he could feel exhaustion dragging at him, under the surface, underneath the frenetic alertness of nerves.

*:Vanyel: He felt Umbria reaching for his mind. :Time to blow the bridges. Can you do it from here?:*

*:If you watch my back:* He would need to go into trance, which he could do even from Yfandes’ back, but he wouldn’t be as aware of his surroundings. He took the precaution of belting himself firmly to the saddle before he centered and grounded.

It took only a few seconds to find the creek with his Farsight – not more than three miles away, and he’d sat with a map and scoped out the area with Farsight while they waited. It took a little longer to zoom in on the first bridge, then reach for his mage-sight. Again, he leaned into the Web, that lived in the back of his mind. Earlier it had updated his assigned area, as he and Kilchas moved around – he had felt it as a sort of buzzing confusion in the back of his head before it settled into the new configuration.

He tapped a node, reached out across the distance with a thread of power, and crushed the stones of the arched bridge to rubble. There were another two bridges, wooden ones; he shattered them as well, then snapped back into his body.

They were moving at a fast march, which for Yfandes was a very easy pace. The Karsites almost certainly knew they were there; they had scouts, they’d manage to corner some of them but certainly not all, and Lissa’s company-and-a-half had been here for a long

time, waiting for the Gate and the signal. Lissa had been clever about dispersing her people and moving them in under the tree cover, so the Karsites hopefully underestimated their numbers...

*:Vanyel: Umbria again, and he felt her opening her shields to him, reaching for a closer rapport. :Farsee here?:*

He followed the indicated dot she superimposed on his vision, and Reached, moving his mental 'eye' to a spot above a cluster of scrubby pines.

...Two Karsite soldiers crouched in the undergrowth, their rust-red uniforms blending well with the carpet of dead needles. He relayed the image to her.

A pause; he had the sense she was speaking out loud, asking a question. *:Take them down, please:*

She hadn't specified he kill them, and so he had no intention of it. He shaped a blow with raw force, and struck them both at about kneecap-height. They fell, crying out, and stayed down, legs broken – but they would live, if they had the sense to stay put and out of the way.

*:Farsee here:*

She must have been using her Thoughtsensing to guess at the locations of scouts; he was able to find and cripple three more groups. *If we're lucky, none of them are Mindspeakers, and they won't be able to send on warning.* Of course, they might well have missed some other scouts; for one, anyone Gifted could likely shield against Umbria's Thoughtsensing unless she already knew exactly where to look.

Sooner than he'd expected, they reached the road. He had used his Farsight to look ahead, and they were expecting the guard on it – perhaps a hundred Karsite soldiers.

*:Vanyel, trap them:* Umbria sent, just before they broke out of the tree cover. She hadn't specified how, so he reached for the node again and flung up a half-dome of a mage-barrier around the whole section. They must have had someone Gifted, or sensitive, because the group immediately realized what had happened – and they must have been well trained, because though he didn't understand enough of the language to catch the shouted orders, he understood their immediate charge towards the open side of the barrier well enough.

The front rank of Lissa's forces exploded out of the trees and met the Karsites head-on. Vanyel stayed in the shelter of the trees, on Yfandes' back, and as he'd agreed with Umbria, cast the illusions he had spent the last ten minutes preparing. It took only a trickle of power, but a great deal of concentration and control. He wasn't near skilled enough to hide their people entirely, but he could blur their outlines, making it hard to see where each man or woman was within several feet. Maintaining over fifty illusions, he didn't have the focus to spare to do anything else, but Jores was clearly wreaking some havoc of his own, and it was all over in five minutes.

He avoided looking at the bodies on the road – some in Valdemaran blue, many more in Karsite red-brown.

Surely some scouts had gotten out and brought word forward, but that was nearly unavoidable. He had raised the barrier entirely from reserved energy, without tapping a node, and hopefully the Karsite Adept didn't know he was here, or at least didn't realize the full extent of his power.

*:Move forward:* Umbria sent, even as he heard the same order shouted. *:We'll veer left and turn down the road to Horn:*

So that was the decision. It had advantages and disadvantages – it would be much faster, of course, but also conspicuous, and they were likely to face more resistance.

*:Lissa's sending half her forces down the road and half through the woods:* Umbria clarified.

And then they were moving on. Lissa had peeled off half a platoon, about fifteen of her people, to guard the surviving prisoners. She rode at the back of the road group, some two hundred men, with Umbria at her side, and Vanyel rode near the front. Clad in an ill-fitting Guard uniform, he was mostly indistinguishable from the few other mounted soldiers.

They peeled off onto the narrower, unpaved road to Horn itself.

*:Vanyel:* Umbria reached out. *:Fall back a little and Farsee the north side of the river, starting at the road-crossing. Lissa wants to know where the South Hardorn forces are:*

*:Don't they have Jarek?:* He was a Mindspeaker.

*:Can't reach him. Worried something's wrong:*

He nodded, and took his time centering and grounding. It gave him an itchy feeling on the back of his neck; he would have to drop into at least a light trance, and he didn't exactly like the idea of doing that in an unprotected place.

*:I'll be watching:* Yfandes sent. *:Activate your shield-talisman:*

He did so, then closed his eyes and Reached. *:I see them:* he sent. Umbria hadn't opened her shields enough for him to share the image directly, she clearly wanted to avoid distraction as well. *:They're about a mile down the creek from the road-crossing. Fairly spread out. Don't think the Karsites know they're there:* The tree cover was dense; he wouldn't have seen them at all if he hadn't had a good idea of where to look. *:Think Terin's people have been doing a fair job preventing any scouts from getting far:* There were quite a few red-uniformed bodies, on both banks of the creek or in the water itself. He flinched from

the image of a man floating facedown, a trail of blood leaking from him and staining the water. Then he caught a glimpse of white. *:I see Jarek, I think:* He hadn't met the man before, but Herald's Whites were fairly conspicuous. *:He's injured:* The bloodstains on his Whites were obvious as well, and when he dropped his mental 'eye', he saw that the other Herald's arm was bound roughly to his chest. He was awake, though, and appeared to be talking to one of the soldiers. *:Should I try to get his attention?:* Having his Farsight on the man would help him direct his Mindspeech.

*:No, it's fine. Thank you:* A pause. *:Can you Farsee ahead? If you can find a camp of any kind, please set fire to it or something:*

He nodded and Reached again, this time just lifting his mental 'eye' about a hundred feet over his head. It was very odd, seeing himself far below, like a toy soldier on a toy horse. He moved his perspective forward, Looking from side to side. After another half-mile the road opened up – in the cleared space where the Horn market fairs took place, he saw instead a number of hasty tents. There were a lot of Karsite soldiers, and a frenzy of activity. *So they do know we're here, then.*

*:I'm counting about five hundred men on this side of Horn:* he sent. *:Fifty cavalry:* Men were mounting their warhorses even as he watched. *:Looks like they're going to ride out to meet us:* Then he dropped the mental connection and concentrated hard, reached for the nearest node, and sent balls of fire spinning into each tent, as well as the two wagons parked to one side of the clearing, which he assumed held supplies or weapons. One of them must have held some amount of lamp-oil or other fuel – it went up in a violent explosion.

*:If you can take out the cavalry without tiring yourself, please do:* Umbria sent.

He had been thinking of doing just that. Gods, he hated to hurt the horses, they were just animals and it wasn't their fault they were fighting on the other side – and he felt a

moment of guilt that he'd thought of the horses first, and not the people, who weren't so different from him. *Shouldn't it bother me more to kill a man than a horse?*

Any one of the Karsite soldiers would kill him given half a chance. He'd passed so many blue-uniformed dead.

He could mindblast the riders, but it would be easy to overextend his Mindspeech Gift, and he couldn't afford that. He could use fire or lightning to spook the horses, or just knock them down with a blast, but at this distance his fine control was poor. *And I can't afford to avoid killing at all*, he reminded himself. Every Karsite soldier who could get up again was a risk to Lissa's people. His people.

He gritted his teeth and planned three strikes, fire and wind combined, that would hit most of the cavalry – they were clumped fairly close together. Count down, *one...two..three...* He sent out the blasts–

*:Van!:*

He dropped back into his own body, trying to re-orient, just as Yfandes reared. The soldier in front of them went under her hooves, screaming, but he had raised his sword in time and it left a bleeding gash in Yfandes' hide. She squealed in pain.

*:Yfandes!:*

*:I'm all right:*

There were men all around them – perhaps thirty, on foot, they must have been a large scout-party. He knocked ten or so of them over with a single blast-front, sending them flying; a few managed to land and roll, scrambling to their feet, but most stayed down.

*Fire!*

He had his shield-talisman activated, and all of his personal shields at full power; it was the only thing that saved him from serious injury. The air around him grew scorching even as the fireball spilled out on other side of him.

*:Looks like the Adept found us:*

Damn it, he had forgotten to even search for the Karsite mage. Which was stupid, he knew he was out there. Was he nearby? Or was he using Farsight or, more likely, scrying in order to direct attacks from a distance?

*:Umbria: he reached out. :Can someone cover me? Need to find the Adept:*

After receiving a short, wordless confirmation, he closed his eyes and cautiously opened his Thoughtsensing, reaching out and out. He felt a dense clumping of minds, not so far away. *:Umbria, men hiding in the ravine ahead. Twenty-some:* None were Gifted, though. He broadened the search, hunting for the distinctive ‘glow’ of a Gifted mind.

And found nothing. The mage, whoever they were, was either farther away or had excellent shielding.

*:Vanyel: Umbria again. :Need cover fire ahead, please:*

He opened his eyes, just as an arrow whizzed by within inches of his right ear. He swore. A group of bowmen had scrambled out of the concealing bushes – were they from the patrol he’d sensed ahead? He heard a scream. Saw one of Lissa’s men fall, clutching at the arrow in his stomach. Another...

Without time to prepare, the wall of force he threw out was much stronger than he’d intended. His Thoughtsensing was still open, and he *felt* the deaths – three of the Karsites died instantly, necks broken as they landed badly. The rest certainly weren’t getting up again anytime soon.

Out of the corner of his eye, as they passed the crumpled bodies, he saw several of Lissa's soldiers peel off, drawing their swords. He looked away.

*:Vanyel: Umbria sent. :We're halfway to Horn. Sending Jores ahead to find targets. Cover him with an illusion?:*

He nodded to Jores as the Herald passed him, his Companion breaking into a counter. *Center and ground.* The relentless pace was getting to him; he could feel his concentration fraying. He was able to throw a crude illusion over the man – it was still clear that someone was there, but only as a vague blur, like heat-shimmer.

*:Can't do anything else while I'm holding this:* he sent to Umbria. It was taking far too much effort just to maintain the illusion, and it would get harder at a distance.

*:Noted. We'll make it fast:*

They ran into two more small patrols. Vanyel winced, watching as they took casualties he was unable to prevent; he knew the losses were small, relatively, and it was more important that Jores find targets for his Fetching, but it rankled.

Then Jores was back, cantering past him in the opposite direction.

*:Jores is falling back:* Umbria prompted, unnecessarily. *:Farsee ahead, please?:*

He obeyed, and this time she did open her shields, pulling him into full rapport. With the camp in chaos and the cavalry mostly down, the remaining Karsites had apparently decided to prepare to meet them at the clearing, rather than marching out. They were still outnumbered – and the Adept was out there, somewhere. Had to be casting from a distance, Vanyel thought – at close range he should have been able to find the mage, no matter how well he or she could shield.

*:Our cavalry are coming down the road:* Umbria sent. *:Kilchas is peeling off with them, there hasn't been much attempt to cross there:*

He sent an acknowledgement.

*:We're less than five minutes out. Vanyel, if you could ride ahead and cause some mayhem? And signal Jores when you hit them:*

*:Can do: Yfandes was already speeding to a gallop. :I expect I'll attract the attention of their Adept: he reminded her. :May be occupied keeping them off my back:*

*:Noted:*

At her fastest pace, Yfandes moved considerably faster than an ordinary horse. He reached ahead with Thoughtsensing, hoping mostly to pick up on the moment the Karsite forces saw him.

—A levinbolt smashed into his shields, then another. None of it got through, but it strained his shields considerably and shattered his concentration. He reached for a node again, his reserves were awfully low. *Damn it, too much happening at once.* He hadn't realized at the time, but all of his past actions had been over a lot sooner than this.

Then he was in the clearing, Yfandes skidding to a stop, and he pivoted and threw a wall of raw force, knocking down twenty or so men, then another, then began drenching every tent and structure he could see in fire. Men were shouting. He recognized the Karsite word for 'Herald' – clearly his attempt at a disguise hadn't thrown them off for long.

He reached behind him with Thoughtsensing. Damn, this was harder. Finally, he found the man's mind. *:Jores, now:*

For the next several minutes, it was all he could do to keep a small circle around himself and Yfandes clear. Karsite soldiers kept rushing him in coordinated attacks – he had to respect their courage, it was suicidally brave of them but of course, from their perspective taking him out was a high priority. The occasional levinbolt or fireball came out of nowhere.

*Where's their damned mage?* He still couldn't get a lock on where the attacks were coming from; he couldn't spare the attention required to reach them with Farsight or Thoughtsensing.

He felt Umbria reaching out. *:Busy:* he sent, gods she probably had important information to pass on but he couldn't afford the distraction. Another arrow flew past, just barely missing Yfandes' head. She reared, screaming. Another man went under her hooves.

–And then Lissa's forces were there, streaming in from the road.

*:Get out of the way:* Umbria sent. *:Want the Adept's attention on you, not us:*

*Lucky me,* he thought, already making a path for himself through the crowded mess of the clearing. Yfandes stumbled on the uneven ground, nearly falling, but recovered, leapt to clear the shattered, smoking remains of a tent, and then they were through and on the other side. The damned Karsite infantry were still trying to come after him; he flung up a spherical mage-barrier around himself, trying to clear a moment just to think.

*Center and ground.* The clashing swords and screams from behind him were very distracting. After a few moments of counting his breathing, he was able to push all of it aside. He opened his mage-sight fully, and gently extended his Thoughtsensing. *Come at me, Adept. Give me a way to find you.*

Nothing.

Ten minutes later, he was still waiting. The light was starting to fade; he hadn't even noticed when the sun slipped down to touch the horizon.

*:Vanyel:* Umbria's mindvoice was laden with weary triumph. *:Think it's over. Kilchas' people are holding off Karsite reinforcements at the Border. I've directed some of the South Hardorn forces to cross the creek and secure the Guard-post. Can you help them cross?:*

*:I can give them a force-bridge:* He would need to use node-energy, and his mage-channels were already scorched and tender from the strain – he hadn't fully recovered

from the Gate, and it was catching up with him. *:Need to be in trance, though, and I still don't know where their Adept is:*

*:Noted:*

He closed his eyes and took a long moment to center himself before Reaching with Farsight. *:I see them:* The nearby nodes were all drained; he had to reach quite a long way to find another. *Damn, I think their Adept can use node-energy.* He certainly hadn't used that much, or he didn't think he had.

He held the invisible band of force until two hundred men had crossed, and Umbria prompted him to drop it. When he came back to his body, he found himself sagging against Yfandes' neck.

*:I'm exhausted, 'Fandes: Should he have been this tired? He was breathing hard, drenched in sweat, his heart hammering like he'd just run a footrace.*

*:You've done a lot, and we were tired going into this. You did well, though. Very well:*

He forced himself to straighten in the saddle, taking slow deep breaths, and looked around. The remains of the Karsite camp were a wasteland of trampled mud and bodies, some of them still alive; he averted his eyes. It looked to be fairly safe now. He dropped the mage-barrier, sighing in relief.

*:Vanyel: Umbria again. :Kilchas needs help holding off an attack at the road. Can you give him some covering fire?:*

He took a deep breath before sending the confirmation. *I can do this.* Kilchas was a strong Mindspeaker as well. He reached for the man's mind. *:Kilchas? Need help?:*

*:Please! They've got four hundred infantry coming at us:*

He groaned. *:I can Farsee and throw some fire around, but I may get distracted. Their Adept is out there and keeps attacking me from a distance:*

*:So that's what that was! Nearly took me out, levinbolt just came from nowhere:*

If he was right and the Karsite Adept was using node-energy, which he almost had to be to sustain that level of power in his attacks, he could have found the mage by tracing the disturbances in energy. *If* he'd been able to spare the concentration to go into trance and look at the Web. Which he couldn't.

*Make a note to see if I can add detecting foreign mages to the Web-alarms*, he thought, then reinforced his shielding as much as he could before opening his Farsight. While he held the mental contact with Kilchas, it was quite easy to use that as a reference point.

*:I See you:* he sent. He wished he and Kilchas had had more time to practice in concert; they could have timed their attacks much better.

The new Karsite forces were packed in a much denser formation than the group at the camp had been, with shield-bearers covering the front ranks – it was making it hard for the cavalry to attack. He had an idea. *:Yfandes, think we can manage the windstorm-spell Starwind taught me?:*

*:Worth a try:*

It was a complex, challenging technique, but it was more energy-efficient, in terms of sheer destruction, than just throwing fire. Power was so rarely a concern for him, but he was starting to worry – he'd had to reach nearly twenty miles to find an untapped node, and his mage-channels were in agony.

*:Need thirty seconds to prepare:* he sent to Kilchas along with a brief image of what he intended. He shaped the spell, humming a simple tune and thumping his hands on his thighs for the rhythm. Felt the threads of energy form – and then tossed up a simple barrier between the Karsite ranks and the Valdemaran cavalry, and threw the full power of the node into the wind-spell.

It was very, very satisfying to see that neat formation go flying in all directions, men literally pulled into the air by tornado force. Some of them flew nearly fifty feet. Most of their injuries wouldn't be lethal, he hoped, but he thought most of them wouldn't be getting up again either, at least not right away.

Kilchas *whooped* in his head. He'd never heard someone do that with Mindspeech. *:Gods, Van, that was spectacular!:* He felt the man's fierce satisfaction as he threw small, aimed fireballs at those men who did try to stand up.

*:Good luck:* he sent, and dropped the Farsight and mage-sight – and this time, he did collapse over the saddle-pommel. Every part of him hurt.

*Gods, please, don't ask me to do anything else,* he thought. He hadn't known it was possible to be this tired.

A candlemark later, it really was all over.

Lissa's forces had retaken the town of Horn. On the Karsite side, there were at least two hundred dead and another three hundred injured prisoners – in exchange for less than fifty casualties on the Valdemaran side. The rest had managed to escape, probably back across the border. Kilchas and the South Hardorn cavalry had killed another two hundred, and nearly all of the rest were prisoners. One company of the South Hardorn infantry had stopped a smaller Karsite force from crossing the border west of the creek, with Herald Jarek very successfully spooking the cavalry horses. They had set up a guard there, while the second company retook the Guard-post. Not that there was much left of it. Or of Horn, for that matter. They were still adding up civilian casualties, but at least half of its nearly two thousand inhabitants were nowhere to be found. The town had been thoroughly pillaged, most

of the houses set on fire, and they'd found the surviving villagers corralled in what had once been the market square. A few people had trickled in from the surrounding woods; he hoped that there were more survivors still hiding.

Vanyel's services had been requested a few more times, to help put out fires, which he had done by scooping enormous 'buckets' of water from the creek in bowl-shaped moveable mage-barriers. He had also thrown up temporary mage-barriers to contain the prisoners. There wasn't a node within thirty miles in any direction that he hadn't drained, and a double dose of the willowbank tincture had done absolutely nothing about his headache. The local weather patterns were shot to hell; it had hailed for nearly half a candlemark, terrifying all the horses, and now it was raining hard, wind blowing hard enough to knock down trees. He wasn't good at delicate weather-magic at the best of times, and certainly couldn't spare anything for it now. Maybe Mardic or Donni could do something about it once they'd recovered from Gating.

“Van?”

From the place where he was hiding, sitting on an upturned log inside the mostly burned-out remains of the Horn inn, he glanced up. “Major Lissa.” He nodded to her.

She made no attempt at a formal greeting; instead, she crossed the room and flung her arms around him. “Van, you were incredible! I had no idea you were that powerful! Gods, do you have any idea... We couldn't have done this without you.” She pulled back, beaming. Her braid was matted and full of mud and ash, her face and uniform smeared with dirt – but she looked radiant, every inch an officer.

He managed a smile. “You were pretty amazing yourself, Liss.”

She laughed. “Oh, it wasn’t all me. Herald Umbria has excellent tactical judgement. I am pleased though. Don’t think I gave any orders that were stupid.” She frowned. “You never found their Adept?”

“No.” He shrugged. “He just stopped attacking me at some point, and I had no way to track him down. Think he must’ve been casting from a distance, using scrying to target.”

“Damn.” She pushed a lock of loose hair out of her eyes. “Gods, I could use a bath. And about a week’s sleep.”

“Same.” He felt disgusting. “Don’t even have a change of clothes here. Left my saddlebags in Dog Inn.”

“I’m sure some of the townspeople can scrounge you up something.” She slapped his shoulder. “Let them pamper you. Think they’d be singing to you in the streets if you let them.”

He looked away. “They should be singing to you, not me.”

“Oh, come on. You’re a hero, Van. The most powerful Herald-Mage in Valdemar.”

He closed his eyes; for some reason, they were suddenly burning. *I don’t want to be a hero. I just want to go home.* It was so hard to face the thought of another night sleeping in a strange place, never feeling safe.

He felt Lissa’s arm slip around his shoulders. Her voice was low in his ear. “I know. It’s not what you want. Well. Come have a drink with me? Can’t get as nastily drunk as I’d love to, not when there might be a counterattack in the morning – hells, or tonight – but I’ll sleep better after some wine.”

He opened his eyes, managed a weak smile. “All right.”

## Chapter Five

*A blowing field of snow—*

(Vanyel twitched to awareness inside the dream. His head felt full of glue, gods, this was the worst possible time for it.)

*“Herald Vanyel.”*

*He nodded to the black-clad mage. “Leareth.”*

*They stood in silence for a moment.*

*“I hear that your kingdom is at war,” Leareth said finally.*

(Vanyel blinked. He hadn't expected that Leareth could possibly know this soon. Did he have some kind of special system for passing urgent messages faster? He wasn't sure what it meant, and he was too tired to think through the implications now. Flag for later, anyway.)

*He said nothing. Which was probably confirmation in itself, but he couldn't think of anything that would be good to say.*

*Leareth paused. He seemed to be choosing his words carefully, though his face was as imperturbable as ever.*

*“For what it is worth,” he said slowly, “this is not something I planned, and I would prefer that both of your countries avoid unnecessary casualties. War is a costly thing, and wholesale destruction along your southern border is not good for either of us.”*

*Vanyel shrugged. “Would’ve thought it’d be good for you, honestly. Weakening us and all. Kind of falls under the same category as killing our mages.”*

(His voice came out more waspish than he’d intended. Damn it, he was tired, he wasn’t up for this. Couldn’t afford to give this much away. He tried to pull together the shreds of his composure. *Center and ground.*)

*Leareth only faced him, steadily meeting his eyes. “I acknowledge that in the past, one of my interim goals was to reduce the number of your Herald-Mages. However, I do not make plans set in stone, and it seems to me that there may be other, better avenues. In any case, Heralds are not the only casualties in war. Your peasant folk will suffer greatly.”*

*“And each of their lives is a light in the world, yeah?” Vanyel managed to keep his voice level, with only a little bite in it.*

(The memories were still too clear in his head – bodies on the ground, not just Guard-blue, but townsfolk and smallholders caught up in the general destruction when Karse had taken the town. And, if he was honest with himself, the counterattack had claimed more civilian casualties as well. He didn’t know how to feel about it – part of him wanted to just forget, push it all away, but wishing it wasn’t true wouldn’t change the reality. A long time ago, he had told Shavri he thought it was right for her to grieve the patients she lost, to not look away and shut it out; was this any different?)

*Leareth eyed him. “You are troubled. I know that you do not like killing, Herald. Only the most hardened of men feel nothing when they take lives, but I think perhaps it is worse for you.”*

*He said nothing, tried to keep his face empty of expression.*

*“I am not sure there is anything I could say that would help,” Leareth said, after the silence had trailed out. “And I am not sure that you would listen to such words from me, even if I could find them. However. I expect you are fighting with yourself, inside, asking yourself whether these deaths could be justified, whether it could be possible that you did the right thing. And perhaps your mind knows that you did, but your feelings do not agree.”*

(It galled him, that Leareth understood so well – and it made him feel vulnerable, like the man knew his weakness. Was it a weakness, to be bothered by killing? He wasn't in fact sure what Leareth would say on the matter – and he was curious, but he didn't want to ask, not now when he was too tired to keep his verbal balance.)

*“If this in fact the way it is for you,” Leareth went on, “and if you are willing to trust me on the matter – I would say, do not try to win this battle with yourself, on either side. Only see it, all of it, the good and the bad. If you slaughtered a Karsite soldier to save ten peasants, that leaves nine more lights in the world than would be otherwise. It does not have to feel good, and perhaps it ought not to. The best outcome given your initial conditions may still be a tragedy – but it does not make sense to think badly of yourself for it. It would make more sense to think badly of the world. To be angry, perhaps. Raise a fist to the sky, say that you will do all you can fix it, and perhaps you will bear it a little easier.”*

*He fell silent. Vanyel wasn't sure if he was expecting a response.*

*“I understand if you do not wish to speak of other matters, at this time,” Leareth said quietly. “Think on it, Herald Vanyel of Valdemar.”*

He woke gasping, but managed not to cry out. Gods, he was uncomfortable – the town mayor had offered him and the other Heralds who didn't have their belongings with them rooms in those houses that survived intact, but he hadn't wanted to be apart from Yfandes, and had claimed a space in the stables instead. There was a crick in his neck and even with his cloak and an extra blanket, he was freezing cold.

*: 'Fandes? :*

Her mind stirred against his, as drowsy and sticky as he felt. *: Chosen? :*

*: Just had the stupid dream again:* He couldn't summon the energy to stand up and search for paper. *: He knows we're at war. Don't know how, must have better communication systems than we realized:* Maybe they were only for emergencies and he didn't use them most of the time – or maybe all along he'd known things immediately, and had been hiding it so they would assume his spy-network moved slowly?

A hesitation. He could feel her trying to wake up fully, turning the problem over in her mind. *: Maybe not. With the amount of node-energy we were throwing around, a sensitive mage could feel the disturbance hundreds of miles away. Thousands, maybe. He might be able to triangulate it, tell that it's at least coming from somewhere near our border with Karse, and not much short of a pitched battle would cause that much disruption:*

He hadn't thought of that. *: Oh. Damn it, maybe I just confirmed it for him:* He tried to think back. *: I didn't say anything...but he could tell I was upset. He always can, it's very frustrating:*

Her response, to his surprise, was a brief snort of mental laughter. *: It is at that. He is a very perceptive man:*

*: Comes of being immortal, I guess. Practice:* He groaned and rolled over, trying to find a position that didn't hurt. *: Gods, I want a hot bath. 'Fandes, I don't know... It's almost*

*like he was trying to make me feel better!:* And the things he had said weren't all that dissimilar to things Lancir might have said to him, way back when. Damn it but he wished he could talk to Lance now. Things weren't awful, but he felt raw, and confused. *How am I supposed to feel?*

*:Start with sleep:* She turned her muzzle and blew into his hair. *:I can help, if you want:*

*:Don't. Need to learn how to fall asleep on my own, or I'll be stuck out in the stables every night:* There was no way he would feel safe enough to relax in one of the offered rooms.

*:If you think that's best. The offer's always open, and I can keep you warm:* The heat radiating from her flanks was suddenly redoubled – he didn't know how she did it, it had to be with magic, but he appreciated it. He closed his eyes and focused on his breaths, trying to find his way into trance.

*:Love you, 'Fandes:*

*:I love you too, Chosen:*

#

Safely in the privacy of her tent, Lissa yawned and stretched. She had been awake since before dawn, mostly receiving reports from her scouts and lieutenants. Herald Umbria was riding around the Border, using her Thoughtsensing to hunt for approaching Karsite scouts, and Herald-Mage Kilchas, after a night's rest, was now guarding the South Trade Road border crossing again. She had received a report that Herald-Mages Mardic and Donni were riding down from Dog Inn, apparently sufficiently rested from Gating. It surprised her that they didn't need more time, but she'd reminded herself that they weren't sensitive to Gates like Van.

Her brother was still sleeping, as far as she knew. He'd been hiding it well, but she knew he had been worn out by the end of the battle – and she had no choice but to ask a great deal of him again, starting with Farsight on the Border and the river-crossing. Apparently there was a Herald with strong Farsight on his way now, she had forgotten his name, but he wouldn't arrive before tomorrow morning – he was coming all the way from Three Rivers, along with Herald Janna from the Victrin Fell circuit. Herald Navine was on her way from Crescent Lake; her short-range Foresight would be incredibly useful, she was enough of a mage to detect and warn attacks, and she might arrive by tonight. Herald Tavri, a strong Firestarter and Empath, would arrive by tomorrow night. All in all, very soon she wouldn't need to put so much weight on Vanyel's shoulders alone. *Gods, I hope he can handle it until then.* He seemed to be doing all right, but she wasn't sure he would actually *tell* her if he was finding things hard.

“Major Lissa?”

She glanced up, startled by the voice at the door. Her new title was still unnerving – and wasn't official, she reminded herself. “Herald Jarek.” She greeted the man with a sketchy bow. “Come in. You've seen the Healers?”

“Yes.” He pointed at his bound-up arm with his good hand. “Had my collarbone quick-healed. I'll be able to use that arm again by tonight.” He smiled crookedly. “I am sorry I managed to get myself hurt so early.”

“Sounds like you made yourself very useful anyway.” She felt her own smile broaden. She hadn't noticed yesterday, in all the rush, but he was very handsome, dark blonde hair and hazel eyes in a tanned face. Lips that looked very appealing – *damn it, girl, not the time to be thinking about that!* “We're sure to need you again today. Listen, I had a thought. What's the range on your Animal Mindspeech? The Thoughtsensing side, I mean.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t think anyone’s ever asked that before! I’m not sure. A few miles, I think.”

“I was wondering...” She found herself fidgeting with her hands, and put them behind her back, it was important to appear composed. At least she had finally learned not to bite her nails! “If we sent you to ride back and forth along the Border with a guard, could you sense for cavalry horses?”

His eyes widened a little. “That’s... Hmm. I think so. I’d need to go slowly, animal minds aren’t easy to Sense and I’d need to sift out a lot – but it helps that horses are fairly large intelligent animals. Means I don’t even need to try Sensing for, well, smaller minds, songbirds, snakes and lizards and all. Thousands of those in a forest.”

She blinked. “What’s it even like to Sense a snake’s mind?”

“Very strange.” He shook his head. “They don’t – well, they don’t *think*, exactly. Or even have what you or I would recognize as emotions. Mostly senses, and desire-to-act, but it’s very instinctive. I can’t really talk to them, per se. Can mostly startle them, make them frightened or aggressive, and make them notice things they hadn’t seen or smelled yet.”

She bit back a snicker, imagining sending thousands of enraged snakes after the Karsite army. *Focus, girl.* “Sorry, got on a tangent. Would you be up to ride out in half an candlemark and see if you can find anyone lurking?” The area was awfully hard to scout, all rocky hills and ravines. A whole company of Karsite soldiers could have been hiding in all that mess and she’d never know. “Oh, and if it does seem like you could send some angry snakes at any scout parties, please do that.”

He laughed. “Of course, Major.”

“I’ll send two bowmen with you for support. Meet them at the center tent in half a candlemark.” She dismissed him with a nod, and he nodded back to her and backed out of the tent.

Grabbing a handful of papers from the tiny folding table, where she’d piled them on top of the large map, she started pacing again. *Think*. She had most of the information she needed to make a report back to Alban. *Healers, we need more Healers*. Haven had sent three via the initial Gate, but they were overwhelmed dealing with all the injured. All of her seriously injured were stabilized, at least, but more Healers would mean more quick-healing, more of her people back on their feet sooner. Which mattered, a lot, because even if casualties had been disproportionately on the Karsite side, her forces were still outnumbered.

She took a moment to close her eyes and knead her forehead with one hand. It was a long time since she had felt so out of her depth – not since her first six months as a lieutenant, maybe. And that had been in peacetime, with the stakes so much lower.

Deep breath. She stuck her head out of the tent and waved over the boy from Horn who’d been serving as her page. He seemed to consider it a great privilege, at least.

It took a moment to remember his name. “Coby, could you please go find my clerk, and send a messenger to find Herald Umbria? And find me some gillyflower tea.” She didn’t use the stimulant often, didn’t like the way it made her irritable and short with people, but she needed to be more alert than she felt right now.

“Course!” He grinned and ran away, which brought a smile to her face. No decorum, and she appreciated it; she was tired of people bowing to her. She felt itchy, off balance. *Wish I could get drunk and pick a fight*. Which was stupid, and she really ought to stop giving in to that temptation, it wasn’t proper for someone in her position of authority. A big downside of that position, if you asked her.

She sat down to wait. Only a minute or two later, she heard voices outside the door. Familiar voices.

“Come in!” She jumped up. Gods, it was good to see Mardic and Donni again. She’d kept up a correspondence with them over the years, after those awful two weeks when they had met, and once or twice they’d even managed to be in Haven at the same time. Donni was always game to spar with daggers, and she was a great deal of fun to go drinking with. She still had all of their letters in her permanent quarters at Deercreek. *Which I haven’t even seen for six months*, she thought irritably. Maybe now the Lord Marshal would formally assign her to somewhere closer.

The two of them looked tired and wan, but their smiles were genuine. She checked that no one was watching, then hugged both of them.

“It’s good to see you! I hope the Gate wasn’t too bad?”

Mardic patted Donni’s shoulder. “It’s gotten a lot easier.”

“Since you trained with the Hawkbrothers?” They had told her some about it, but she always wanted to hear more. Not that now was the time. “Anyway. Come, have a seat. How rested are you?” She pulled out and unfolded two more stools. They both looked very relieved to sit down.

“We’re plenty rested,” Donni said, with a forcedly cheerful smile.

Mardic shook his head. “Honestly? We’re fine for scouting, probably, but I don’t think we’re up for a battle yet. Our reserves are still low, and I’m not confident we could control node-energy under battle conditions.” He turned his head, a blank expression coming across his face for a moment. “Not that there’s much left around here. Gods, was that all Van?”

“He thought the Karsites might have an Adept who can use nodes as well. Kept attacking him from a distance, apparently.” She hadn’t really understood the explanation.

“Rude of them.” Donni rolled her eyes.

Mardic’s lips twitched into a half smile. “Don’t think ‘rude’ is the word I’d use, there.”

“Anyway.” Lissa sat and pulled the table over, the legs scraping on the waterproofed canvas laid down over the uneven earth. “Let’s make some plans. We’re all right for the moment, but we need better coverage along the Border. Right now they could sneak an attack up on us and I don’t feel comfortable we’d seen them coming.” She would have to find out from Alban what the situation was at the other posts, just how long a stretch of border he wanted her responsible for. “Remind me of your effective Mindspeech range?”

“Ten or so miles for Donni, maybe thirty for me,” Mardic said, his voice a little rote.

“Closer to fifty if it’s with each other,” Donni added brightly, “but we’d really rather not be fifty miles apart, if it’s all the same to you.”

“And we’ve got good rapport with Van,” Mardic added. “I can usually get his attention at fifty miles, and he might be able to reach us from a hundred.”

That was useful to know. “All right. I won’t split you up unless I have to, but I may have to. Mardic, you’re a Fetcher as well? Remind me how strong?” She had notes on all the Heralds, but she often found them cryptic.

He nodded. “Moderate strength. I can boost it with node-energy if Donni’s in rapport supporting me – I’ve moved a hundred pounds or so over distances of a mile, before.”

“Good. Again, I won’t ask you to push yourself that hard unless we badly need it.”

“There’s another thing,” he added. “This isn’t normally considered safe, but I can Fetch living things, if I’ve got time to prepare. The Hawkbrothers helped me experiment with it. I’ve transported casualties to safety, that way. Need line of sight to them, obviously.”

Herald Umbria had mentioned something about using Farsight... They were both Mindspeakers; she wondered if they would be willing to do a concert-working with Van in that sort of situation. Come to think of it, Van was a Fetcher as well, but it wasn't one of his stronger Gifts, and it would be good to avoid tiring him unnecessarily. Something to keep in mind, though.

“Good,” she said, catching herself before her thoughts could start to wander. “I’ve got to make a report up-chain to Dog Inn, but please make yourselves comfortable. Do you have supplies?”

“Some. Didn’t have time to find a tent or anything.”

“All right. Talk to my quartermaster and he’ll set you up. Might still be some rooms in town, they were offering them to Heralds. Rest up, and I’ll send a messenger if and when I need you today.” As tired as they looked, she would avoid needing them at all if she could, but they were desperately short of scouts. Heralds on Companion-back could move so much more quickly and silently than even her best-trained people.

“Will do.” Mardic smiled, and she offered him a hand; he levered himself to his feet and pulled Donni up after him. “Come on.”

When they were gone, she started pacing again. It was weird; the more tired she was, the harder she found it to sit still. She could think better on her feet. *What do I need to pass up to Alban? I should make some more notes...*

#

Vanyel slept longer than he would have expected; he woke only when the sun crept over the rim of the stall and shone directly into his eyes. He felt better rested than he’d expected, too, and remembered only a few vague nightmares.

He sat up, and winced; the inside of his head still felt very tender. Yfandes was gone; he was curled up alone in the straw of her stall. Now that he thought about it, he did remember half-waking as she rose, her nudging him to go back to sleep.

*:’Fandes?:*

*:I’m nearby, love. Hunting for somewhere to graze. Can’t stomach any more of this moldy hay:*

Relieved, he struggled to his feet and brushed straw off himself. He was still wearing the borrowed Guard-uniform, stained with mud and ash.

*:’Fandes, I need to find my things. Any idea if someone’s moved them from Dog Inn?:*

*A pause. :Go the center tent:*

He yawned and stretched, retrieved the satchel that contained a few of his possessions, and made a quick effort to comb his hair with his fingers, then left the stables, wincing again at the bright sunlight. The storm had blown over, though he could see the signs of its passing – gardens flattened into muddy swamps, stalls knocked down, a few houses that had been intact now missing roofs.

Lissa’s forces had moved their main camp to what had once been the Horn market square. He recognized the green of the Healers’ tent; there was a line outside of it, men standing and holding bandaged limbs. All walking wounded, meaning they must have already treated the worse-injured.

“Vanyel?”

He jumped and spun around, startled by the voice, and recognized it a moment later.

“Mardic!”

The Herald-Mage jogged to him and gripped his arm. “Van, we’ve been looking for you. Donni and I brought your things from Dog Inn.” In Mindspeech: *:How are you holding up? You look a little worse for wear:*

*:Nothing a bath and some clean clothes won’t fix:* He switched back to spoken words. “How long ago did you arrive?”

“‘Bout a candlemark.” Mardic followed his lead. “Already spoke to your sister. She’s making a report up to Major Alban now, I think. Figuring out where to deploy us. Have you eaten?”

“No.” He wasn’t especially hungry, but something hot to drink sounded lovely – and if he could find tea, he would have something to mix his willowbank tincture with, and maybe do something about the headache. He’d taken a dose straight the night before, measuring out the drops onto his tongue, but it tasted vile.

“Well, come with me. Donni’s drawing our standard supplies with the quartermaster right now. Asked her to get a tent for you, too.”

“Thank you.” That was very thoughtful of them.

He followed Mardic to the mess tent, where they both obtained bowls of pease porridge and mugs of tea, and then found a couple of folding stools to sit down. The tent was staffed by a cook in uniform, the lighter blue of Guard support staff, but he had several women in civilian clothes helping him. Now that he looked, the camp was full of Horn locals. Three girls in their teens had set up a stall with sewing supplies; there was a long line for their services. A woman and her brood of children, or maybe grandchildren given her grey hair, had brought out a laundry-tub; he saw the woman accept a coin from a young soldier, who bowed gallantly and kissed her hand.

Mardic followed his gaze. “Amazing, isn’t it? Already putting their lives back together.”

He let his eyes scan further, and saw blue-uniformed men standing on wooden ladders, lifting bundles of thatch to replace a damaged roof. A number of locals had lined up and were accepting rough-cut timber from another Guard supply-tent.

“Van!”

Donni’s voice startled him, and his hand jerked, spilling some tea on his treads. He swore.

“Sorry.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s good to see you. You look like hell.”

“Thanks.” He managed not to roll his eyes. Donni was always so blunt.

She gestured back at the quartermaster’s tent. “Your bags are back there, with the clerk. Did you know that you’re famous? I said I needed a tent for Herald-Mage Vanyel and his eyes nearly bust out of his head, and then he went to the special supplies and gave you the best officer’s tent he had!”

Vanyel flinched. “I’d rather not be.”

Donni looked around for a vacant stool, saw none, and sat down in Mardic’s lap. Vanyel looked away. Even now, it was hard to watch them being affectionate with each other.

*What would you think of all this, ‘Lendel?* He could picture Tylenel accepting the townspeople’s thanks with a gallant smile, offering to carry wood and water, stopping to kiss every woman’s hand. *What would you think of me? Would you hate me, for what I just did?* No, ‘Lendel wouldn’t have any problem killing Karsites, he thought. Wouldn’t have any doubts that protecting Valdemar at all costs was the right thing.

There was a deep ache in his chest. *I need to think about something else.* He looked around for a distraction, and felt his mind raise a little flag – avoiding thoughts wasn’t a good

strategy. He stared down at the bowl of porridge in his hand; it took him a number of seconds to realize that he needed to set down his tea if he wanted a free hand to eat it with. He held the mug between his knees and forced himself to eat a spoonful, then another. It tasted like sawdust.

“Sir, are you Herald-Mage Vanyel?”

He nearly spilled the tea again as he jerked his head up, but he kept his face composed. “Yes, I am,” he managed.

The man wore a fancy embroidered robe, the hem of it a little muddy. “I am Master Kondron, mayor of Horn.” He stood several yards back, trepidation in his eyes. “I wanted to personally thank you for your services.” He bowed jerkily.

It wasn't just trepidation, Vanyel thought – there was fear there, his Empathy was picking up on it even as he tried to shield. *They're afraid of me.* And why not? He was a force of destruction. Last night he must have killed hundreds of people just with his mind.

It hurt, gods, but he kept his expression smooth and his voice level. “It was only my duty, Master Kondron. I am sorry I could not be there sooner.”

The mayor bowed again. “You did more than we could ever have asked. I'm not sure where you'll be going next, but if you are still in Horn, it would be my great pleasure to host you for supper. I am afraid I cannot offer such a fine meal as I'm sure you're accustomed to—”

He thought of last night's awful stew, and nearly laughed out loud. “I'll see,” he interrupted. “You're right, I may not be around.” The man's emotions weren't congruent with the words – he wanted to impress Herald Vanyel, yes, but he was terrified by the thought of having him sit at his dinner table. *How do I get out of this?* He had to respond gracefully, somehow – and it would be polite to let the mayor express his gratitude, but he couldn't stomach the thought of choking down a meal surrounded by that miasma of fear. Maybe if...

“Have you met Herald-Mages Mardic and Donni?” he said. “They contributed to the counterattack at least as much as I did; they’re the ones who Gated over the reinforcements from the South Hardorn garrison.”

Mardic stood up, setting his bowl and mug down on the stool. He bowed. “I’m honoured to meet you, Master Kondron. Your people are bearing up very well. I hear your militia fought hard, and were of great assistance. We might not have been able to take back the town otherwise.”

The mayor bobbed his head, cheeks going pink. “Thank you, Herald-Mage Mardic. The honour is all mine. If you would like to join us for supper—”

*There, Vanyel thought. Now I just have to arrange to be elsewhere, and let him fawn over Mardic and Donni, who don’t frighten the piss out of him.* It rankled a little. Gods, why couldn’t he be a normal Herald? Wasn’t it enough to be destined to die fighting for Valdemar? Did his own people have to be terrified of him as well?

He wouldn’t be able to stop Leareth at all if he were a normal Herald, he reminded himself – which didn’t help. *Why me, damn it? I never asked for this.*

He jerked himself out of the loop of thought in time to watch the mayor kissing Donni’s hand. Her eyes sparkled; she at least was enjoying this. Mardic looked stoic.

He reached for his friend’s mind. *:Sorry, Mardic:*

*:I don’t mind. I know you hate the attention:* From the overtones of resignation, he knew that Mardic wasn’t exactly looking forwards to that part either – but he would enjoy watching Donni bask in the spotlight.

Running footsteps. “Herald-Mage Vanyel?”

He managed not to jump this time. The voice belonged to a child, a girl of perhaps nine or ten, a little out of breath. She wore a strip of blue cloth tied to her upper arm, marking her as one of the local children who had volunteered to act as pages for Lissa.

“Yes?” he said politely.

The girl fidgeted. She was frightened, too, but there was a thrill of anticipation as well; he imagined she was looking forwards to telling her friends she had met the famous Herald-Mage Vanyel.

“Sir, Major Lissa requests your presence,” she said, speaking slowly and carefully.

“Thank you.” He smiled as best he could. “Here.” He fished a copper from his satchel and flicked it to her; she caught it with a startled grin, and bowed awkwardly before dashing away.

He drained the rest of his lukewarm tea and stood up, looking around for somewhere to leave his half-eaten pease porridge.

Donni reached for the bowl. “I’ll have that if you don’t want it!”

He let her take it, and Mardic took the empty mug from his hand and gripped his shoulder for a moment. Their minds brushed. *:Take care, Van:*

#

Lissa greeted him with a formal bow at the entrance to her tent. Someone had found her a major’s uniform; he could see where it had been altered to fit her, but she looked immaculate.

“Major Lissa.”

“Herald-Mage Vanyel. Come in.” She gestured and he followed.

Umbria, Kilchas, and Jarek were all there, along with a red-haired, freckled man who Vanyel didn’t recognize.

The man nodded to him. “I’m Herald Ruvi. Mindspeech-relay from East Hardorn.”

Vanyel nodded back. "Herald-Mage Vanyel."

The man's eyes widened slightly, but he kept his composure well.

Lissa snapped her fingers, and all the eyes turned to her. "Thank you," she said.

"We're just waiting for – oh, there you are."

Herald Jores came into the tent, and Lissa closed the flap behind him.

"Good. Thank you all for coming. I've been in touch with Major Alban, and we have orders, but he's given me a great deal of discretion in how to carry them out. Somehow we need to figure out how to cover the Border all the way from Victrin Fell to Sun's Hill. For those of you counting, that's about a hundred miles. There's no possible way we can spread our forces to cover all of it and still have the strength to hold off an attack anywhere. Meaning I'd like to keep the main Guard force concentrated, most likely here in Horn, and try our best to have enough coverage that we'll at least notice the Karsites gathering forces in time to redeploy our own."

"That makes sense," Umbria said cheerfully. "You'll want a Mindspeech-relay at either end, then. Ruvi, would you rather the east or west?"

Vanyel raised a hand, tentatively; eyes moved to look at him. "Both Kilchas and I are strong Mindspeakers. And we're Web-Guardians, so if we're on opposite ends of the range, we would be pretty well able to pick up on threats above the alarm threshold." Which unfortunately wouldn't work for detecting un-Gifted soldiers, but he might be able to find Karsite mages that way.

"Noted," Umbria said. "Where are the nearest well-staffed Guard posts on either side?"

Lissa frowned. "To the west, Bakerston. Chapel Hill Crossing has a post and they'll be covering up to Sun's Hill, but they're understrength and I doubt they'll be able to spare

anyone. To the east, Crescent Lake, but they'll be spreading out east, since we stole most of South Hardorn's people."

Umbria nodded, tugging at a lock of hair. "Ah. Let me think. Figure the Karsites are most likely to send cavalry up the road. Might be we ought to station Jarek there. You'll want a Farseer, so we ought to keep Vanyel here until the other lad arrives – Efrem, no? After that, I think we ought to send him to the eastern side. He's the only one with a chance of holding off an attack long enough for you to move your forces. Do you agree with me that an attack east of us is more likely than to the west?"

Lissa raised her eyebrows. "What's your reasoning?"

"Terrain, mostly. Mostly flat farmland to our west until you pass Sun's Hill, but to the east there's all that nasty hilly stuff, especially around the Terilee. Area's full of caves and old mines."

"Hmm." Lissa tapped her chin. "I came to the same conclusion for different reasons. Their population is much denser east of the Terilee, and we think one of their largest garrisons was stationed at Cebu Pass, on their border with Hardorn. Before this all happened, we actually thought an attack was more likely between South Hardorn and Crescent Lake. Karse is also on fairly good terms with Rethwellan right now, we think, and likely wants to keep in that way – which means they're more likely to avoid attacks that might get near where the borders intersect."

Vanyel raised his hand again. "Do we know Rethwellan's position on this war yet?"

Lissa shook her head. "Not yet. We've dispatched a Herald from Bakerston, but they'll need to cross the Comb, even on Companion-back that takes a few days. Do you have information on what position they might take?"

He shrugged. “Randale thought they were likely to stay neutral.” He had brought up, briefly and with distaste, the possibility of cementing a stronger alliance and mutual aid treaty with a marriage to Queen Lytharien, around Randale’s age and un-partnered. *I really hope it doesn’t come to that.*

“Could be worse, I suppose.” Lissa drew her shoulders up. “Let’s move on to details.” She moved to the table with the map, and the Heralds followed.

#

Vanyel sat cross-legged on a bedroll inside his new tent, which was in fact very nice, and reached into his saddlebags again. He must have packed in a hurry – the contents were very jumbled.

Uniforms: three sets of Whites, plus the filthy set that was currently with the laundress. Her name was Lafti, and she hadn’t seemed frightened of him at all. By the way her eyes had moved over the camp, watchful and calculating without much curiosity, he thought this wasn’t the first war she’d seen.

Books: three. He had brought a book of historical ballads, thinking he might want something to keep himself busy if he had to sit around waiting, and he’d also packed Seldasen’s treatise on ethics. His copy was well-worn by now, despite the preservation-spells he had laid; he often brought it along when he traveled. In addition, he’d had his personal notes on spell-development bound in a leather cover by one of the Palace clerks, with the second half of the book still blank for notes.

Clothing: four sets of underclothes, two pairs of warm woollen socks Shavri had given him as a gift at Midwinter, two sleeping-gowns. One standard cloak, white, the hem already dingy, and one oilcloth for rain. A clasp for the cloak, which he stared at blankly for a

moment; he didn't even remember packing it. *Gods, I must have been tired.* It had probably been another gift from Shavri. It was a nice item, carved of horn, simple but sturdy.

Magical items: an extra focus-stone, fire-opal carefully wrapped in soft leather, it was hard to find good unflawed amber and his focus-stones tended not to last longer than a year if he was using node-energy often. Savil teased him about it; she'd been using the same personal focus-stone for five years now. Three unkeyed quartz crystals, which he'd been saving for new talismans.

Weapons and armour: his sword. A set of boot-daggers. A light chainmail shirt that could be worn under his tunic, though it was heavy and hot and he usually went without and relying on magical shielding.

Miscellaneous items: a sewing kit, polish for his boots, the special soap for cleaning Whites. An extra belt-knife. His medicine kit, freshly restocked. A wooden plate, bowl, and cup carved to fit together when packed away – another gift, this time from Lissa, and he always brought the set when he traveled.

Lutes: one. He had gone back and forth on whether to bring it, but he often did for long missions. It helped him feel less unmoored when he was far from home.

With his possessions strewn all around him, he closed his eyes for a moment. *I want to go home.* He missed Savil. Missed Shavri and Randale and Tantras. Mardic and Donni were here, and Lissa, but they would be splitting up soon – he would go to Victrin Fell as soon as Efrem arrived. He would most likely be alone with strangers, he didn't know for how long.

*:You have me:* Yfandes reminded him, sending a burst of affection.

*:That's true:* He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. *:We can do this, right?:*

*:We can:*



## Chapter Six

Vanyel sat at the foot of the tree, feeling the rough bark through his tunic. It was raining, and a trickle of water had made its way down the back of his neck despite the oilcloth over his cloak.

He stared at the piece of jerky in his hand – he knew he had to eat, he had just been using node-magic to set a few simple trap-spells for the night, but he felt queasy and it looked utterly unappealing. Gods, he was tired of travel-bread and dried meat.

“Herald Vanyel?”

He looked up, and smiled. “Jonne. Any luck.”

The Guardsman held up a brace of rabbits. Vanyel felt his smile broaden, and not just because he was anticipating a hot rabbit stew. He liked the young lieutenant a great deal. Jonne was friendly, and competent, and looked out for his people, the platoon of bowmen and skirmishers currently keeping an eye on a twenty-mile section of border by the town of Victrin Fell.

*:And he’s awfully handsome: Yfandes teased.*

*:Shut up, horse:* His lips twitched as he tried to hide a smile. She was right. With his deep blue eyes and sun-streaked blond braid, the man was very pleasant to look at. *And, gods, I think he might be shay'a'chern as well.* He'd caught the lieutenant looking at *him* a few times, in a way that felt more than just friendly or curious. Not that anything was going to happen, of course, not when they were all tramping around in the rain from dawn to dusk every day. Still, it was a pleasant daydream.

Jonne held out a hand, and Vanyel let himself be pulled to his feet, wincing as his head throbbed. "Camp's this way," the man said cheerfully. "See anything on your Farsight check?"

It had become a regular routine – every day, about two candlemarks before dusk, Vanyel found a place to sit down and go into trance while Yfandes and two bowmen kept a lookout, and he played over their section with his Farsight and then reset the magical traps. He could do it at a distance, after keying his three quartz focuses, along with four more that Jonne had found for him in a riverbed, and burying them at intervals along the Border. When he had energy to spare, he searched for the Karsite Adept through the Web, but he didn't expect much and had had no luck so far.

They had been there a week, and so far there had been no sign that the Karsites were concentrating here. They had turned up a lot of single or paired scouts, though, which was suspicious. Vanyel struck whenever his Farsight found a party on the Valdemaran side of the Border, and he'd given up on non-lethal attacks after a second pass showed him the body of a man whose legs he had broken, now with his belly torn open and a wolf and her cubs feeding on his innards. A lone injured man was doomed, and it felt kinder to kill them cleanly, unless any of Jonne's men were nearby enough to reach them and take them captive.

His trap-spells, set far enough on the Valdemaran side to avoid catching scouts who didn't intend to cross, were set to paralyze and then alert him of the exact location. So far they'd caught one man alive that way, and found two more dead at the hands, well, claws and teeth of local wildlife, and one injured badly enough that Vanyel, with his weak Healing, had been unable to save him. In total they had three prisoners, which was very irritating; Jonne had only one understrength platoon of twenty-one men, and now two were tied up guarding the captives, and transporting them when they moved camp each night. They hadn't even known very much, when Vanyel interrogated them under Truth Spell.

One of Jonne's patrol-leads, a young woman who had clearly read a number of historical ballads about mages, had asked Vanyel if he could lay a compulsion spell on the prisoners and force them to obey their guards. He had refused, claiming he didn't know how. Which was a lie. It wasn't a type of magic used in Valdemar, but Starwind had taught him, after needlessly restating the dubious ethics of ever using it.

No one in the Valdemaran chain of command knew this was one of his skills, and he intended to keep it that way. Not because he thought it was wrong. *Because I'm not sure whether it is wrong*, he admitted to himself. *Because it seems maybe not so different from Mindhealing or, hells, whatever a Companion-bond does to a Herald*. It felt like what Leareth would call a 'slippery slope', one that led nowhere good, and he didn't want to be tempted.

*:It's nothing like a Companion-bond or Mindhealing:* Yfandes sent, her mindvoice leaking irritation; they had been going back and forth on the matter for days. She agreed he ought not to use it, but not on the reason. *:The difference is intent to harm, and consent:*

*:I didn't consent when you Chose me:* He regretted the words immediately, but it was too late; he felt her mind flinch away from his, and guilt washed over him. *:I'm sorry,*  
*'Fandes. I didn't mean that:*

*:No, but it's true: There was hurt in the overtones, but no anger. :I've thought about it a lot. I think we're both glad that I did Choose you, now, but I certainly violated your consent at the time. One could say that you weren't yourself, weren't in your right mind, and maybe that makes it different... But I'm not sure:*

He sighed. *:I don't intend harm to the Karsite captives. If anything, they'd be less likely to be hurt, if the guards don't have to keep them tied up. Or shoot arrows at them if they try to run away:*

*:I'll think on it: Yfandes sounded very dubious. :Anyway, pay attention:*

He blinked, and realized Jonne was speaking to him, though he caught only the end of the sentence. "...tomorrow?"

He smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, I was woolgathering. What was that?"

"I said, do you want to go scout out the caves to the east tomorrow?" Jonne didn't seem bothered by his inattention. "This is where I grew up, so I can show you where. Area's riddled with caves. The Karsites could be hiding half a company in there and we'd never know."

Vanyel nodded thoughtfully. "Can do after my morning Farsight-check, if I don't turn up anything urgent. You grew up here?"

Jonne nodded. "My family has a gem-mine. I was actually born very near here, 'bout two miles. Seam played out when I was six and they moved to near Terilee Crossing. Exhausted that site four years ago and moved again, thirty miles north." He looked relieved. "Thank the gods they're not still on the Border."

"Wow." Vanyel smiled. "I don't know much about gem-mining. What was it like?"

“Very boring. Well, to me. There’s a reason I didn’t stay.” They had reached the camp, and Jonne gestured to an upturned log. “Sit. I’ll get these to the cook and bring us some wine.”

They didn’t have a dedicated cook, of course, or any support staff, but one of Jonne’s men, a grizzled old patrol-lead, had a real talent with turning wild plants and game into fare that was not just edible but delicious. Not that Vanyel had been enjoying it as much as he wanted; he wasn’t sure if it was nerves, the constant horrifying sights of dead bodies, or backlash from using too much node-magic, but his stomach had not been especially happy with him lately.

*:You are overusing your Gifts: Yfandes nagged. :Working yourself to the edge of backlash every day, and never taking any time to rest. You should take a day off. Make yourself useful at camp without magic:*

*:Or I could just take willowbark and work through it. I can manage, and you know I can’t afford time to rest:* Reminded, he dug in his satchel again for the bottle. It was half-empty; he would have to request more next time he crossed paths with the Guard Healers.

“Here.” Jonne offered him his wooden cup, filled; he took it, their fingers brushing for a moment. The Guardsman sat on another log, and wearily raised his own cup. “To Valdemar.”

“To Valdemar.” Vanyel took a sip of the heavily-watered wine, and decided it was awful enough that the addition of some willowbark wouldn’t make it much worse.

“Headache?” Jonne said, a crease of concern appearing between his brows.

“I’m fine.” Vanyel managed a smile. “Just worked my Gifts a little too hard.”

“We could cut the number of trap-spells—”

He shook his head. “Too risky. More chance scouts could slip through.” He had tried using the Web to search for scouts, but he had to do it actively; he couldn’t set any alarms that would alert him when he was asleep, not without changing the parameters of the Web itself, and he couldn’t do that except from Haven.

“All right. Please look after yourself, though, all right? You’re the only mage I’ve got.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.” He met Jonne’s eyes. “Tell me more about your family?”

Two candlemarks later, rabbit stew sitting uneasily in his stomach, he found his way to his things. He pitched his tent, he had gotten quite good at it and it took only five minutes, and crawled inside. Too tired to undress fully, he only shed his cloak and pulled off his boots before laying out his bedroll and crawling into it.

Even though it was late spring now, the nights were chilly. His bedroll felt very cold, and very lonely. Despite his utter exhaustion, it took a long time to fall asleep.

#

Vanyel jerked awake, and for a moment he couldn’t remember where he was. Cold seeping into his bones from the uneven ground, even through a canvas tarp and sleeping-mat; wind whistling above his head...

*Right. I’m with Jonne’s platoon.* He turned over, trying to figure out what had woken him. There were no sounds, or no unusual ones – just branches creaking, the patter of rain, and an owl hooting in the distance.

He opened his Othersight and Reached to check on the trap-spells. *One...two...three...*

“Damn it!” He sat up so quickly that his head spun. The fourth trap-spell was gone. Not sprung. It just...wasn't there anymore, and he'd put enough energy that it ought to last for days. Which meant a mage was out there.

*:Fandes! Problem!:*

He felt her sleeping mind stir. *:What?:*

*:Trap-spell's down. Number four:*

Her alarm echoed down their bond as she came fully awake. *:What? Oh, no. I'll start waking the others:*

Vanyel fumbled with his tunic, his fingers clumsy with cold. It wasn't especially clean, but it would do – none of his Whites were very clean at this point. He shoved his feet into his boots, checked the daggers, and grabbed his cloak and sword-belt before standing and stumbling to the tent-flap. There were advantages to being famous, he admitted: one overawed clerk, and he had an officer's tent with room to stand.

He tried to move silently as he went to Jonne's tent; if there was an enemy out there, he didn't want to alert them that he knew they were there. A stick cracked under his foot, and he swore, but in a whisper.

“Jonne,” he hissed, crouching outside the flap, rainwater already soaking his hair and sneaking down the back of his neck. “Jonne, wake up.”

He heard movement. “...Van?” The man's voice was blurred with sleep.

“Shh. Trap-spell's down. Think there's a mage out there.” He could start searching, but only once he had some of Jonne's people awake and covering his back.

“What? Oh, damn.” More shuffling. “Out in a minute. Wake the others.”

“Will do.” He crept towards the center of the camp. Yfandes had clearly gotten the attention of the man on watch-duty – he was now pacing around, stopping outside each tent to wake the others.

Five minutes later, they were gathered around the banked fire.

“Herald Vanyel.” Jonne rested a hand on his arm. “You need to go into trance to search, right?”

He nodded.

“Good. Ascott and Morga, cover him. The rest of you, form your patrols and spread out. Standard search pattern.”

Vanyel nodded and found a log to sit down.

*:I'll be watching as well:* Yfandes sent, and he heard her hoofbeats, muted by the mud so that there was no hint of bells.

It was hard to concentrate. He was cold, the damp made his joints ache, and his stomach hurt. At least the reaction-headache had subsided. And he was used to focusing through discomfort. He counted his breaths until the feelings in his body were distant, centered and grounded, and Reached for the Web.

His sense of his body faded even further into the background as his awareness expanded, racing through the land. He focused on his mage-sight, finding the pattern of nodes and ley-lines that was by now familiar, searching for changes. None. Probably not the Adept, then; whoever it was, Kilchas thought they had been harrying his section of the Border near Sun's Hill.

He opened to his Thoughtsensing as well, feeling the muted glow of un-Gifted minds clustered around him, four-person patrols already dispersing through the dense underbrush to

search. Reaching further, he felt nothing...nothing...there! At least twenty men, cutting through the gap left where his fourth trap-spell had been. Headed straight for the camp.

*How do they know where we are?* Somehow a scout must have gotten in and out through his trap-spell coverage – today, because they moved the camp at least two miles every night.

Focusing hard to maintain his Thoughtsensing and mage-sight, he summoned Farsight as well, finding the place where the minds were. He couldn't see much in the dark, only movement in the shadows – there! The faint glow of a covered lantern. Shadows resolved into the shapes of men, wearing dark clothing, moving deftly through the foliage.

And one shadow that was a little more visible; it was too dark to see the exact colour of his paler robes, but he guessed they would be red and gold. A priest, then, and his mage-sight told him they were also mage-gifted. Which made sense; most Karsite mages were priests in the order of Vkandis Sunlord, their official state religion.

He released the various forms of Sight, though he maintained his focus on the Web-spell, as though watching for movement from the corner of his eye. He kept his actual eyes shut. “Jonne?” he said, his own voice sounding distant and strange.

“Yes?”

“Party of twenty. Well trained, moving quickly without torches. Mage with them. Master-level, at a guess. Less than half a mile away, coming straight for us.”

Jonne's breath hissed out. “Damn. They got a scout through.”

“Must have. Sorry.”

“Not your fault.” As though from a long way off, he felt Jonne's hand brush his shoulder. “Focus on the mage, we've got the rest. Can you take him out?”

“I'll try.” He hesitated. “Should I pass word on the relay?”

“Not yet, unless it’s very quick.”

He would need to drop the Web-spell to find Ruvi, who was at the Terilee crossing twenty miles away and probably fast asleep. *:Yfandes, can you try for his Companion?:* He had never been quite sure what the Companions’ limits were on their Mindspeech with each other.

*:I can try: A pause. :Made contact. She’ll wake Ruvi:*

*:All right. Need to focus:* He leaned into the Web again and brought his Thoughtsensing back to the Karsite party. It took a moment to find them; they were covering ground fast, now fording the little creek that no one knew the name of and they’d jokingly nicknamed ‘The Snake’ after one of Jonne’s Guards was bitten by a viper.

*Found you.* He focused his mage-sight on the pale-robed figure – and winced. *Damn it.* He had thought the woman was only Master-level, but her shields were better than he’d imagined. After a moment, he realized why – they weren’t hers. They had been built onto a talisman of some kind; at this distance, he couldn’t find exactly where she wore it, or else he could maybe have Fetched it off her. It was an Adept-working for sure, maybe better than he could have done himself.

Nothing for it. Enough power would get through, and at the very least he could keep her very distracted. He readied himself and flung a focused, pointed bolt of nearly pure mage-energy – some always went into light or heat, but most of the force hammered directly into her shield.

He felt the jarring in his head as it bounced off, and wasn’t especially surprised. *Ow.* He reached for a node–

The insides of his eyelids turned red; he flung up an arm to cover his face, startled, and threw power into his shields. After a moment he realized it couldn’t possibly be an

explosion or fireball – there was no sound at all. He thought to summon his Farsight, just above his head – that wouldn't ruin his night vision at least.

A giant plume of reddish gold rose up, bisecting the horizon, at least five hundred feet high. It was a mage's signal-flare – not as impressive as it looked, it was just a modified mage-light and caused no heat or damage, but it was still far more than a Master-level mage should have been capable of. Another talisman? He hadn't been watching carefully enough to know.

*A signal flare... :Yfandes, got a bad feeling. Going to warn Ruvi:*

*:Don't think you need to. That must have been visible from Horn:*

He tried to think. A signal. A signal for what? Why was it so enormous?

Barely a minute later, he felt a tap on his shields. *:Van?:*

*:Kilchas?:* He parted his shields to make contact. *:What is it?:* Kilchas was on the opposite end of Lissa's assigned border sector – he must have been straining his range to reach this far. Why wasn't he going through the relay?

*:We're under attack. At least a thousand ground troops, and their godforsaken Adept is there. Can't shield and attack at the same–:* The mind link cut out for a moment, and Vanyel swore aloud, and dropped his rapport with the Web, focusing only on Reaching for Kilchas. It was a long way. Past Horn, he felt the concentration of Gifted minds there, one in particular open and receptive – spare a moment. *:Mardic?:*

*:Van?:* He felt the strain in his friend's mindvoice, and put more energy into stabilizing the connection; Mardic wasn't as strong a Mindspeaker.

*:Kilchas is under attack. Contacted me directly:*

*:Where?:*

*:Don't know exactly. Near Sun's Hill. Lost the link, trying to make contact with him.*

*Pass it on?:*

*:Will do:* Mardic dropped the link, and Vanyel kept Reaching. Umbria was on patrol somewhere between Horn and Sun's Hill, but he didn't have time to look for her.

*:Kilchas?:*

*:A moment. Busy:*

He hung back, holding his Thoughtsensing extended without actually touching the other man's mind. A few seconds later, Kilchas' shields parted, and Vanyel slipped through the opening.

*:What's going on?:*

*:Sorry, got distracted. Bastard set our mess tent on fire:* He sensed overtones of frustration and anger, mixed with the remnants of sleep-fog – Kilchas must have been wrenched out of bed only a few minutes ago. *:Van, can you help? Know you can work at a distance:*

Not usually that far a distance. *:I'll try. What do you need?:* It would be much harder to coordinate.

*:Shields. If you can keep the mage-attacks off Captain Chana's people while I attack...:*

Kilchas had never been especially skilled at shielding relative to offence – he had an Adept's raw power, but no finesse. *:I'll try. Range is long for me:* Shielding would be easier than attacking, though, he wouldn't have to aim.

*:Thank you:*

*:How many troops with you?:* He ought to remember, but didn't.

*:Eighty. Three platoons. Two infantry, one of skirmishers—:*

He felt an echo of alarm and the link dropped again. Deciding not to distract Kilchas for the moment, he broadened his Thoughtsensing, finding the minds clustered nearby. *That feels like about eighty.* There was alarm and surprise in those surface-thoughts he couldn't avoid picking up, but not much fear, and a great deal of determination. He could already feel the distant throb of a reaction-headache, and took a moment to tap another node before Reaching further.

*There!* A much larger concentration of minds, less than a half-mile away, clearly just crossing the Border. He tried to recall the map he'd spent so many hours poring over; the area was all farmland, he thought. They hadn't thought the Karsites would attack there – their army was recruited heavily from the hillspeople, used to moving through rough terrain. They were giving up that advantage – but clearly they didn't need it, not when they had numbers on their side. *How did they march a thousand troops all the way there right under our noses?* No point speculating now.

He pulled up Farsight as well, fixing it on a point high in the air above where he thought the Border was. It wasn't raining where Kilchas was; the sky was clear and the moon high, giving some light. The ground splayed out below him. He could see farmsteads like doll's houses, fields with crops just beginning to sprout, tiny figures moving around outside.

He still couldn't pinpoint the stupid Adept, who had to have the best shields of anyone he'd encountered. *Have to make him use node-energy,* he thought. *:Yfandes? Can you help me watch the Web?:* He would be able to feel the disturbances, that way, but he didn't think he could maintain focus on it along with all the rest.

*:I can help ground you. You should tell Jonne what's happening first:*

Oh. He hadn't even thought of that. "Jonne?" he said; he could barely feel his own lips moving, as though they belonged to someone else.

“Yes, Vanyel?” The voice sounded like it came from deep underwater. “Are you all right?”

“Sun’s Hill under...attack.” It was hard to find words when he didn’t dare drop any of his Sight. “Kilchas...needs my help. Cover me.” He tried to think. “Mage...doesn’t have...physical shields. Arrows...would kill her. Need to...focus now.” He poured more energy into his own shields; he was going to be fully in trance, and didn’t want her to take him out with a lucky hit he didn’t see coming.

*:I’ll warn you if she gets near. Now, let me help:* He felt the mental ‘hand’ she offered him – and for a moment he saw her, even through his closed eyelids. Only she wasn’t a horse, she was a woman, tall with brown skin and dark hair in two braids.

A flash of memory – *out in the garden with ‘Lendel, he looked at Gala and saw a young woman with red hair.* He shoved the image away and took Yfandes’ hand, and his sense of his body faded entirely. He was Valdemar; the lakes were his eyes, the trees were his hands, the rocks his bones and the soil his skin. With Farsight he could see the soon-to-be-battlefield; with Thoughtsensing he could feel the minds corresponding to those tiny figures; with mage-sight he saw the flows of energy, Kilchas’ aura flaring angry purple.

He linked to a node, it felt oddly like touching a part of his own body, and flung up a long shield in front of Captain Chana’s platoons, now spreading out across an invisible line. It was a one-sided mage-barrier, a trick he had learned from Starwind and only recently attained proficiency at – the Guards could cross from their side, but the Karsites couldn’t and neither could their spears or arrows. The shield was invisible to ordinary eyes. It was visible to mage-sight, of course, but that was unavoidable. It didn’t block heat well – he had judged that keeping it invisible was more important, given how much it would baffle the Karsite infantry,

and heat-sink shields always glowed when they were struck – but it would block levinbolts and other mage-attacks from the Karsite side.

–And there came one, he felt the force of it vibrating through him. Where had it come from? There – that node. But where was the mage linked to it? He leaned into his mage-sight, the Farsight image slipping to the background–

Another attack tore his attention back to the shield-spell, and he shaped more node-energy with mental ‘hands’ and pushed it into the barrier. *Ow*. His mage-channels were already sore, and he couldn’t key the energy to feed through his focus-stone, or at least not efficiently, not when his physical body was a hundred miles away.

Another attack. Another. The Adept had clearly decided to hammer at him with raw power rather than attempting anything sneaky. He was clearly very strong, and the fact that he could use nodes meant he wouldn’t tire quickly. *Not a bad plan, if he were up against anyone but me.*

Vanyel’s whole world shrank to the barrier, and the Web. Damn it but the Adept was smart; he was hopping around between nodes with each attack, never giving Vanyel enough time to pin down his location. He could feel Kilchas’ attacks passing through the barrier and striking the Karsite forces, feel minds winking out like candles in a high wind. The man was strong, but he didn’t have the control required to use nodes, and he *would* tire sooner or later.

*Note, see if I can persuade Kilchas to train with the Tayledras.* He and Savil had tried to work with him, but Kilchas had been a Herald nearly forty years now; he was very set in his ways.

*Focus*, he reminded himself. Something was moving in the corner of his ‘eye’ – there! Some of the Karsite troops were trying to creep around his barrier, occasionally firing arrows

to test whether it was still there. Clever of them. He knocked them back with a wave of force, then extended the barrier, curving it around until it was a half-dome.

–Fireball after fireball slammed into the shield; the Adept must have realized he couldn't block heat well. No time to add a heat-sink now, and he probably couldn't manage it anyway, he'd never practiced that combination. Captain Chana's troops scrambled back, crying out in alarm as the grass under their feet caught fire; he felt the startled pain in their surface thoughts and pulled back from his Thoughtsensing, it was very distracting.

He reinforced the shield again and then took a moment to put out the fire and cool the air, using the same adaptation of the weather-barrier spell he had once used to freeze a mudslide solid. Thinking quickly, he flung the resulting white-hot globe towards the Karsite side just before the threads of the spell snapped and it exploded.

Soldiers died, their minds screaming – dozens, hundreds, and those that winked out instantly were the lucky ones. He nearly lost control of the shield. *Don't think about it. Don't don't don't.* Focus on the moment. Focus on the mission.

*If your Valdemar was under attack, Leareth had said to him once, you would kill a hundred enemy soldiers with a wave of your hand, never seeing their faces, and consider it right. What is the difference?*

No. Think about it later. Not the time.

*:I'm with you:* He felt Yfandes light merging closer with him. *:I'm with you, Chosen:*

Her presence gave him the strength to find his mental footing again, just as the Adept changed tactics and started blasting at his shield with wind. He didn't recognize the exact spell – it was probably like Savil's tornado-spell, and he could feel it stripping away the shield's energies. He replaced each layer, feeding node-energy through himself, gods he knew he was hurting but it was distant it didn't matter...

Time didn't exist. If someone had asked him then, he wouldn't have remembered his own name. There was only the barrier, he had forgotten why it was important but it was the only thing that mattered in the world. He had to hold it. That was his one purpose. Had to hold...

At some point he realized there were no more attacks. He drifted, clinging to the barrier, unsure what to do.

*:Chosen:* Yfandes reached for him. *:You can stop now. Kilchas and the others will take it from here:*

He hesitated. What was his purpose if not to hold a shield—

*:CHOSEN:* Her mindvoice was ringing steel. *:Vanyel. Come back to me. Now:*

Vanyel. That was his name. He was a Herald. He'd been helping— A battle. Except it was over. The Karsites had turned back, fleeing for the border, he could see them like toy soldiers below, carrying their wounded. Leaving behind too many bodies.

*:Leave the barrier up:* Yfandes sent. *:With what you put into, it'll last till morning:*

He managed to send a wordless acknowledgement, and broke his connection to the barrier, then the nearly-drained node he had been touching. *I'm going to have a lot of new white hairs*, he thought dully. *Does that mean I have to fight Leareth sooner?* He wasn't sure if that made any sense, his thoughts were going murky. He dropped his Farsight, then mage-sight and Thoughtsensing. There was only the Web, the sleeping land, roiling energy now settling. He was supposed to go somewhere else now, he thought, but where?

*:This way:*

He found his body again, but only for a moment, and then there was blackness.

“Herald Vanyel?”

He drifted up from red-black agony. Tried to pull away from the voice. Why couldn't they let him rest?

“Van, please. Wake up.”

He recognized the voice, but couldn't remember the name.

Muffled: “Give me that waterskin.” A pause, and he felt something cool on his face.

“Come on. Van. Wake up for me.”

He opened his eyes a crack, and immediately shut them again; everything was spinning and the dim firelight felt like a spear through his brain.

“Van?” Someone was bathing his forehead with a wet cloth. It felt good even through the pain. “Van, squeeze my hand if you can hear me.”

He felt warm fingertips brush his, and squeezed.

“Good!” The voice faded a little. “He's awake. Sort of. Let's get him under shelter.” A hand on his cheek. “Hang on. We're moving you inside, all right?”

Jonne. That was who the voice belonged to. He sighed. *I can trust him. I'm safe.* The relief almost carried him into unconsciousness again – until someone jarred his shoulder, hands slipping under his arms. He bit his lip as they lifted him, trying not to scream, or vomit.

*:Fandes? Where am I?:* It hurt to Mindspeak with her, but he gritted his teeth and pushed through it; he had questions.

*:Still at Lieutenant Jonne's camp. You passed out for a bit. After holding that goddamned Adept off Kilchas and his people for nearly a candlemark:*

*:Oh:* He was remembering fragments now. *:We won?:*

*:I would say so. The Karsites lost at least half their troops. Five hundred dead or wounded. Compared to nine dead and eight wounded on our side:* He could feel her pride and love radiating down their bond.

He felt rain on his face, cool and soothing. The memories were coming clearer.

*:Fandes, I killed them. So many people:*

*:I know. You had to. Do you know how many lives you saved?:*

It was hard to think. *:Seventy?:* Surely that wasn't right. The trade wasn't wasn't worth it.

*:You're not counting civilians. Farmers who would've been killed, tortured, raped, or just lost their homes and livelihood. And future losses. We'd be in a worse position if the Karsites had taken Sun's Hill:*

That was true...but still. Would more than four hundred and thirty farmers have died at the hands of the Karsites? More would have had to flee, but surely losing your home, bad as it was, didn't equal death. How could you convert it— He couldn't think, there was too much pain.

*:Van, please stop overthinking this. We'll talk tomorrow. Just rest:*

She sent a wave of overwhelming love, and he did fade out for a little while, drifting, until he felt something change in the air. The breeze was gone; it was still and warm. He realized he was shivering.

“Get him down. There.” He felt a hand gripping his again. “Vanyel, squeeze my hand if you're still with us.”

He squeezed.

“Good. We have to get you undressed, you’re soaked. You don’t need to help us.”

Jonne’s voice grew muffled again. “Ascott, stay and help me. The rest of you, go clean up out there.”

Another voice. “You don’t need to—”

“I want to. Get me if you need me for something. Otherwise, I’m staying with him until I know for sure he’s not going to die on us.”

Vanyel let them tug at his soggy Whites. He’d fantasized about being naked in front of Jonne, but not exactly under these conditions.

*:’Fandes? What happened here?:* He must have missed the entire raid.

*:Guardsmen Jeri got their priestess with an arrow to the shoulder. Kept her from coming after you, but unfortunately she was still conscious and could spellcast. Jonne lost two people:*

*:Who?:*

*:Kepla and Norvan. Mage-bolt and an arrow to the eye, respectively. And Garvi was badly burned by a mage-fireball. We killed three or four of theirs as well, and then Deleran managed to get up a tree and throw rocks at the mage, hit her in the head. Don’t think we killed her, but they peeled off some of the party to evacuate her. The rest of them harried us for a while, but they never got near you, and eventually they gave up:*

*:How many wounded?:*

*:On our side, you mean? Garvi’s the worst. Other than that, some broken bones and flesh wounds. Three who can’t fight for now, a few more walking wounded. Jonne sent someone to request a Healer: A pause. :Save the rest of your questions for tomorrow. You should rest your Mindspeech channels:*

Vanyel dared to open his eyes again. The only light in the tent came from a shuttered lantern; it was bearable.

“Get some more blankets for him,” he heard Jonne say. “He’s still shivering.” The man’s face swam into his field of vision. He looked concerned. “Van, are you cold?”

He nodded weakly.

“We’ll try to fix that. Hurting anywhere?”

He tried to speak; no sound emerged. Working some spit into his mouth, he tried again. “Everywhere.”

“Thirsty?”

He nodded.

“I don’t want to give you much to drink, you’re in shock, but a little should be safe.”

He smiled. “My sister’s a Healer. Taught me some basics. Not that I know much about how to treat a mage who’s drained themselves unconscious, but I figure keeping you warm and comfortable is a start. Anything else I should know?”

He tried to think. Remembered Roa treating him, all those years ago. “Honey water helps.”

“Oh, that makes sense. It’s like when a man fights all day without anything to eat, and gets weak and dizzy? Guess using magic would be tiring. You were sweating and out of breath just sitting there. Then you keeled over.” He shivered. “You scared the piss out of me, Van. Don’t do it again.”

“I’ll try not to.” He closed his eyes again, fighting down nausea.

He felt Jonne squeeze his hand again, briefly. “I’ll see if I can find something sweet for you.” There was a sound, and he felt a brush of cool air moving. “Oh, Ascott. Thank you. Could I trouble you to bring Herald Vanyel some warm water with sugar or honey dissolved

in it? Don't think we have any in our stores, but I know some of my men bring it for their tea."

"Yes, sir."

The cold breeze went away. Still, he felt like he could never get warm.

"How bad is it?" he heard Jonne say. "I mean, has this ever happened to you before?"

He managed a nod. "I've had worse." Though only when Gates were involved.

"How long do you figure you'll need to recover? I just don't know anything about this."

He tried to think. "Few days."

"Really? The way you look, I was thinking weeks. Anyway, we have a Healer coming, or we might have to go to them if they can't spare anyone." A pause. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"My medicine kit." He swallowed, hoping he wasn't going to be sick. "Has painkillers."

"Of course. What does it look like?"

"Wooden box...this long. In my saddlebags." He gestured vaguely.

He heard Jonne shuffling through his things. "This looks like it... You keep argonel with you?"

He'd asked for it in case he had to Gate anywhere – without Moondance, it was the only way he would be able to sleep. He only had a half-dose. *Not that I think I'd ever be tempted to kill myself with it, but it made Andrel feel better about giving it to me.*

"Well, I can't risk giving it to you in this state. How about some kava and valerian? Should take the edge off."

The honey-water arrived. Jonne helped him sit up, and made him take small sips and wait. Which was probably a good idea; he still felt very nauseated. And it wasn't exactly a hardship, lying propped up against the other man's knee, Jonne holding him upright with one arm, putting a hand over his to help keep the cup steady.

He felt guilty, though. "Don't you have other work?" he mumbled finally.

"Not particularly. My patrol-leads are very competent. Besides, you're my only mage. Keeping you alive is important."

He turned to meet Jonne's eyes. "M'not in danger f'dying." He was starting to slur his words, which was very embarrassing.

"You could've fooled me! You turned blue. I was shaking you just trying to get you to breathe."

Surely it hadn't been that bad? :*Fandes, did that really happen?:*

:*You did stop breathing for, oh, about thirty seconds. After you cut your connection to the node, before I helped you find your way back to your body. It was quite scary. Let's not do it again:*

Oh. He grimaced. "M'sorry."

"You do see why I'm concerned, right? I mean, your Companion thought you'd be fine, but still."

He blinked. :*Fandes, you talked to him?:*

:*He talked to me. I like him, he treats me like a person. Like a lady. Asked me some yes-or-no questions:*

"You're talking to her." Jonne's voice was soft. "My sister's a bit of a Mindspeaker. Recognize the look." There was a brief silence. "Have another sip. Good. Oh, I forgot to ask. How did the battle go at Sun's Hill?"

“We won.”

“Oh! That’s a relief. Good. My people will be happy to hear it.” Vanyel’s eyelids were drooping shut against his will, but he didn’t need to see Jonne’s face; he could hear the smile in his voice. “You’ll have to tell us everyone once you’re– Hey! Van? Are you falling asleep on me?”

He tried to lift his head. “No…”

“You are. Must be the valerian kicking in. It’s all right. Don’t have to fight it.”

He opened his eyes a crack, as Jonne lowered him back onto his bedroll and tucked in the blankets. The man was watching him intently, a small smile playing about his lips, and there was some other expression in his blue eyes.

*I think he is shay’a’chern*, he thought vaguely, and then sleep claimed him.

## Chapter Seven

Two weeks had passed.

In the end, it had taken Vanyel two days before he could even stand, and five before he was good for much except sleeping.

The Healer had arrived late on the third day, and brought word of the Sun's Hill battle – she was from the Terilee Crossing station, where Ruvi was a Mindspeech-relay. She was a plump older woman who reminded him of Roa, and when she examined him, he caught her looking at him with awe – but not fear.

After she had seen all of the wounded, she let some of the Guards ply her with wine, and regaled them with stories. They had grown in the telling – apparently, Herald-Mage Vanyel had singlehandedly won a battle against a thousand Karsite troops. He had to remind them that he'd been mainly providing defence so that Kilchas could attack, and that there had been some Guard forces involved as well. It didn't seem to stick.

Before this, he thought they had been starting to accept him as one of their own. They didn't understand the details of his work, but they understood that it was important, and he had tried hard to be friendly and approachable, and played the lute for them at every meal,

which made him fairly popular. Now, they acted like he was a hero out of a tale. Not *all* of them were afraid of him, but some were, and certainly the comfortable ease from before was gone.

Except with Jonne. The way the lieutenant looked at him had barely changed – maybe a hint more pride and respect, but certainly not fear. *Well, he did help me use the chamber-pot when I couldn't make it out of my tent. Maybe he can't be scared when he's seen me like that.* He had been quite a mother hen for the first few days, until the Healer had looked at Vanyel and pronounced that 'a few days of rest would set him right' and 'damned Heralds ought to know better.' Now he wasn't quite so solicitous, but he was still quite friendly.

Maybe too friendly. *Damn it, but I can't tell if he's flirting with me.* He was almost certain that the other man was attracted to him, but that wasn't enough – did Jonne want to act on it? Would he respond positively to Vanyel expressing interest? He didn't know, and didn't dare risk it, not when they had to keep working together for the indefinite future. It would be unbearably awkward if he propositioned the lieutenant and it turned he wasn't interested.

Jonne wasn't making it easy. He couldn't think of the last time anything had tried his self-control so hard.

After a second Karsite skirmish party came after their camp in the middle of the night, seeming to know exactly where they were, he had worked up the energy to lay some detection-wards, which were faster and easier. When a third party came straight for them the next night, and he was absolutely certain that no scouts could have made it as far as their camp and back, he started to wonder if the Karsites had a Farseer. It was the only thing that could explain it. They kept their priest-mage back on the third attempt, at least, after the

second attempt when Guardsman Prestley had put on Vanyel's shield-talisman, snuck up on the mage, and run him through with a sword while the others kept his guard distracted.

There hadn't been a fourth attack, thankfully. Once he was sufficiently recovered, Vanyel had started putting up a mage-barrier around their camp before he went to sleep. Maybe that was dissuading the Farseer.

He didn't have much of the higher-level picture, but he suspected the Karsites were regrouping, planning their next attack carefully. They had to be baffled by what had happened at Sun's Hill, unless they already realized that Valdemar had a ridiculously powerful mage who could cast at a distance. In which case a good strategy would be for them to coordinate two attacks, a raid on Vanyel directly and a larger force where he wasn't, keeping him distracted so he couldn't intervene.

He had passed that thought on via Mindspeech-relay, and received orders the next day that they were moving – they were to switch place with Herald Ruvi and Captain Hara's understrength company, except for one of Hara's skirmish platoons which would join forces with Jonne, and take over the Terilee Crossing stretch – and do it in unofficially and in secret, as sneakily as possible. Which meant under shields against Farsight, given Vanyel's speculations. He'd helped renew the shields on the private Palace meeting rooms before, and knew the technique, but it took half a day to figure out how to use it on a group of soldiers in motion, and it was a lot of effort. Hopefully, the hypothetical Farseer wouldn't realize where Vanyel had gone. Word would get out eventually, but it might buy them time.

They had been there three days, and just barely settled into the new routine. Vanyel still renewed the trap-spells over their previous range, though the distance made it more of a strain – it might mislead them into thinking he was still there. He laid only passive detection wards over their new stretch, and started setting up trap-spells inside the numerous caves,

where they would be difficult to detect from outside but would snag any Karsite parties who tried to stage there. Jonne had spent his teenage years romping through these woods, and knew exactly where to look.

He was lying in his tent, making one last Farsight-check before going to sleep. *One advantage of war, you're always tired enough to sleep, anytime and anywhere.* The basic shielding and soundproofing he had laid over his tent made him feel a lot safer, so that he could almost relax, and exhaustion did the rest.

Drowsy already, he slid his mental 'eye' from one checkpoint to the next. None of their maps had much detail, so they had taken to naming the landmarks themselves. Eagle's Nest, Tall Man Rock, Ascott's Broken Ankle Hill – she was still angry about the last. And confined to camp. Vanyel had worked what Healing he could, but she wouldn't be able to put weight on it for another few days.

Very Tall Tree, nothing. Pease Porridge Pond, nothing – he couldn't remember who had named that one, but it was a round little pool covered in dense, bubbly green algae that really did look like pease porridge. Baby Otters Creek–

He jerked upright. *:Fandes!:* Damn it, how had a party that large gotten through his wards? They were only one checkpoint inland from the Terilee itself. Maybe they had waded upstream in the river itself before cutting across – it was extremely difficult to make any spell last over flowing water, and he hadn't bothered. They must have known his detection spells were there. *They have a mage.*

*:What is it?:*

He Sent her the image directly.

*:Damn. Get dressed, I'll raise the alarm:*

A moment later he heard her squealing, hooves ringing on the rock. Jonne's platoon knew to trust Yfandes' warnings; they would pass it on to the newcomers transferred from Hara's forces.

He crawled out of his bedroll, reluctantly – he'd only just gotten comfortable, damn it! It felt unfair. He was still fuming as he pulled out a cleanish pair of Whites and dressed as fast as he could.

Jonne was already standing by the fire, his platoon-leads gathered around him. He waved Vanyel over, and gripped his arm for a moment, a smile warming his eyes even though his lips were properly serious. "Details?"

"There's a party of forty or so just passing Baby Otters Creek. On side of the Border. Think they must've come up the Terilee past my ward-line and then turned east. Likely have a mage."

"Did you see one?"

"Couldn't see much in the dark." He gave in to temptation and massaged his temples with both hands. It had been a very long day. Two of his old trap-spells had been sprung, thus needing to be reset and not just renewed, and he had been looking forwards to sleeping off his reaction-headache. "But they evaded my wards. Must've known they were there, and they're hard to detect. Would take a skilled mage."

Jonne nodded. "Can you pass an update to the relay? Standard priority."

"Already done." He had been able to reach Mardic in Horn.

"Thank you." Jonne was watching him with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'll manage." He dug in his satchel, looking for his bottle of willowbark tincture. It was nearly empty, and he'd been saving it, using the dried powder steeped in water whenever

he had time. Which he didn't now. He squeezed five drops directly onto his tongue, grimaced, and tried to wash out the taste with a swig from his waterskin.

Jonne had already turned briskly. "I'd like to move out and meet them. Ascott's Broken Ankle Hill is easier to defend, and we might be able to keep them from getting as far as the camp. Ascott, Prestley, and Varna are still on the wounded list and will stay behind."

"Hey," Ascott muttered from next to the fire. "Don't have to rub it in."

Jonne pretended to ignore her, but Vanyel saw his eyes twinkling. "Anyway. We're fairly matched for numbers. Vanyel, I want you focused on confirming whether they have a mage with them, and if so taking them on. If we need fire support from you, I'll pass it through Yfandes." They had discovered that the system worked well; if Vanyel needed to be in trance, or just physically apart from the main group, Yfandes could pass on messages without distracting him unduly. "Patrol-leads, come up and I'll assign roles. Everyone else, we march out in five."

Vanyel remembered something. *: 'Fandes, I finished that shield-token today, didn't I? :*

*: Just about, love. Not the final layer, but you could key it as is in a minute or so:*

He'd been filling the occasional free candlemark by working on more of the quartz stones that Jonne kept bringing him – unsurprisingly, the man raised working a gem-mine had an eagle's eye for gems, and the riverbeds were full of them. He'd wanted an extra talisman, so he could keep his own and still offer one to any of Jonne's men who had to take on a mage. Right now, he knew exactly who he wanted to have it.

"Jonne," he said, returning from his tent a few minutes later. "I have something for you."

"Oh?"

He held out the stone, wrapped loosely in leather. “Made a spare shield-token. I’d feel better about this if you had it.”

Jonne raised an eyebrow. “Why me?”

Vanyel tried to keep his voice light. “Well, you are the one giving me orders.” *And I like you, he thought, and, gods, I’ve seen enough death, I don’t know how I’d cope with losing you as well.*

“Hardly. You outrank me. I merely give you suggestions.” But Jonne did take the package. “Thank you, Van. Means a lot to me.” His cheek dimpled as he smiled. “Of course, now that I know you can make spares, I expect one for each of my patrol-leads by next week.”

Vanyel laughed. “I’ll do what I can.”

Jonne turned away. He leapt lightly onto an upturned log. “All right, everyone! Let’s move out!”

Vanyel was keeping an eye on the raiding party with Farsight, and they reached Ascott’s Broken Ankle Hill when the Karsites were still a half-mile out. It was more of a ravine than a hill, and as treacherous as the name sounded. Jonne stopped them at the top of the ridge, then sent a six-person patrol in both directions.

He had his own shields locked down, and the whole party under shields against Farsight just in case – though he’d have to drop it if he had to fight. To be honest, he barely had the strength for it now. He was avoiding using nodes, in case the Karsite Adept who could use node-energy, and presumably see disturbances in it, was anywhere near. *Gods, I hope he’s not with the attack. Don’t know if I can handle that tonight.*

He wasn't feeling well. Yet again, he'd started to feel sick to his stomach shortly after forcing down a bowl of stew. Lying down had helped, but now he was trying to bash his way through dense undergrowth, on foot because Yfandes was scouting ahead. *Maybe one of the local plants disagrees with me.* He ought to ask the Guard who cooked for them what he used.

He swallowed and checked with Farsight again. "Ten minutes out by my guess," he told Jonne. "Please excuse me a moment." He shoved his way through the foliage until he thought he was out of earshot, then shielded his link with Yfandes, bent over, and heaved up his supper. She would only nag him if she thought he was ill, and it wasn't like he had the option of going back to camp to rest, so what was the point? He wiped his mouth on a handful of leaves, took a few deep breaths until the world stopped spinning, and made his way back to the main group.

Jonne, his face barely visible by the light of their covered lantern, shot him a concerned look. *Meaning I look as bad as I feel,* Vanyel thought irritably. The lieutenant said nothing, just nodded and then turned to speak to one of his patrol-leads. Vanyel reached for his Farsight again—

The world exploded.

Caught off guard, he flung power into his shields, but he didn't have much to spare, gods, he hadn't realized how low his reserves were. He tried to center and ground, had to reach a node, but everything was white-hot pain and blinding light even through his eyelids—

*:Chosen!:*

He felt Yfandes flinging out a mental link, offering her own energy, and he tried to take it but his control was slipping. He flailed, and felt his shields crumple — there was the

worst pain he had ever felt, worse than a Gate, but only for a moment and then there was nothing.

#

*What just happened?*

Jonne's ears were ringing; his vision, when he opened his eyes, danced with spots. He lay twisted where he'd landed, flung backwards by some incredible force – he didn't actually remember landing, just flying through the air, so he must have lost consciousness at least for a moment. Every part of him hurt – which was actually a good sign. *Probably haven't broken my neck.* He wiggled his fingers and toes, making sure they obeyed him, then cautiously tested his limbs before trying to sit up.

*Ow.* He was going to be bruised black and blue – but he was alive. And didn't think he'd broken any bones, which had to be a miracle.

Blinking hard, he looked around. His vision was slowly clearing. The air was a haze of ash, glowing faintly with the light of several small fires. He saw a burned, twisted lump on the ground, and a moment later recognized the shape of a body. Whose? No time to find out now. No time to think about it.

*That was a mage-attack.* He couldn't think of anything else it could possibly have been. Where was Vanyel? Gods, was he all right? He tried to remember the sequence of events, it had happened in an instant – he'd seen a blaze of light, heard Vanyel cry out, started to turn, and then found himself airborne.

Footsteps. No, hoofbeats. He started scrabbling backwards, looking for somewhere to hide – and stopped when he recognized the white shape.

“Yfandes?” he said tentatively. She was favouring one leg, but looked otherwise unhurt. “Where's Vanyel? Is anyone else—”

His mouth clamped shut as he heard, no, felt, a voice – a voice in his head. It was a woman’s voice, dry and slightly husky, reminding him a little of his sister. *:Everyone else is dead. You and Vanyel are the only survivors:*

It took a moment to understand the words – and then he found his throat tightening. “Everyone?” he breathed.

*:Everyone. I’m sorry. But you need to move. Van’s hurt, and the Karsite Adept will be looking for him:*

Jonne scrambled to his feet, a burst of fear giving him strength. “Gods! He’s hurt? How badly? Where is he?”

*:Slow down. You need to stay calm. Follow me:*

His left knee hurt quite a lot, but he could walk. Yfandes paced through the haze, moving in remarkable silence, and he followed until they came to a clearing. *There wasn’t a clearing here before*, he thought dully, staring at the ground. It looked oddly glassy in the dim firelight.

Then he saw Vanyel lying in the center of it, sprawled like a broken doll, his Whites still smoldering a little.

“Van!” He ran to him, dropping to his knees, and shook him. “Van, wake up.” Three blackened, scorched bars crossed the front of his Whites, and the air stank of burned meat. His face was untouched, and he was breathing shallowly, but he didn’t stir.

*:I’ve been trying to rouse him. I can’t. Just get him into my saddle somehow. He’s not heavy:*

Vanyel was a head shorter than him, and slightly built, but Jonne was still surprised by how easy he was to lift. *He wasn’t this thin when we started out.* Cradling the Herald in his arms, he looked uncertainly at Yfandes.

She knelt. *:Just belt him in:*

Jonne tried to keep his breathing steady as he maneuvered Vanyel into the saddle and fastened the belt with shaking fingers.

*:Now get up on the pillion-pad and try to hold him on:* The voice in his head was calm, firm. *:I'll need to move fast. They're nearly here:*

He clambered up behind Vanyel and reached carefully around his body, gripping the pommel with one hand and gently clasping his chest with the other. He tried to avoid touching his burns, but gods, he was going to hurt him.

*:No better way. Hold on:*

Involuntarily, he squeezed his eyes shut as Yfandes rose and leapt forwards. A few seconds later, when they failed to hit anything, he dared open them.

The trees rushed by on either side, barely visible in the faint moonlight that shone through a haze of clouds, but for all the speed of her gallop, it was remarkably smooth. Still, Vanyel bounced in the saddle with every stride. He couldn't help wincing – gods, how much pain would he be in if he was conscious?

Yfandes galloped in silence for a few minutes, though it felt like much longer, and then she slowed and he 'heard' her voice in his head again.

*:Jonne, I need somewhere to bring him. The camp isn't safe. You know the area – can you think of anywhere?:*

He looked around, squinting, trying to find his bearings. There – he recognized the silhouette of that rock against the sky. "Oh! We're not far from my parents' old gem-mine. Less than a mile. Can we make it? I know a few caves closer by, but the mine has some supplies we stashed, I think. And it's not damp." He realized he was babbling, and closed his mouth.

*:Point the way, please:*

He directed her for a few minutes. Vanyel moaned a few times when she jumped obstacles and the landing jarred him, but he showed no sign of waking.

“What happened?” he said finally.

*:Damned Adept cast at a distance. Even I didn't sense it coming. Attack was concentrated on him, mage-lightning got through his shields. Reckon the rest of your people were just collateral damage. He was after Van:*

Jonne winced – at the reminder that he'd just lost his entire platoon, *no don't think about it yet*, and at the additional reminder that Vanyel was a target. “How did that happen? He's the strongest mage ever to have existed.”

*:Ever to have existed is probably a little much. He is very powerful – but he was exhausted:* Her mental voice grew tart. *:Thanks to what you've been asking of him:*

“I'm sorry.”

The voice softened. *:It's not your fault. And neither was this:*

He knew that, but it was hard to really believe it. All his people, dead... “Ascott and the others,” he said suddenly.

*:I warned them:*

“How?”

*:Same way I'm speaking to you:*

He hadn't really had time to be surprised by it in the moment. “I didn't know Companions could do that.”

*:We can do a lot of things:*

He fell silent, unable to think of an answer. “Turn left,” he said finally, pointing. “Almost there.” He knew he couldn't relax yet, they weren't out of danger. “Yfandes, why did

I survive?" It was catching up to him; he knew he ought to be glad, but all he could feel was crushing guilt.

*:I imagine it was Van's shield-token that he gave you:*

Oh. "I owe him my life," he said slowly. "I mean, I'm sure we all did, a dozen times over, but..." It felt different.

*:And he owes you his. I couldn't have gotten him out of there without you:*

He found himself blinking, his eyes stinging. Stupid. Why did this make him want to cry, when he hadn't yet shed any tears for the deaths of his entire platoon?

"We're there," he said, a little thickly, and pointed. The entrance wasn't visible at all; in the time since they had left, vines had grown over it. It was a good thing, he thought; it would make them harder to find.

*:Get him down:*

She knelt again, and he slipped down from the pillion pad. Vanyel moaned again and mumbled something incomprehensible as Jonne gently unbelted him.

"Van, it's all right. You're safe. I'm going to have to carry you inside – I'm sorry, I know it's going to hurt you." He looked at Yfandes, meeting her eyes. "I don't think you'll fit."

*:It's all right. They won't find me:* He felt her wry amusement. *:I can be quite hard to see when I want:*

He found it hard to imagine, Companions were very conspicuous, but oddly he believed her.

*:Take his bag. It's tied to the side:*

He nodded and unfastened the leather satchel, struggling with the straps in the dark, and swung it over his shoulder before reaching to lift Vanyel again. He felt a lot heavier this time – the strength that came with shock and fear had faded. It wasn't far, though.

He picked his way carefully to the doorway, terrified of dropping the Herald if he stumbled, and managed to shove through the vines. Inside was pitchy black. *I know we left candles and a tinderbox by the door.* Unable to think of a better option, he set Vanyel carefully on the dry, uneven stone floor before feeling around at waist-height for the shelf he knew was there.

It took five tries to land a spark on the cottonseed fluff from the tinderbox. He cupped one hand around it, blowing gently until a tiny flame rose on the shelf, then lit one of the sturdy candles. He used it to light three more, for good measure, and moved around sticking them into wall-sconces. He would come back later and extinguish or move them, the light might be visible through the vines, but right now he needed it.

He didn't want to leave Vanyel, but he *really* didn't want to negotiate the narrow stairway in the dark. He knelt by him for a moment, touching his cheek. "Hey. Van. I'll be right back."

Hurrying down the stairs he remembered so well, he lit the candles at each landing. Reaching the bottom, he turned and scrambled back up. *Ow.* He was starting to feel the bruises again.

He crouched to lift Vanyel again – and the Herald's eyes flew open. For a moment Vanyel just stared at him, blankly with no sign of recognition, one hand lifting–

"It's all right, you're safe," Jonne said, a little frantically. *He could kill me with a thought.* "Van, it's just me. Jonne."

Vanyel blinked a few times, and sense came into his eyes. “Oh,” he said faintly, letting his hand fall back to the floor.

“You’re injured. I need to move you. I’m really sorry, I know it’s not going to be comfortable.”

“S’okay.” Vanyel closed his eyes again. Jonne lifted him as carefully as he could – and saw him biting his lip, beads of sweat popping up on his brow.

Getting down the stairs was an ordeal. Jonne nearly lost his footing a few times, and Vanyel whimpered every time he jarred him. *I would be screaming*, Jonne thought. However Vanyel had picked up this incredible discipline, it was good – there might still be search parties close enough to hear.

He reached the bottom – well, not the bottom, but the first level. This had been a natural cave at one point, though they had enlarged the entrance and his father’s workers had chiseled out the steps. The mine itself kept going down, but their workstation had been here. The candlelight showed him a low space with a ceiling that sloped down until it nearly met the floor at the edge. A few crates were stacked in the corner, and against one wall, there was a cot. It was where they had brought injured miners to stabilize them before transporting them out, and he remembered his father napping there sometimes between shifts. *He always had to speak to the workers at every shift change.*

He laid Vanyel down on the bare mattress. It smelled musty, and crackled. “I’ll find you a blanket, and then I need to go up and blow out the candles before anyone sees.” And he didn’t know how long they would be here, or how many extra candles were packed with the supplies. He couldn’t afford to waste them.

Vanyel nodded, eyes still closed. Jonne grabbed the nearest candle and carried it over to the crates, playing its light over them. “Blankets, blankets...” They were all labeled with

charcoal markings, in his father's shorthand. "Here, I think." His voice echoed oddly as he clamped the candle between two fingers and reached to lift the crate down. He had been right – it held wool blankets, also musty, but perfectly usable.

He replaced the candle in its sconce by the cot, and draped two blankets over the Herald. "Warm enough?"

Another nod.

"I'll be right back. I promise."

#

Vanyel stared at the candle-flame, watching it waver in his vision. Focus on the light. Focus on anything except the incredible, spectacular amount of pain he was feeling.

*:I'm with you, Chosen:*

He clung to Yfandes' mindvoice. Gods, how was it possible to hurt this much? *Tran was burned worse than this*, he thought dully. *How is he still sane?*

*:It's going to be all right. This is the worst part:*

Earlier, Jonne had found some shears and cut away his Whites, except for the strips that were quite literally burned onto his flesh, then had gone to hunt for painkillers and come back with only a flask of apple-brandey, from which he had given Vanyel a few swigs. He thought longingly of his bottle of argonel, left behind at the camp.

Jonne had lit a fire in the small stove, drawn water from the well, boiled it, and mixed it with a little of the brandey. He was using it to soak the charred cloth until it loosened and peel it slowly away.

*He hates hurting me.* Vanyel was trying as hard as he could not to scream each time; Jonne had told him it was all right, they were deep enough underground that no one would hear him. *And I won't think worse of you at all*, he'd assured him. Still, he didn't want to

make the man's job any harder. Jonne had apologized over and over, until Vanyel told him through gritted teeth to please stop and just get it over with.

"Almost done." Another blinding bolt of pain, and then it receded a little. "I'll give you a rest before I try cleaning them. More brandy?"

"Please." At least he could be drunk and in pain.

Jonne helped him prop his head up and held the flask to his lips. Vanyel gulped it eagerly, trying not to choke. His stomach wasn't pleased about it, but that was the least of his problems right now.

He took a deep breath. "How bad?"

Jonne sighed. "The burns are deep, but it's not a lot of skin area. If we can stave off infection, it ought to heal all right. Though you'll have scars." His eyes played over Vanyel's torso. "Probably not as bad as some of the others."

"I do...collect them." It was difficult to speak; every tiny movement hurt. The alcohol was going to his head now; the bed seemed to rotate gently, but it wasn't unpleasant. "Jonne, I..." He reached out. "Glad you're here."

"I'm glad I'm here, too." Jonne took his hand and squeezed. "Without your spell I'd be a smear on the ground." The lieutenant smiled. Even with his hair full of ash, bruised, blood crusted on his face from cuts on his forehead and cheek, he was incredibly handsome.

"You're very handsome." *I really didn't mean to say that out loud*, Vanyel thought a moment later.

Jonne's eyes widened just a little. "Oh. Um. I— Gods, if you must know, you're the most beautiful man I've ever met." He scrubbed a hand across his face. "Well, now that's out there."

Vanyel smirked, and decided it was too much effort to tell Jonne he was cute when he blushed. “Were you...flirting with me? Before?”

Jonne blinked. “Maybe a little, but I didn’t want to be inappropriate–”

“You knew...that I’m *shay’a’chern*.”

“What? I’m sorry, I have no idea what that word means.”

“That I...prefer men.” It was hard to catch his breath. *Gods, I am very drunk*. He couldn’t bring himself to care.

“I mean, yes, I heard stories. Wasn’t sure. Didn’t want to offend you.”

Vanyel felt his smile broaden. “Didn’t want...to offend you either. Guess I was...being stupid.”

Jonne actually laughed. “Guess we both were. Well, nothing like a near-death experience to loosen the tongue.”

Vanyel took a breath, let it out. “Kiss me?”

“Right now? Are you sure? I’ll hurt you–”

“Please. Could use...a distraction.”

“Well, if you insist.”

Later, Vanyel would have to admit that it had been a very awkward first kiss. It was hard for it to be otherwise, with him flat on his back, unable to move, and Jonne trying to figure out where to put his hands and avoid leaning any weight on him.

‘Lendel would have thought it was hilarious – and the thought hurt, but only a little, in a bittersweet way.

After what felt like a wonderfully long time, he winced, pulling away. “Ow.”

“Sorry!”

“S’okay... I asked.”

Jonne looked like he was trying not to grin. “I hope that was as distracting as you hoped.” He hesitated. “I do need to clean your burns. I’ll unpack some more of the supplies, I’m sure my sister left one of her salves here. Maybe I’ll even find real painkillers. Want a splash more brandy first?”

“Please.”

#

*An icy wasteland—*

(He was incredibly not in the mood for this, Vanyel thought with irritation. He was exhausted, drunk, and the evening had shown he had absolutely no ability to control what came out of his mouth. At least it didn’t hurt much, here – he could feel the pain in his real body, distantly, but it seemed to belong to someone else.)

*“Herald Vanyel.”*

*“Leareth.”*

*They exchanged nods, and Vanyel turned and shaped a stool to sit. He summoned a heat-spell.*

(He’d noticed that ‘magic’ in the dream always felt easy, even when he was drained. Well, it wasn’t real. He had given up trying to make sense of the whole thing.)

*“I hear you did very well in your first battle,” Leareth said, forming his own stool.*

*“Congratulations. You are a very talented mage. A hero to your people.” He paused.*

*“Though I expect that does not please you especially. How are you finding war, Herald Vanyel?”*

*“If you must know, it’s horrible.” His voice cracked, and he found himself blinking away tears.*

(Control, damn it. Center and ground. He tried to lean into the cold peace of the dream, letting it numb his raw emotions.)

*“I agree.” Leareth leaned forwards a little, his dark hair swaying in the wind. “War is a blight on the world. A pointless waste of lives and resources.”*

*“And yet you’re sitting there with an army at your back,” Vanyel snapped.*

*Leareth smiled thinly. “Yes. You know this was not my preferred path, and it was not the first thing I tried, nor the second or third. At some point, one realizes that the only way to fix something, to truly make it better, is to cause more suffering in the short run.”*

(Vanyel thought of Jonne apologizing as he cleaned his burns, and almost laughed at the irony of it.)

*“I would still prefer a different way,” Leareth said slowly. “To negotiate with you, if I can. You will be a hero of your kingdom, Herald Vanyel. You already have the ear of your King. Congratulations on your promotion to the senior Council, by the way.”*

(Vanyel barely managed not to snap something about how Leareth had to rub in how good his spies were. He didn’t even think it was true; he suspected Leareth very cagey about what he revealed. Keep your composure, he reminded himself. Focus.)

*“In any case. You will soon be in a position where you truly can speak for Valdemar. I wish you to know that this offer is always open.”*

*Vanyel nodded. “I’ll think about it.”*

*“You still do not trust me.” Leareth’s voice was calm, thoughtful. “I cannot fault you for it. It is correct, given your priors and the information you have, and the onus is on myself to provide full information so that you may make your choice. There is a chasm I must cross, to build that trust, and perhaps it is impossible. Nevertheless, I wish to try.”*

(That was one way of putting it. Vanyel wanted to think it was impossible, it would have been simpler, easier – but, damn it, did he really know that Leareth was in the wrong? Wasn't the onus on him, as well, to seek the information he needed? No matter how unreasonable a thing it was for the gods to ask of him, if the gods were even on Valdemar's side – but that wasn't the point. Fairness wasn't the point. Only the results mattered.)

*“Perhaps we should not speak of this tonight,” Leareth said finally. “What do wish to speak of?”*

(The answer was nothing. He couldn't summon any interest in theoretical dilemmas in ethics, or even military strategy, for all that it might have been useful. But he didn't feel like waiting the dream out in silence, either – and wouldn't it reveal weakness, if Leareth knew how little he felt up for this?)

*“You could tell me a story,” he said evenly. “About your past experiences with war. I would be very curious.”*

*Leareth's eyebrows rose very slightly. “What will you offer in return?”*

*He shrugged. “I'll sing you a new song.”*

(His Bardic Gift didn't work in the dream, but oddly enough, Leareth seemed to like music, even without the accompaniment of his lute. Maybe he shouldn't have been confused – he ought to find very little about the man surprising by now.)

*“I will take that offer. What would you sing for me?”*

*Vanyel thought for a moment. “The song is called ‘The Shadow-Lover’.”*

(He had been curious for a long time about how Leareth would react to that song. And hesitated, because it felt like it must give something away – but he'd sung nearly fifty songs for the mage by now, everything from tragic love ballads to bawdy tavern choruses, his choice of another fairly popular Valdemaran song couldn't reveal all that much.)

*When he finished singing, Leareth was silent for a long moment.*

*“It is about Death?” he asked finally.*

*“That’s the standard interpretation, yes.”*

*“Strange. I would not have thought to find it moving.”*

*“I don’t think you’re the intended audience.”*

*“You might be surprised.” Leareth’s gaze was as calm as ever – but Vanyel thought there was sadness in his black eyes. “I do not wish to die. Yet I understand why a person might wish to leave this world behind, when it is so full of horrors, and most people do not believe that it can ever be repaired, certainly not that they might do it themselves. I suppose that my reaction to those horrors has always been defiance, that I will not let this uncaring world deter me.” He sighed; it was barely noticeable, a slight rise and fall of his chest, but it was definitely a sigh. “It is a great privilege to exist, and to be in a position where perhaps I can carve those horrors out of the world forever. I would never waste that chance. Yet it is also a burden. It would be a betrayal of all that I care about, to set that burden down before the work is done, before I have tried everything that is possible – and yet, I do wish for my work to be complete, so that I might finally stop. Rest.”*

(Vanyel focused hard on the words, trying to fix them in his memory. It felt important, maybe one of the most important things Leareth had ever said to him, though he couldn’t put his finger on why.)

*“And so I think I understand the song,” Leareth said finally, “though I would not put my trust in any deity.” He paused. “I suppose it is my turn. I would tell you of a time long ago, in a place the name of which I will not share...”*

Vanyel woke to dim candlelight, tears drying on his cheeks. He tried to sit up, and immediately thought better of it, instead turning his head to survey the room. Jonne was asleep on the stone floor, under one of the blankets. He was hurting again, and it was very distracting, but he pushed it away, focusing on his breathing.

*:’Fandes?:*

She must have been already awake. *:Yes, Chosen?:*

*:Dream. Don’t have paper. Want to remember it, can we go through it?:*

#

Vanyel dipped a toe into the steaming water, and sighed. “Jonne, I can’t believe you didn’t tell me sooner there were hot springs!”

Jonne, as par for the course, looked like he was trying not to grin from ear to ear. “Well, you’d have tried to go in, and your burns weren’t healed enough.” He looked pointedly at Vanyel’s bare torso. “I’m amazed by how quickly they did heal.”

“Told you, I’ve got a bit of Healing Gift.” He had been spending candlemarks every day in trance, doing focused self-Healing, and he would have recovered faster than an ordinary person anyway. There was a reason Healers didn’t often fall ill. Jonne had found his sister’s salve, as well, and it really was excellent – in any case, though the three diagonal stripes across his chest and stomach were still scabbed and swollen, there was healthy new skin underneath. Hideous skin, it was an angry red, but nonetheless. With some effort, he could probably push his body to keep Healing until they were barely visible. He hadn’t bothered in the past except when the scar tissue interfered with movement, like the time he’d taken an arrow to the shoulder back in 785. It was time-consuming, and he didn’t see the point in vanity anymore.

*:Except your face:* Yfandes teased. *:You spent weeks on that gash the bandit out west gave you:*

He smiled despite himself. He still let her listen in on his surface thoughts, though he'd been trying to shield her from how he felt physically, there was no reason for her to share his pain. *:Everyone sees my face. Apart from Healers and various Hawkbrothers, who don't care, all of five people have seen me nude in the last nine years:* Tantras, Daystar, two brief and unsatisfactory flings back in Haven, and now Jonne.

*:Six if you count Savil:*

*:Savil doesn't count. That's like my mother seeing me naked:*

Jonne smirked. "What's she telling you off for now?"

He smiled back. "Can't tell if it's for my vanity or my lack thereof."

"Vanity, huh? Can't say I've seen much of that. Dignity, now, that's a different story. You wear it like armour." He stepped all the way into the pool and then reached for Vanyel's hand. "You know, I consider it a privilege to know the real you. Mostly. You've clearly got depths I haven't plumbed. Anyway, come on."

It wasn't quite like k'Treva. There was a harsh, chemical smell in the air, for one, and the water was milky and felt oddly slippery as he slid under.

"It's full of minerals," Jonne said, noticing his look of distaste as he rubbed his hands together. "Folklore says it'll cure anything. My sister said that was a load of horseshit, but you never know."

It stung on his still-raw skin, but not too badly, and the rest was worth it; he could feel the joint-aches from days in bed slipping away.

"Come here, you." Jonne pulled him onto his lap. "Heard it's good for certain other things as well..."

A candlemark later, they made their way back through the winding passage to the main room. Vanyel was quite lightheaded after spending too long in the hot water. Jonne had an arm around him, holding him steady.

“You have to admit,” Vanyel said, “that could have gone better.”

Jonne’s eyebrows rose. “What? I contest that anything could possibly be better than making love in a hot spring.”

“For one, I’ll never get the taste of that water out of my mouth. Also, you nearly drowned me.”

“I didn’t realize the bottom was that slippery. Besides, I rescued you.”

“Don’t think it counts as ‘rescuing’ if you caused the situation in the first place.”

“I resent that.”

The banter went back and forth for a few minutes until they reached the large cavern, and Vanyel sat down heavily on the cot. Jonne brought him a cup of water. He’d almost gotten used to the mineral taste by now.

“We should go soon,” he said after he had drunk it and set the cup aside. “I’m better. We don’t know what the situation is like out there. Need to check in.” He hadn’t been able to reach any of the relays, and even his link with Yfandes went in and out; apparently enough rock could block Mindspeech. “They must think you’re dead.” They would know *he* wasn’t dead, since the Death Bell hadn’t rung for him, but still, he’d been completely out of touch for five days. Lissa had to be worried sick. Gods, if word had gotten back to Savil–

Jonne sat down next to him and took his hand. “We don’t know what the situation is out there. Meaning there could be Karsite troops everywhere, and you’re better but you’re

nowhere near well. Yfandes says you've still got barely any reserves, because you're burning all your energy on Healing."

He rolled his eyes. "I wish she hadn't gotten into the habit of talking to you. She tattles."

"I'm being serious, Van. I'm worried about our safety if we leave now. What happened out there? It's because you were worn out. Because I asked too much of you, and it nearly killed you."

He turned to meet the other man's concerned eyes. "Jonne, I'm a Herald. This is my duty."

"I know. And it's your duty not to get killed doing something stupid, because your King needs you. Van, two or three more days won't change anything."

"It might." He took a deep breath, trying not to fidget. "It could make a very big difference, if the Karsites attack in the next two or three days, and this section of Border isn't guarded."

"What, are you serious? We're two people. We're not going to singlehandedly change the course of the war."

He closed his eyes. "Anyone else, sure. I'm different."

"Right." A hesitation. "You are, aren't you. I..." He trailed off.

"Gods!" Vanyel slammed his fist down on the mattress. "I hate it, Jonne. I hate being the most powerful mage in the Kingdom. All it's ever brought me is trouble and pain – but they do need me. I couldn't ever live with myself if I stayed here longer than I needed and we lost the war."

"Don't be melodramatic. Vanyel, listen. We can recover from losing a battle; we can't get you back if we lose you."

He sighed. “Fine. I won’t be good for much offensive magic for a while longer. I can still do other useful work.”

“And what’s going to happen if you do check in with your commanding officer? They’ll send you out on some fool mission you aren’t ready for, because they won’t have a choice. Because there aren’t enough mages and you’re needed everywhere. And maybe your luck will hold and you’ll be fine, but I really don’t want to press it, all right?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jonne, you aren’t my keeper.”

“No, but I am your friend. I don’t want you to die, and I especially don’t want you to die because you were being an idiot.”

Was he being an idiot?

*:You’re being an idiot: Yfandes sent, tartly. :Have a look at your reserves:*

*:Doesn’t matter. I can use nodes:*

*:Oh? What did you tell Moondance about that?:*

Vanyel sighed. “Fine. Two days.”

“Only if you can make it up the stairs by yourself.”

He smiled despite himself. “That’s not fair. Those stairs are completely unreasonable.” He’d tried to go up the day before, to see Yfandes and make contact with Ruvi or Umbria, and made it only ten steps before giving up and sliding down on his rump. Which, he had to admit, was funny in hindsight.

“If you can’t handle stairs, you absolutely can’t handle a battlefield, Van.”

“I can so handle stairs. Normal stairs. Not that death-trap your father built. He must have been a sadist.”

“Or a masochist. Did I ever tell you? He used to go down for the start of every shift to talk to his workers. He wouldn’t go longer than six-candlemark shifts, said he tried and it just made injuries and mistakes go up. Four times a day, up and down.”

“Clearly he was just insane.” Vanyel snorted. “Could be where you get it from. You must be, to be attracted to a scrawny scarecrow like me.” He hadn’t realized how much weight he had lost until he took all his clothes off, which he hadn’t done for weeks except in the dark.

“Yet again, you can’t ever say anything good about yourself.” Jonne reached up, cupping his chin. “You have the most incredible eyes. Maybe the rest of you does look like a scarecrow, but I could stare at your eyes all day.”

Vanyel shook his head a little. “You’re hopeless.” Gods, it felt good just to sit and hold someone’s hand.

## Chapter Eight

“Keiran,” Randale said. “Update on our numbers and troop placements?”

The Lord Marshal’s Herald nodded and spread out her papers. “We’ve finished the redeployment. Three thousand of the Guard are now on the southern border. Major Alban is still posted at the relay in Dog Inn, and is our point of contact with all other forces. Major Lissa Ashkevron has a full battalion at Horn, three companies of infantry and one of cavalry. She has Herald-Mages Mardic and Donni on call for emergency redeployments – we have secured Gate-terminus locations at South Hardorn, Crescent Lake, Sun’s Hill, and Chapel Hill Crossing. We no longer have a secure terminus at Terilee Crossing and we cannot guarantee Victrin Fell. We recently promoted Captain Chana to major and gave her two companies at Sun’s Hill...”

Savil leaned back in her chair and listened, occasionally checking her memory against the map spread on the table and scribbling notes on her scrap of paper.

“Casualties in the last week?” the King asked when she had finished.

“Thirty-seven dead and one hundred and five wounded confirmed with Captain Terin’s people at Chapel Hill. Sixty-two presumed dead from Lieutenant Jonne’s forces at Terilee

Crossing, unconfirmed. We also lost Herald Navine and Herald Talla. Herald Vanyel is still missing.”

Savil winced. She hadn’t known until *after* news of the attack that Vanyel had been moved to the Terilee Crossing stretch – only Tantras and Randale had known. *He’s alive*, she reminded herself. They would know if he had died.

“Thank you.” Randale laid his palms flat on the table. “I do have good news – well, as good as anything can be in this mess. The Council has officially approved increasing the Guard to wartime levels. We’ll be sending the announcement out by Mindspeech-relay tomorrow. Initially I would prefer we ask for volunteers only, and see if we can make our required numbers.” He glanced at Keiran.

“Which is ten thousand,” she said smoothly. Savil drew in her breath. She had known about the decision, but not the details – they would be *tripling* the size of the army in one swoop. “I propose that we wait two weeks for preliminary enlistment numbers, and if we haven’t hit five thousand, we do institute a draft.”

Randale leaned forwards. “I would prefer a month.”

“We can’t afford to wait that long. It takes between one and three months to train a new recruit as a basic infantryman, and at least six months for a skirmisher.”

Randale sighed. “We’ll look at it again in two weeks, then. Jaysen, an update on the Treasury, please?”

The Seneschal’s Herald sat up straighter. “Well, we’ll be increasing taxes this year,” he said, sourly. “Meaning we ought to work on preparing the Council for it now. I don’t think we’ll have to push through a general mid-year tax, but we ought to think about offering harvest-tax reductions for landholdings near the Border that can provide supplies now. We

have sufficient stores here in Haven to keep the troops resupplied for a year, but transporting them is very costly.”

*You can say that again*, Savil thought. She had been raising a Gate every four days, the tightest interval she could manage, so that supplies and personnel could be moved around. *Twenty years ago I could've handled one every day*. Yet another unwanted reminder that she was getting older, that her stamina wasn't what it had used to be.

“I'll have a detailed budget proposal for the troop increases in three days,” Jaysen went on. “It's not going to be pretty, but we can cover it.”

Randale nodded. “Thank you. Tantras, news from Rethwellan and Hardorn?”

The King's Own fidgeted with his papers. “We received word back from our envoy to Rethwellan. They're officially neutral. Unofficially, they very much don't want Karsite troops anywhere near their border, and will be using their diplomatic channels to strongly discourage that. Meaning we may be able to cut our numbers at Bakerston.”

Savil sucked in her breath. It was a big risk – but they had to take it. *We're badly outnumbered*. The Heralds did a great deal to compensate for it – but the Karsites had their damned priest-mages.

Tantras shrugged. “Hardorn is still waffling. We're on better terms with them, but after their recent difficulties, King Festil can't offer us much even if they do choose to ally with us.”

“Noted,” Randale said. “Thank you. Katha?”

Herald Katha had been promoted to the Senior Circle along with Vanyel. She had no official title, but then again, it was better for as few people as possible to know who their spymaster was.

The young woman looked very nervous. She licked her lips. “We’ve still been having a difficult time slipping anyone into their official hierarchy. Cultural differences – our people stand out, and if they draw too much attention to themselves they usually die. Herald Joana’s found a position as a camp cook at Sweetsprings. She’s able to tell us that they’ve gathered two thousand troops there, and can warn us of large movements and any gossip she overhears, but obviously doesn’t have access to any of their strategy planning. Herald Kieran is a low-level clerk at their garrison in the Jaysong Hills. Again, he can pass on anything he happens to observe, but has no access to classified information. We have a number of non-Heralds in other low-level placements, including a Healer at Warford. The communication loop is more challenging, but we have a system of coded message drops that presents minimal risk to them.” She was staring down at the table, one finger tapping out a beat. “I’ve been trying to recruit spies from Sun’s Hill and other towns near the Border that were once Karsite territory. Helps if our people look and sound right.” She looked up anxiously. “I think that’s all.

“Very good, Katha,” Randale said, smiling at her encouragingly. “Savil, run me through where our Heralds are deployed?”

She pulled herself up in the chair and took a deep breath. *You are not going to yawn.* “Starting at South Hardorn, we have—”

There was a knock on the door. “Message for the King!” a piping voice announced  
Randale sighed. “Is it urgent?”

“Yes!”

“Come in.”

The page who opened the door looked about nine. Herald Tantras rose smoothly and went to take the sealed envelope that he held out.

Savil ran her Othersenses over it briefly before relaxing. She had been very paranoid about even official Palace messages after the attempt on Vanyel's life.

Tantras opened it carefully and dumped the contents out onto the table. He read the note, and a smile transformed his face.

"We've had contact with Vanyel," he said quietly. "He's at the town of Victrin Fell, awaiting further orders. Says he was badly injured in a fight with a Karsite mage, most likely that one Adept who's been ruining our lives for months, and went to ground until he was recovered. Lieutenant Jonne is also alive, and Vanyel claims he's the only reason he survived at all. Unfortunately, all but three of his platoon were killed."

Savil sagged back in her chair, listening to the sighs of relief all around the room.

"That is very, very good news," Randale said. "Keiran, please think about where we can reassign this Lieutenant Jonne. Sounds like a promotion may be in order. Savil, go on."

#

"So?" Tantras said quietly. "How are you holding up?"

Shavri looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "Fine."

Tantras frowned at her. "Fine fine, or is it like when Vanyel says he's fine?"

That startled a smile out of her. "No, I – well, I'm managing. Can't say I'm happy about the state of things. Who is?" She pulled her legs up onto the chair, folding them under her. "I could wish a lot of things were different, but if wishes were fishes we'd never go hungry."

Tantras chuckled. "There is that. Listen, though... If you ever need to talk, I'm here."

She shrugged. "Why do you care? It's not your job to look after me."

"It is my job to look after Randi, though. And you're the center of his life."

She shook her head. “I’m not. Valdemar is.” *I hate it*, she thought silently, *I hate it and it’s selfish of me but damn it, I want my lifebonded back.*

“You’d be surprised. Shavri, he only ever looks happy, really happy, when he talks about you.” Tantras ran a hand through his hair. “He doesn’t want to be King. He’s doing his duty, and I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone who met an unwanted duty so gracefully – but you’re what he lives for.”

She looked away. “I shouldn’t be.”

“Why not? You’re a pretty incredible person.”

She fidgeted with the hem of her robes. “I’m just a Healer.”

“One of the strongest Gifted Healers in Haven, and certainly the smartest. I’ve asked Gemma about your research. You’re very talented. And you’re a wonderful mother and a caring friend.”

“None of that matters.” Her throat felt tight. “I’m not the right person for *this*. I hate politics. Have to grit my teeth and bear it every time Randi wants to talk about his godforsaken Council meetings, and if I have to hear one more thing about troop placements...” She trailed off. “I’m doing my best, but I – I’m not good enough. I’m not who he needs.”

There was a brief silence.

“Look at me, Shavri,” Tantras said quietly. She looked up, forcing herself to meet his eyes. He licked his lips, his eyes flicking to the side and back; he seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “Shavri, lifebonds happen for a reason. You’re *exactly* the person Randale needs.”

“Do they, though?” Her voice came out sharper than she’d intended. “Because I’ve been thinking about that, Tantras. Van was lifebonded, and he lost Tyrendel and he’s not

going to get over that *ever*. And I – I hate to even think about it, but what happened, it’s the reason he is what he is. It’s how he became the most powerful mage we’ve ever seen, and – and it’s the only reason we have any hope at all. For what’s coming.” Shaking, she wrapped her arms around her knees. The room felt suddenly cold. “And, just, if lifebonds happen for a reason, if the Hawkbrothers are right and it’s a sign the gods are meddling – do I have to believe that the rest happened for a reason as well? That, that Van needed to be lifebonded to a mage, so Tylendel could tie a Gate to him and rip his mind open, and, and the gods didn’t *care* if ‘Lendel had to die! Didn’t care that Van’s going to be hurting for the rest of his life – that he’ll be *relieved* to call down a Final Strike.” She dabbed at her eyes, annoyed by the pointless tears. “Because if that’s true, I don’t want to be in this world.”

Tantras had looked away, staring at a wall hanging.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a small voice.

“No, it’s– I’m sorry.” Tantras looked up. “I hadn’t... Gods, please tell me you never told Van that.”

“I’m not stupid.” *But neither is he*. He had to have thought of it too. She didn’t want to imagine what that was like. Gods, it was awful, selfish of her, but she was glad that Vanyel was so private about his feelings, that he rarely talked about it at all. *I can’t bear even a fraction of his pain. How does he bear all of it?*

Tantras sighed. “I don’t know, Shavri. It was a mess. But it’s not the same thing at all, with you and Randi. You can support him better than anyone else.”

“No.” She clenched her hands together until her knuckles turned white. “Don’t you see? I’m a *weakness* for him. If we were just in love, like normal people, he could lose me, and find someone else and be all right. But if I die, it would break him. And it’s not a secret that we’re bonded, so I’m a target.”

Tantras was silent for a long moment.

“Sorry,” he said finally, his voice a little uneven. “I’m not – well, I’m not Lancir, I’m no good at this. I am glad you told me. Didn’t realize how much it was bothering you.”

She nodded, biting her lip. *Don’t cry.* It had been embarrassing enough already.

“Listen. I – Maybe you feel like Randi should have had someone else, but he has you. That’s the state of things, whether or not the gods had any hand of it.”

She switched to Mindspeech; her throat was too tight to speak. *:It’s not fair:*

*:No, it isn’t. I’m sorry, Shavri:* And he really was, you couldn’t lie with Mindspeech, but there was no hint of pity. He didn’t think less of her. *:We have to start with how things are. I’m willing to do whatever I can to make this easier for you:*

She nodded, eyes still brimming with tears. *:Thank you. I guess if I’m not the person Randi needs, I have to try to become her:* It felt impossible – but it was easier than what Van had to bear, so who was she to complain?

#

Donni snapped awake and lay perfectly still, eyes closed. She’d never been quick at waking before – but war had changed that. When you knew you were never totally safe, you learned.

She relaxed when she sensed Mardic, nearby. He was just settling onto his haunches; it must have been his entry to the tent that had woken her.

She rolled over. *:Morning. What time is it?:*

*:Couple candlemarks to noon:* His mindvoice sounded very alert.

She sat up with a jerk. “Gods! Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You needed the sleep.” He reached to ruffle her hair. “You were worn out after yesterday.” They’d had to Gate reinforcements to Crescent Lake after a surprise attack there.

“So were you.” Though she’d had it worse, Donni had to admit. Gates were always harder on her; she wasn’t sure why, their mage-gifts were near equal strength. It was frustrating. *At least I’m better at everything else.* A little uncharitable, and not quite true, but it made her feel better.

“Well, I managed to get out of the tent without waking you, figured I’d make sure everyone left you alone. They haven’t needed both of us.” He sighed, picking at a fingernail. “Let’s check our reserves?”

She nodded and reached to take his hand, throwing him a mental link as well and parting her shields to let him into full rapport. Felt the *snap* as their mage-auras merged; they’d learned to do it in seconds.

She ‘held’ the link while Mardic poked around. *:Could be worse. I’m telling Major Lissa we can’t Gate today, but we ought to be able to use nodes if we have to:*

She agreed. There was a sucking emptiness deep inside her – before this war, she’d have swallowed her pride taken a day’s leave if she felt this drained – but the Gate-backlash had cleared, and between the two of them, they could spare enough to safely control node-power.

“Strategy meeting in a candlemark,” Mardic said out loud. “Figured I’d wash up a bit.” The bathing facilities at the camp weren’t much, and they rarely had time anyway. His hair hung in lank, oily strands against scalp, and his scruffy beard didn’t quite hide the new hollows under his cheekbones. He’d lost the hint of a paunch he’d acquired once they were in their twenties. Donni had always been very slender, but now there were new hollows under her ribs. On Guard rations, it was difficult to eat enough to compensate for the amount of magic they were using.

“I’ll join you.” Though she wanted food first; she was ravenous.

He smiled. "Let's go, then."

With her cloak slung over the simple cotton tunic she'd been wearing to sleep in, she followed him through the camp, detouring past the mess tent to grab some bread and hard cheese.

"I forgot to tell you." Mardic reached to take her free hand as she ate with the other. "Van's back in touch. He's at Victrin Fell."

"Oh." To her surprise, she felt almost faint with relief. She chewed and swallowed, wishing she'd thought to bring her cup and get some watered wine as well; the bread was stale. "Is he all right?" They had both been assuming he was hurt badly, or else he would have checked in sooner.

"Says one of the Karsite mages caught him by surprise, got a levinbolt through his shields before he could reach a node."

"Gods." They must have really caught him off guard; she doubted anyone in the world could get past Van's shields when he was prepared. "You spoke to him directly?"

"Yes."

"...How did he seem?"

Mardic shrugged and switched to Mindspeech. *:Exhausted, of course. But surprisingly happy. Think he's made a friend:*

She smirked. *:What kind of friend?:*

*:Yes, that kind. I'm pretty sure. Some Guardsman called Jonne. Didn't say anything directly, of course, he wouldn't, but, overtones:*

*:I'm happy for him: A battlefield romance sounded stressful and tiring, but if he was happy... :And I'm glad he's all right:*

*:Same: Mardic squeezed her hand. :Maybe they'll even assign him here for a bit:*

Donni doubted it. There were too many sectors under-covered. She said nothing, though.

“Look!” Mardic pointed. “Bathhouse’s free.”

It hardly deserved the name ‘bathhouse’ – a simple, open-roofed canvas cube with a foldable canvas tub inside, and the water was cold. Could they spare enough magic to heat it?

“I’m saying we can,” Mardic announced. “Been wanting a hot bath for months. Figure we’ll both fit?”

She grinned. “Oh, definitely.”

#

*This is not how I hoped today would go.*

Vanyel was bent over the latrine trench; it felt like his stomach was trying to turn itself inside out. The nausea had hit him suddenly and violently during a strategy-meeting, and he’d excused himself and bolted out.

Footsteps behind him. “Van, you all right?” Jonne’s voice. *Damn it, why did he have to follow me? This is humiliating enough already.* He held up a hand, unable to speak.

He felt Jonne’s hand on the back of his neck, scooping his hair back and holding it.

“Hey, you’re okay. Just breathe.”

He coughed, spat. “Why aren’t you...in the meeting?”

“Because Herald Jores sent me to make sure you were all right.”

“I’m fine.” He straightened up. “Let’s go back.”

“How about we don’t go back?” Jonne passed him a waterskin; grateful, he took a swig and rinsed his mouth. “There. Better?”

“Yes.” No. He felt faint, and all he wanted to do was lie down. And his nose was running. He dug for a handkerchief.

“Van, you should see a Healer.”

He grimaced. “It’s probably just nerves, or something I ate.”

“You haven’t eaten today.”

He glanced at the angle of the sun; it had to be past noon. “I’m sure I have.”

“You haven’t. I sat with you at breakfast and you just stared at it.”

It was hard to keep track; the days all blurred together. Gods, he was dizzy. It was early summer now, and far too hot.

“Van, you were sick yesterday as well. Something’s wrong.”

“Fine. I’ll go see a Healer.” Just to get Jonne to stop nagging him about it. At least he’d been shielding Yfandes out. “They’re going to tell me Guard rations don’t agree with me and there’s nothing I can do about it.” His stomach had behaved itself while he and Jonne were staying in the mine, but he had to admit that he hadn’t been feeling well most of the last week. To make matters worse, he still had a splitting reaction-headache, and it had kept him awake half the night. They’d been at Victrin Fell a week, awaiting further orders; in the meantime there was always too much for him to do. At least he’d gotten his things back, though not the nice tent – Ascott had thoughtfully hobbled in and taken his saddlebags and lute before escaping and making her own way with the other two to Victrin Fell.

It felt like a very long way to the green Healers’ tent. A girl who couldn’t have been more than fifteen, in greens robes too long for her, was standing outside.

“Herald,” she said, nodding, without much expression; clearly she didn’t recognize him. She looked tired and overheated. “Sit down.” She pointed at a bench just inside the tent; a young Guard with his arm in a sling was already waiting there.

Vanyel sat.

“So, what’s wrong?”

“Stomach trouble.”

“Right. May I?” She held out her hand, and when he nodded, rested it on his forehead, her expression going blank for a moment.

“All right. Stay there, it’ll be a wait.” She turned over her shoulder and shouted.

“Jenna! Priority three!”

A moment later, another Guard was limping up to the tent, and the girl turned away without speaking another word to him. Vanyel put his head down on his knees.

He felt Jonne’s hand rest on his back.

“You should go back to the meeting,” he mumbled.

“I should. Unfortunately, I don’t believe you’ll actually stay here if I leave.”

“You’re very irritating.” He didn’t have the energy to lift his head. He must have actually dozed, briefly, because he startled awake to Jonne gently shaking his shoulder.

“It’s your turn.”

“Oh. Thank you.” Vanyel sat up, blearily, and accepted Jonne’s outstretched hand, levering himself to his feet.

Jonne pointed him towards the back of the tent, where a grizzled-looking man in Greens was waving to him. “I’d better go,” he said, sounding apologetic. “I’ll come check on you in a candlemark if you’re not back.”

He nodded and turned to walk over to the Healer.

The man nodded to him. “I’m Haren. You’re Herald Vanyel, right? It’s an honour to meet you.”

Gods. Vanyel managed not to groan. *The longer I’m here, the more strangers know my name.*

“Come in.” The Healer pulled a curtain aside. “Sit.” He pointed to a narrow cot.

“What’s troubling you?”

Vanyel ducked his head, self-conscious. “I’ve just been sick to my stomach a lot recently. Don’t think it’s anything serious.”

“Well, let me have a look.” Haren laid a hand on his forehead and closed his eyes. A moment later, though, he spoke again. Vanyel hadn’t met many Healers who could have a conversation from trance. “How long has this been going on?”

“Few days.” No, it was longer than that. “Weeks?”

“Well, something’s definitely wrong. You’re quite dehydrated. Feeling tired and achy?”

All the time. Didn’t sleeping in a tent on the ground and constantly being woken in the middle of the night do that to everyone? He’d learned to tune it out. “A bit,” he allowed.

A brief silence. “Have you been taking willowbark?”

“Yes.” He’d gotten another bottle of the tincture when he and Jonne arrived at the Victrin Fell camp.

“How much?”

He tried to think. “Few times a day. Don’t know exactly.”

The Healer lowered his hand. “Well, you’ve got to stop,” he said gruffly, expression coming back into his face and voice.

“What? But—”

“No buts. You’re going to give yourself a bleeding stomach. Why were you taking so much?”

“Headaches.” He was feeling faint again.

“Backlash, huh? Guess I’m not surprised, all the talk about how much you’re doing for us. Though if you’ve got a headache now, it’s just as likely drinking some water will help. Gods. Are you bruising more easily than usual?”

He hadn’t noticed anything. “Don’t think so.”

“Where’s that one from?” The Healer pointed at his forearm.

Vanyel looked down. It was quite an impressive bruise, he thought vaguely. “Don’t remember.”

“Well, there you have it.” Haren rested his hands on his hips and stared him down. “Did no one tell you medicines have side effects? Willowbark is very hard on your stomach, and it thins the blood. Not the best idea to take a lot when you’re expecting to go into battle.”

“Oh.” He tried to think back. Shavri might have mentioned it at some point, but he’d definitely forgotten.

The Healer dropped his hands to his sides and let out his breath in a gust. “The gods save me from Heralds who won’t take care of themselves. You need to pay more attention to your body, Herald Vanyel. I can see you’ve got a bit of Healing-Gift, but that doesn’t mean you can abuse yourself like this. Anyway. Lie down.”

“But—”

“Lie down.”

Somewhere on the other side of the green canvas, he heard someone cry out. Trying to ignore it, he carefully settled himself on the cot. *Oh, that feels better.*

“Just relax. The lining of your stomach is very irritated, so I’m going to do a bit of Healing, and then you’re going to stay here at least four candelmarks so we can keep an eye on you.”

Vanyel winced. “I’m missing a meeting right now.”

“Well, you wouldn’t’ve had to if you’d come here a week ago. Or not been such an idiot in the first place. Be quiet, I have to concentrate.”

Vanyel fought the urge to snap something back. He was used to busy Healers being a little cranky – and, gods, this couldn’t be easy work for them either. He closed his eyes.

*:Yfandes?:*

*:What, love?:*

She was never going to let him live this down, but he had to warn the others before someone came looking for him. *:Um. I’m at the Healers’ tent. Can you pass a message to Jores that I’ll be here all afternoon?:*

*:What’s wrong?:* He felt her concern and alarm.

*:It’s not serious. Just an upset stomach. Apparently I took too much willowbark:*

A pause. *:Van, if they’re keeping you there all afternoon, it’s at least a little serious. Listen to the nice Healers, please. I’ll pass it on:*

At least she wasn’t nagging him. And it really did feel good to lie down. It would probably be rude to fall asleep...

#

“So?” Savil said, raising her glass; Jaysen wearily clinked it with his. “How’s the new Treasury budget coming?”

“Gods.” The Seneschal’s Herald rubbed his forehead. “Let’s please not talk about that. I’m seeing tables of numbers every time I close my eyes.”

She laughed. “Fine. How’s your student, then?”

“Jatha?”

She nodded.

“Making good progress on shielding, still has trouble with offensive magic. You know the type.”

“Sweet girl, couldn’t hurt a fly?”

He chuckled dryly. “Exactly.”

She shook her head. “I always hate to push children like that. Feels like it would be teaching Shavri to kill.” She shivered.

“But we have to.” Jaysen sighed. “I hate it too. And she’s frightened of me.”

“Can’t imagine why.” Savil smirked despite herself. “Jay, you could be more approachable.”

“Yes, well, I spend all day trying to look cranky enough that no one will stop me in the hall to ask ‘just one question.’ Hard to turn it off.”

She laughed. “So it’s all an act, then? You’re just a big teddy bear under that sourpuss face?”

He glanced up. “You’re in a good mood.”

“Suppose I am.” She sipped her wine. “Got a letter from Van.”

“Oh?” Jaysen leaned forwards, interest in his face. *Once upon a time he’d just have gotten that I-bit-a-lemon look*, Savil thought. She wasn’t sure exactly when Vanyel and Jaysen had started to get along better, even be friends. Sometime in the last few years, when she wasn’t paying attention.

She smiled. “He’s doing all right. Sounds like someone wrote a song about the Battle of Sun’s Hill and he overheard it for the first time. He claims it’s awful. Says he’s being moved to Deerford, which I already knew. With Captain Jonne and his new company. Sounds like they get along.” *Should I tell Jay they’re lovers?*

She didn't have to; Jaysen had clearly guessed. He smirked. "I see. Well, good for him. From all I hear, Jonne's a good man."

"You know him?"

"Haven't met him myself, but his sister's a Healer. She treated me once. Told me all about her little brother in the Guard." He took a sip of wine. "Wonder if she volunteered to go to the front."

There had been a call for Healers in particular, and Savil knew there had been quite a lot of volunteers. *Gods, for all that she hates war, Shavri would go if it wasn't for Randle.* Healers tended to be deeply selfless people – and, inevitably, some of them were going to die. Even Andrel had considered going until Gemma and Aber talked him out of it; he was one of their more experienced teachers, and could do more good in Haven training the new students. Which took a weight off her mind. Enough of the people she cared about were out there already. *In danger. Some of them are going to die.*

Jaysen must have noticed her expression. "Tell me about your day, Savil."

She stretched in her chair. "How long have you got?"

He glanced at the window; the sun was a hand's-breadth above the horizon. "A candlemark. Have to prep for the Council meeting."

They never got to spend that much time together – not like when they were younger and could set aside whole, lazy evenings. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had an evening free.

*Well, you take what you can get.* She took another drink and set down her glass; she wanted more, but she was supposed to be at the Council meeting as well. "To start with, they've given me a third student..."

#

Vanyel sat cross-legged on his bedroll, looking without enthusiasm at the steaming mug of herb tea. He was supposed to be having it before every meal – and it did help, but it tasted like rotten fish.

“Sick list for two days,” he said irritably. “Can’t believe it.”

Jonne, sitting opposite him, shook his head. “Jores wasn’t even surprised. Says he thought you looked dreadful and it was good someone had the guts to tell you.”

They weren’t technically sharing a tent – they had tried to be discreet ever since arriving at Victrin Fell – but their tents were pitched close together, and most nights one of them crept over after dark. It was nice, not having to sleep alone. He hadn’t expected that, gods, he hadn’t stayed overnight with someone else in a very long time, not even with Tantras after that first awkward night.

But Jonne was a deep sleeper, and rarely woke even when Vanyel had nightmares – and he had nightmares of his own. Who wouldn’t? They’d both had a turn comforting the other in the early hours of the morning.

He stared at the wavering light of the lantern; he didn’t usually use it, but tonight he felt too drained to manage a mage-light. “I just feel like I’m not pulling my weight.”

“You’re pulling the weight of about a hundred people. Gods, Van, you really don’t know how to be kind to yourself.”

He shook his head. “It’s not—” But he didn’t have words for it. He lifted the cup to his lips and sipped, making a face. “Bleh.”

Jonne laughed, trying and failing to hide it with a hand over his mouth.

“Quit making fun of me.” He decided to get it over with quickly, and tipped the cup to his lips, draining it in four swallows. They sat in companionable silence for a moment.

“I’m being promoted,” Jonne said. “To captain. They’re giving me a company.”

Vanyel felt his lips slip into a smile. “Congratulations. That’s wonderful. You’ve earned it.”

Jonne nodded. He licked his lips. “They’re sending me to Deerford. Took a lot of casualties over there, including their captain.”

Vanyel nodded. It made a lot of sense. Deerford was about fifty miles away, midway between Crescent Lake and South Hardorn, and they’d lost nearly half a company in seconds, most likely to the same damned Karsite Adept. *Unless there are two of them, gods forbid.* Vanyel had intervened from a distance as soon as the alarm woke him, shielding the survivors, but the Karsites had just pulled back at that point, melting away into the woods before he could attack.

Jonne’s eyes rested on him, dark in the lamplight. “Rumour mill says you’re coming with. Command knows we work well together. But...” He took a deep breath. “Van, they’ll separate us sooner or later. Only a matter of time.”

“I know.” He’d known from the very beginning. Should it have bothered him more? “Jonne...”

“It’s all right.” The man shook his head. “Always knew I wouldn’t get to have you forever. Duty comes first.” He swallowed, his throat bobbing, and looked down at his hands for a moment before lifting his eyes again. “Figure that’s why we get along so well. We’re the same, that way, we both made an oath to the King... We were always going to be two carriages passing in the night. Touching for just a moment.” He held out a hand, and Vanyel clasped in. “Van, when you find something good in this damned awful world, something beautiful and perfect, you make it last as long as you can, you know?”

Vanyel blinked, surprised by the tears that sprang to his eyes. “Didn’t know you were such a poet, Jonne.”

The Guard laughed. "I'm a bit of a hopeless romantic. In another life..." He sighed. "You're the most beautiful, perfect thing I've had in my life for a long time. I do want to hold onto you as long as I can, but I won't cling to it past that."

"Stop embarrassing me." Vanyel could feel his cheeks growing hot. "Jonne, I- I'll always be grateful I met you."

"Same. You'll write to me?"

"Of course."

"And promise me you won't get yourself killed doing something stupid?" Jonne's voice was light, but there was something else underneath.

"Only if you promise the same."

"It's a deal." Jonne squeezed his fingers for a moment, then let go. "And let's not get ahead of ourselves. Maybe we'll be lucky and they'll keep us together the entire war."

Something to eat?"

"I could eat, sure." He was actually a little hungry.

*He was in the room with the garden door, watching golden motes dancing in a sunbeam. He knew that if he turned his head, Lendel would be there – he could feel his presence. Right there. Could picture his face perfectly, the way the light would catch the golden highlights in his hair. He didn't want to look yet – he wanted to just hold the moment, preserve it in amber. Forever.*

*"Ashke," he said finally, and turned his head – and the other side of their bed was nothing but ashes. The room was crumbling around him, the floor falling away, opening to a*

*bottomless void that matched the emptiness in his head, and blue-white fire straining against the windowpane. Any moment it would break through, and he too would be consumed—*

#

Vanyel woke with a cry, flailing at the blankets. He couldn't breathe; his own weight seemed to pin him to the earth. *'Lendel*. He hadn't dreamed of him in years, not like this. Had locked away that room of his house – but now the door in his mind was open, icy cold, sucking at him.

“Van?” He heard Jonne's voice, sleep-blurred. “Van, what—”

He tried to swallow the sobs, but he couldn't. It was too much. Nine years, and it still hurt like a knife to the chest.

“Hey, it's alright. I'm here.” He felt Jonne's arms wrapping around him, pulling him close. “You're safe.”

It wasn't all right, not at all. But it did help, that he wasn't alone in it. With his head pillowed on Jonne's chest, he could hear his heartbeat. He clung to that, to the warmth and immediacy of it. To the deep affection and concern his Empathy was picking up. *Thank the gods I soundproofed the new tent first thing*. Eventually the tears subsided, and he was able to catch his breath.

“That sounded like a bad one,” Jonne whispered, his breath tickling Vanyel's ear. A pause. “It wasn't about the war, was it?”

He stiffened. “How do you know?”

“I'm not sure. I... You've got Mind-Gifts. I think you might've been projecting a little.”

Gods. Of all the embarrassing things. Had he forgotten to check his shields last night? He had been fairly distracted. Better than projecting a conversation with Leareth, at least. “I’m sorry.” He hesitated, but he had to know. “How much did you see?”

“Not much. A glimpse of a room. You were with someone. You were happy. Then it started coming apart and the whole world was on fire.”

A succinct enough description. *It could describe my whole life.*

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Jonne murmured. “If it’s private. I can just be here.” He meant, it, too.

Vanyel, with reluctance that surprised him, checked and reinforced his shields. *It was nice, feeling what he’s feeling.* A fraction of an echo of what he’d had with ‘Lendel – but it was a violation of Jonne’s privacy, and unfair to him.

“I lost someone,” he said. “A long time ago. That’s all.”

## Chapter Nine

Vanyel stared out through the flap of his tent, holding the canvas aside with one hand. Jonne was still asleep on the bedroll behind him; he'd managed to disentangle himself and dress without waking him.

It was just past dawn, and for once the camp looked peaceful. He could see smoke rising from direction of the mess tent, and a few people moving around, but for the most part it was still. Silent. If not for the distant haze of smoke staining the eastern horizon, he could almost have imagined there wasn't a war.

He sighed and pushed his way out into the already-warm air. *I thought I hated rain, but this summer heat might be worse.* At least he didn't have to wear heavy armour.

:*Yfandes?*: he prodded gently, not wanting to wake her if she was still asleep.

:*Hmm?*: A sleepy, almost wordless response. :...*Oh, you're up?*:

:*Where are you?*: He didn't have to report for his Farsight check for a candlemark, and it would be nice to have some quiet, uninterrupted time just to brush her down when he wasn't falling asleep on his feet. He spent plenty of time with her, of course, he was often in the saddle all day, but it wasn't the same.

She showed him with an arrow flashed in the corner of his vision. He found her on the edge of the camp, cropping at a patch of grass that had somehow avoided being trampled. He sighed and leaned on her neck.

They had been at Deerford for six weeks; the war was already three months old. Overall, he didn't think the situation was dire, but it wasn't good either. They'd lost Herald Ruvi to a raid. Vanyel had barely met him, and it had surprised him that he cried when he heard. They were still outnumbered, and their information on the Karsite movements was frighteningly spotty. He knew Efrem was stationed with Alban, now promoted to general and coordinating deployments across the entire border, and providing what Farsight overviews of the area he could – they had no detailed maps. He wasn't sure if the Adept or one of the other mages could shield against Farsight, or if their forces were just being very clever about keeping out of sight. The Karsite side of the Border was less densely inhabited, and wilder; it wouldn't be hard for groups up to a company to stay under tree cover.

There hadn't been any major battles, just endless raids and skirmishes. The Karsites had to know he was at Deerford by now; maybe they'd been avoiding it for that reason.

*:Let's go to the stable: Yfandes sent. :I would love a brush-down:*

The building hardly deserved the title of 'stable'; it was a frame of wooden slats with a thatch roof, the walls woven willow branches covered in canvas. It kept the sun and rain out, respectively, and the town of Deerford itself, along with two neighbouring landholdings, were keeping them supplied with clean straw and fresh hay.

One of his saddlebags was hung on the side of Yfandes' stall; someone had scrawled his name above it, in shorthand with a charcoal stick. He dug out a curry-comb and set to work.

"Should trim your mane again," he said out loud. "It's getting in the way."

*:Ask the stableboy to do it, I know you don't have time:*

He nodded. He preferred to do it himself, but she was right; he'd had to compromise a lot when it came to Yfandes' care. *My time is worth too much, and there's never any to spare.* Except, sometimes, a few minutes to snatch for himself. Or with Jonne...

He felt a smile coming to his lips, involuntarily. *We still make each other happy.* They had never spoken more of his nightmare, and Jonne still looked at him the same way – with respect, desire, a hint of wonder. Vanyel was a little surprised by how easy it still was, and how quickly and deeply he'd felt able to trust the other man. Every day they had felt like a gift.

*:I think it helps that you know there's a time limit:* Yfandes sent. *:Makes it easier for you not to question it so much. To enjoy it while you can, fully, and not want to pull away to protect him:*

Was that true? He hadn't thought of it that way at all. *:Protect him from what?:*

*:From your pain. From your life. I'm not sure, Van, it's just a feeling I have. There are other factors. I think you would start to annoy each other, eventually. He's awfully protective of you, and you wouldn't like that in the long run – but for a short time, you can take it as a gift:*

He thought maybe she was right though. Even with Tantras, he had never felt this comfortable. *Two carriages passing in the night...* Why did that make it so much easier?

*:I could have fallen in love with him, I think:* he sent. *:In a different life. Normal love, I mean:* Not a lifebond. Gods, what would that version of his life have been like?

*:I'm sure. He's a lovely man. I'll miss him too:*

He realized he had been daydreaming, and started to lift the comb again–

*:Gate!:* Yfandes screamed in his head, unnecessarily; he felt it, and sagged to his knees against her side. She slammed her shields up over him; it helped, and he focused on breathing through the pain.

*That's not ours.* Surely there would have been a warning. And the Gate had a different 'flavour', somehow – it wasn't Mardic and Donni, or Savil. *Gods, I can't think.* That meant it was the Karsites. The Adept? Hells, it could be one of their master-level mages, if they didn't need to cross a large distance.

Someone was shaking his shoulder. He looked up. A young Guardswoman with a lieutenant's sash on her shoulder was looking at him, mouthing words that didn't make it past the ringing in his ears.

Remember to breathe. "I'm sensitive to Gates," he said, or thought he did, it was hard to tell if his lips were working. "Be all right once it's down."

She was trying to pull him to his feet, pointing. His eyes were watering, fracturing the world into a thousand panes, but he thought he could see the shape of the Gate, just visible five hundred yards away, built on the door of an old barn. *How did they get a mage across the border and back so they could Gate here,* he thought dully. Rusty spots were spilling out by the dozens, rushing towards the camp. Guards in blue were rushing out to meet them, others scrambling out of tents... His vision wavered and he found himself back on the ground, still clutching at a handful of Yfandes' mane.

*:Van!:* He felt her pouring everything she had into the shields. *:Van, focus. Blast the Gate:*

*:What?:* He didn't understand. *:The mage? I don't see them:*

*:No. The Gate. Mage hasn't crossed yet. You ought to be able to destabilize the Gate if you throw enough at it. Do it now, before they get more troops through:*

He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. *Center and ground.* It was one of the hardest things he had ever done, but he opened his mage-sight and reached with mental hands through the shields, touching the nearest node. The mix of Gate-energy and node-energy felt like molten metal on his channels, and he nearly lost the connection, but managed to hold it. Focus. Shape the energy, pull it through his focus-stone, key it–

:*Go!*: Yfandes shouted, and he screamed and flung everything he had at the distant Gate.

He felt the structure of it wobble and then stabilize, it wasn't enough, everything else faded as he grasped and pushed harder–

He felt the Gate start to come down, a wild messy rush, and blacked out.

When he came to, he was lying on his back. The acid pain of the Gate was still eating at the inside of his skull, but he could think.

:*Fandes?*:

He felt her damp nose against his hand. :*Van!*: She felt relieved, and very anxious.

:*You're all right? Can you sit up?*:

He opened his eyes, and saw two worried faces peering down at him – the lieutenant, and another too-young Healer, a boy who couldn't be a day older than sixteen. His ears were still ringing; he flexed his jaw, trying to make them stop.

The young Healer's mouth was moving. "...Have to move," he was saying. "Herald, can you stand?"

He wasn't sure. "Can ride," he managed. "Get me up." He glanced at Yfandes – damn it, she wasn't wearing her tack, there was no way he could stay on bareback right now. "Find my...Companion's saddle." *:Yfandes, how many got through?:*

*:Fifty or so – Look out:*

She lunged up and gave the Healer a hard shove just before an arrow whizzed past where his head had been.

*Have to shield.* The lieutenant had grabbed a stableboy, and they were lifting Yfandes' saddle down from the wall. *Jonne, you'd better have activated the talisman.* It would drain quickly if it was in use all the time, so they saved it for action, but he'd modified it so the un-Gifted man could turn it on himself.

Even as the Healer pulled him to his feet and towards the makeshift stable, he was trying to center and ground, pulling the ragged shreds of his personal shielding into place. Digging deep into what was left of his reserves, he flung up a mage-barrier just in time to block two more arrows.

*:Van!:*

The mindvoice didn't belong to Yfandes, and it was strident; it hurt considerably.

*:Umbria? I'm busy:*

*:Van, we need help NOW:* Overtones of alarm, and real fear, and he could feel strain as well – she was a long way away, at the edge of both their range. *:Fairweather's under attack:*

Fairweather was midway between Sun's Hill and Chapel Hill Crossing. Well over a hundred miles.

*:Umbria, I'll do what I can, but we're under attack here as well:*

*:Goddamnit:* He had never heard her swear with such intensity, or felt anything like terror from her. *:We're outnumbered nearly four to one. They've got at least one mage:* Her mental link was faltering; something else was distracting her.

*:I'll do what I can. Give me a minute:* He dropped the connection. Someone was grabbing at his shoulder again. He opened his eyes, turned to look. The lieutenant was gesturing at Yfandes' saddle.

"Help me," he said, he still couldn't really hear his own voice. Yfandes knelt, and the two of them helped him swing his leg over. He gestured at the belt, his fingers too shaky to manage it, and the lieutenant frowned but fastened it. Yfandes rose gracefully to her feet.

He looked down, meeting the young woman's eyes. She was asking a question; he still couldn't understand what she was saying.

*:Yfandes, did the mage get through the Gate?:*

*:No. Hope you killed him:* There was a tightly-controlled fury in her mindvoice.

He hoped he hadn't, and Yfandes' moments of bloodthirsty rage bothered him deeply, but now wasn't the time to argue about it. "Lieutenant," he said, goddamnit it why couldn't he remember her name. "Mage didn't get through here. Fairweather's under attack, need to help them. Tell Jonne..." His throat tightened. "Tell Jonne you've got to handle this one without me." *:Yfandes, just get us as far away from here as possible:*

He felt her hesitation. *:Van, you're not up for this:*

*:I'm really not, but they need me:*

He closed his eyes as she burst into a gallop, focused on digging for his own shield-talisman and activating it. Just in time, too; a few seconds later he felt the thud as an arrow bounced off.

Center and ground. Focus. Block everything else out. *:Yfandes, cover my back:* And he leapt headfirst into the Web.

He hadn't been to Fairweather before, but he found it easily enough by reaching for Umbria again. This time he didn't prod at her mind, not wanting to distract her, just fixed her location in his head. Bring up mage-sight, find a node. Bring up Farsight. He felt like an automaton, like the wood-and-metal man made of gears and pulleys he'd seen once at the Midsummer Fair, moving in jerks when its nose was touched or its fingers were pulled.

*Damn.* He could guessed exactly what had happened. The Karsite forces must have marched in at night and waited for dawn under the tree cover. Now they were swarming out, at least a thousand troops, skirmishers with bows at the front just behind a wall of shield-bearers – and a red-robed mage at the front, like a doll far below, surrounded by shield-bearers of his own.

Vanyel threw a levinbolt. It missed; he hadn't taken enough time to aim, and it was always harder using Farsight. He was so tired. *Why now? Why does it have to be now?*

The mage had a shield up now. Vanyel took a moment to throw the illusion of fog in front of the Valdemaran forces, still bursting out of their camp in a jumble, no neat formation. He was still terrible with illusions, relatively speaking, but he'd discovered fog was easy. *It'll annoy them too, but the Karsite bowmen won't be able to aim.* Damn it, who was the Valdemaran commander? He couldn't remember, he could only remember that Umbria was there.

He pulled from the node again and thrust a jet of fire at the mage. No good; he could feel it sliding from the man's shields. Adept-level shields. *Is he the Adept, or did the Adept just give him a shield-token?* No way to know without taking more time to look, which he didn't have.

*:Chosen, stay calm. Focus:*

He tried, taking a moment to center himself – not in his body, again he couldn't feel it at all, but in the Web. Fire wasn't going to work. He started to form a wind-spell–

He wasn't paying much attention to Farsight, and it took a moment to realize that the fog was gone. A moment too long.

He felt Umbria die.

Felt her reaching for his mind even as the levinbolt struck her full in the chest. *:Van!:*

He felt her agony like it was his own. *:Keep...them...safe...:*

And she was gone, just like that, a crumpled white shape far below, a thread torn out of the world, he felt it echo in the Web – a moment of confusion, she wasn't a Web-Guardian. Felt Yfandes' shock, suppressed grief. Anger.

*I'm sorry, Umbria.* He hadn't been fast enough. Even as he watched he felt more minds wink out – arrows were flying, the damned mage was throwing fire at the Valdemaran forces, and no one had shields up to block either.

*No.* He reached for the strongest node he could find, pulled it entirely into himself, reached for another – it felt like trying to swallow the sun. He felt Yfandes holding him steady, entirely with him – and he barely had the forethought to throw a barrier-shield up in front of the Valdemaran troops before he struck.

He felt a moment of raw triumph as the mage died – and, behind him, rank after rank of Karsite soldiers died with him, by the hundreds, screaming.

And then there was nothing.

He opened his eyes, and immediately squeezed them shut again. Even through his closed eyelids, the sunlight hurt.

*Where am I?* He was horizontal, and didn't feel like he was moving anymore, but it was hard to tell, his body was half-numb.

Frantically, he tried to wiggle his toes, and couldn't tell whether or not they obeyed him. He'd been tied to Yfandes' back as she galloped away from the raid – what if he'd fallen? Broken his neck?

He opened his eyes again and blinked until the spots faded, then lifted his head a little. A white shape... Yfandes was sprawled on her side, lying on top of his left leg, and his other leg was wrapped awkwardly over her.

He couldn't catch his breath enough to speak out loud. *:Yfandes:* It was hard even to form Mindspeech.

Her mind was a semiconscious haze. *:?:*

*:Yfandes!:* Involuntary tears came to his eyes; he hadn't noticed the pain at first, but his leg was hurting a *lot*. *:YFANDES:*

She came awake, groggy. *:Van?:*

*:You're...lying...on me:*

*:What– Van! I'm so sorry! I can't... Are you all right?:* She lifted her head, shook it woozily, then started trying to roll off of him.

It hurt even more, and he might have blacked out for a moment, but then there was relief. He thought about trying to move his leg, and thought better of it. Something was definitely broken, he wasn't sure how badly. *Maybe I'll just lie here and rest until someone finds us.*

:Van: Yfandes was trying to climb to her feet, without much success – she wobbled and sat down again. *:Van, you need to stay awake. I'm really, really sorry!:*

He took shallow, controlled breaths. “S’ alright.” He managed to raise himself a little on one elbow, so he could look into her worried blue eyes. “You helped. In the Web. Felt you. That’s why you fell?”

*:Probably. I wasn't thinking:* She shook her head again. *:Stupid. My fault. I'm sorry:*

“You already said.” He slumped back and closed his eyes.

*:Chosen, I told you, stay awake. You need a Healer... Gods, you're the only Mindspeaker in the camp, you're not much good for it right now anyway, and neither of us can move. Need to get help:* A pause. *:I'm going to try to reach Jonne:*

He didn’t bother questioning it; it wasn’t the first time she’d spoken into the un-Gifted Guard’s mind, anyway.

*:Van, he's hurt – he's all right! Please don't panic! Arrow to the gut, but he's with the Healers right now. He'll tell them where we are:*

A gut wound. *Jonne, I'm sorry. I failed you too.* Tears leaked through his closed eyelids. *Oh, Umbria...*

*:Van, you didn't fail anyone. You did your best, which is ten times better than anyone else alive could do. You kept almost all of Captain Jerna's company alive, and flattened the Karsite forces:*

He tried to turn his head away from her mindvoice. It didn’t work, of course. *I killed them. I killed all of them.*

*:You did what you had to. It was the right thing:*

“Fandes...just stop...” For the first time in years, he brought up his shields against her and blocked her fully, and he buried his face in his hands and cried.

At some point, much later, there were voices. He thought they were speaking to him; he wasn't sure if he answered. There was pain, as they lifted him onto a stretcher. It didn't matter. None of it mattered.

Someone held a flask to his lips; he recognized the bitter taste of poppy-syrup. He swallowed it, and then he drifted, halfheartedly wishing he could escape and slide right out of the world.

#

“Fancy seeing you here.”

The voice was hoarse, and familiar. Vanyel opened his eyes, and blearily turned his head. “Jonne?” His voice was a raw whisper; he tried to work saliva into his parched mouth.

The other man lay on a cot a few feet away. He was almost as pale as the linen bandages wrapped around his belly, and there were pain-creases around his eyes, but he was smiling. “You look dreadful.”

“That’s rude.” Vanyel tried to turn over, and couldn’t. He lifted his head and looked down at himself; his left leg was firmly bound and splinted. It hurt, but his head was foggy and he didn’t care much. “What happened? Gods, I’m sorry—”

“Stop.” Jonne lifted a hand, then let it fall. “Van, Yfandes told me what happened. You were absolutely correct in your priorities, and you did more than anyone could have asked for.” His eyes crinkled in sympathy. “I’m sorry about Herald Umbria. I know you liked her.”

He blinked away tears. What was he supposed to say? *Jonne, I’m a monster.* A sob rose in his throat; he fought it down. Remembered blue-white fire pressed up against a Gate. *Gods, ‘Lendel, you killed fifty people. I just murdered twenty times as many without even*

*thinking about it.* He knew it was different, but. Was it really? *They were human too.* A thousand lights in the world, gone. Just like that. It shouldn't have been so easy. *I shouldn't still be here.*

He nudged that thought away, and fought to get himself under control. Not the time. “Jonne, I don't think this was a coincidence. They must've known I was here. Must've known how I react to Gates. They timed it perfectly so I'd be distracted.”

“I know.” Jonne's voice was low, serious. “They underestimated you. Still. I had the same thought. If we're right... They can't know where you are.”

He closed his eyes. “We have to split up. I have to go out on my own.” He'd known it was coming, but – damn it, not this soon. *Why now, when everything's falling apart?* He forced the thought away. *Don't be maudlin. Focus on the mission.*

“Maybe.” He felt a brush of air, then Jonne's hand over his. “But we're both good and banged up, aren't we? Should give us a week on the wounded list.”

That was true. *Hold onto it as long as you can.* He folded his hand over Jonne's and squeezed.

#

Savil stared blankly at the message, the sealed envelope torn open on her desk; one of the senior clerks had carried it directly to her quarters. She had to read it three times before her brain put the words together – and even then, it didn't make sense, and not just because of Keiran's messy shorthand.

#

*Urgent message for Herald-Mage Savil*

*Timed attacks at Deerford (Captain Jonne with 289) & Fairweather (Captain Jerna with 321).*

*Deerford: Unknown Karsite mage Gated direct to Deerford camp, raiding party of fifty skirmishers crossed before Gate shut down by Herald-Mage Vanyel. Total losses raiding party, mage presumed dead. Casualties: 12 dead, 31 wounded (down 15%)*

#

Gate shut down. She shuddered. There was a reason she would refuse to Gate unless the other terminus was confirmed secure. A mage in the process of raising a Gate was fully open, and if the enemy had a chance to blast the Gate apart, there was no way to shield against it. It had to be a horrific way to die.

#

*Fairweather: Karsite battalion est. 1000 troops acc. by priest-mage marched by night on camp. Requested aid from Herald-Mage Vanyel who intervened at distance. Near-total losses Karsite side (est. 800 dead 200 wounded captives). Mage confirmed dead. Casualties: 27 dead, 81 wounded (down 34%).*

*Herald Umbria killed in action. Herald-Mage Vanyel injured list est. 1 wk.*

*Circle meeting to be scheduled, further updates.*

#

She had known Umbria was dead; they'd all heard the Death Bell, and it hadn't taken all that long for confirmation by Mindspeech-relay to reach them, but somehow she'd already known. Ever since she'd been added to the Web, she always knew.

They had only worked together a few times, but she had held the woman in high regard. She touched the paper for a moment, brushing her fingertip across her name, before she set it aside. There would be time to grieve later.

The absolute casualty numbers were overwhelmingly in Valdemar's favour. Relatively speaking, though...it could have been worse, but it was a heavy blow. The Karsites just had

greater numbers, and it would take months more before the new Guard recruits were trained. And the Heralds... Counting Umbria, they'd now lost seven in the last three months, leaving a total of exactly one hundred forty, and that included everyone who could possibly be pushed in to Whites early and sent to one of the safer circuits to free up someone more experienced. Every death meant nearly a one percent reduction in their total strength. And mages... Gods, they'd lost just two so far, but there had only been thirty-nine to begin with, six of whom had been pushed into Whites early and weren't even eighteen yet.

She kept coming back to one thing. *Van, how did you possibly take out a thousand Karsite troops and their mage?* She had known he was powerful, but this was beyond her wildest dreams. *I couldn't do that even with Final Strike.*

And she knew another thing with absolute certainty: he wasn't going to feel good about it. She hoped he had someone to talk to. It would eat at him otherwise. Maybe Jonne could help. He sounded sensible.

She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes for a moment, trying to gather her strength. This was going to mean another late night.

*:Kellan, did you get that?:*

*:Yes:* As usual, he'd been listening in the back of her mind. *:I am also quite impressed by what your nephew is capable of. And a little frightened. More than a little:*

#

*Blowing wind, falling snow on a grey sky—*

*“Herald Vanyel.”*

*“Leareth.” Vanyel met his eyes steadily. He felt empty. Numb.*

*The silence stretched out.*

*“You are troubled,” Leareth said. “If I were to guess why, it is because you have done something, in the course of this war, that you wish you had not.”*

(Damn Leareth for always being so perceptive. Vanyel didn’t want to talk about it, and he didn’t have the wits for a verbal sparring match to avoid it.)

*“Guilt is an interesting thing,” Leareth said slowly. “So often it seems misguided, but it is rarely pointless. When you feel guilt, Herald, it is for a reason, though perhaps not the reason you think. Feelings do not always speak to us clearly.”*

Vanyel blinked. *“I’m not sure what you mean.”* He tried to think. *“It makes sense to feel guilty when you’ve done something wrong. So you’ll try harder not to do it again.”*

*“A simplification. The world rarely contains simple rights and wrongs. If you do something you know is wrong, in anger or haste or because you simply wish for the results – that is one thing. Herald Vanyel, I believe that I know you a little, and I doubt this is what happened.”*

(It felt like what had happened. He had been angry. He had wanted revenge for Umbria, or at least some part of him had. He had wanted their mage dead, and clearly hadn’t cared how many others died with him – and he could have found a way, if he’d wanted to. If he’d thought about it at all. Still. He had talked to Jonne about it, and the Guard had reminded him that every Karsite soldier who left a battlefield alive would sooner or later show up on another – and more Valdemarans would die. Vanyel, haltingly, had explained that he didn’t want to weigh the deaths of people from his own country more than those from another. Jonne had been startled, then thoughtful, then had made the surprisingly reasonable argument that Valdemar hadn’t started this and just wanted the war to be over, and a few disastrous battles might well shock the Karsite government into suing for peace, ultimately saving more lives overall. He still wasn’t sure he believed it – how was he supposed to compare different

hypothetical ways the war could go, when there was so much uncertainty? But it was something he'd been mulling over.)

*"You always do your best," Leareth went on. "I know this. And yet, our best when we are flung into a situation unprepared is not so good as our best when we have had time to plan. We can take the time to make plans, to train and study, and the more that we learn, the better we can do. All the magic in the world cannot turn back time – and so if your feelings wish to change the past, look to the future instead. Look to who Herald Vanyel could learn to become, that he might do better if he faced the same choice again." He shook his head.*

*"Perhaps this is what your guilt would say to you, if it could speak. I do not know your mind."*

(It was an odd way of looking at things, imagining his emotions speaking in words. It was the sort of think Lancir might have said, but Lancir had never put it exactly that way.)

*"Think on it." Leareth nodded, his expression solemn. Then, to Vanyel's surprise, he smiled. "I heard a new song today. Your name appears in it."*

*Completely startled, Vanyel brought a palm to his face. "Please. Gods. Don't sing it." He could guess which one – 'Ballad of Sun's Hill' had been around long enough that it might reasonably have trickled through Leareth's spy-network.*

*Leareth laughed. A dry sound, like wind rustling dead grass, but nonetheless a laugh. "I did think it was a rather dreadful song. In any case, I do not sing so well as you."*

*Vanyel got his face under control, and lowered his hand. "I'm sure people have written songs about you, a time or two," he said, perfectly polite. "With everything you've done."*

*"Of course. For the most part they were also dreadful. One or two were quite good. Perhaps it would be fair for me to teach you one."*

## Chapter Ten

Huddled in the wet undergrowth, Vanyel clamped a hand over his mouth and nose, fighting back a sneeze. He was pretty sure no one was in earshot, or within a mile, but still.

He was somewhere between Crescent Lake and Victrin Fell – he wasn't exactly sure where. After contacting Colonel Alban directly through Herald Shallan and passing on his and Jonne's suspicions, he had been given new orders – and he and Yfandes had spent the last nearly four months tramping around the wildest parts of the Border. Alone.

*I want to go home.*

Seven months in the field. It was longer than any past circuit, and this wasn't like a circuit at all. The pace was relentless and gruelling. Even wandering the woods by himself, he wasn't out of touch. People could request his help through the Mindspeech-relay, and did. Often. He had finally started to say no if it seemed like something they could handle on their own, only because Yfandes had insisted.

There had been only two battles since he set off on his own, neither with more than a company on either side – the Karsites seemed to have realized that Vanyel could decimate any number of their troops from any distance, and settled into a strategy of constant small raids

instead. Which was a lot harder for Vanyel to help with. He could provide Farsight, but not constantly for a two hundred mile stretch; he could use Thoughtsensing, but it was actually quite difficult to pick out raiders from townspeople and smallholders without taking the time and making the dubious ethical choice to read surface thoughts; he could use the Web, but it was energy-intensive and the alarm-threshold was still too high to be much use. He had tracked down three master-level Karsite mages that way and, when they actually crossed the Border, killed them. Without ever seeing their faces. For the most part he just set trap-spells and alarms everywhere he passed, he'd been up and down the entire Border by now, and sent alerts by Mindspeech-relay when they were tripped.

At least the pace seemed to be slowing a little, in the last month. Autumn wasn't a good time for any country to be at war, and the Karsites must have stripped all the able-bodied men from their farms to raise so large an army.

He had lost even more weight; his Whites looked almost silly on him now, like a twelve-year-old in his father's clothes. He knew he ought to be eating more, but re-supplying was difficult, hunting was time-consuming even with magic, he was out of any kind of seasonings, and if he had to eat one more half-raw, half-burnt squirrel roasted over a mage-fire he might prefer to starve. He could never get warm, his feet were always damp, he hadn't washed his hair in a month, and his leg, which had healed cleanly thanks to the excellent care of the Deerford Healers, had started aching again once the rains began. He never had the energy to spare for self-Healing. To make matters worse, now he had a cold.

And he kept running into Karsite scout-parties. It seemed like the entire border was crawling with them. He kept his Thoughtsensing open and the Web in the back of his mind, and usually he could notice them in enough time to get away – even in dense woods a Companion could move faster than anything else – but it was irritating, and meant he could

never fully relax. He'd started laying a half-mile radius of wards and trap-spells before he went to sleep, after far too many times waking to a fight already in progress – or, once, a drunk Karsite soldier literally stepping on his face.

*I want this to be over.*

The solitude was getting to him. He tried to notice when he was getting very maudlin, and distract himself with work, or plan a visit to some town to re-supply, but sitting with strangers in a tavern for a night wasn't the same as seeing friends, even if they did greet him as a hero. Especially not when they did.

*I want it to stop. I wish I didn't have to exist.*

He noticed the thought, and tried to let it drift by. *You don't mean it. You're just tired.*

It didn't feel like he would ever not be tired.

He ought to reach out to Yfandes, he thought. He'd been keeping her shielded from his surface thoughts most of the time; she didn't deserve to suffer his discomfort when she was just as cold and wet, and he thought the loneliness was getting to her as well. She reacted by nagging him about everything – and he reacted by not telling her things. He knew it was an unhelpful pattern that they'd fallen into, and he didn't know what to do about it.

*Maybe I'll read Jonne's letters again.* He certainly wasn't getting anything useful done, and it was nearly sunset; he ought to think about setting up camp anyway. He tested his reserves, checking how much he had. Enough for an understrength mage-barrier just to keep the rain off his head, he decided, and raised his hand.

*:Vanyel?:*

The gentle tap on his shields startled him; he jumped. *Gods, I'm twitchy.* He took a deep breath and parted his shields. *:Shallan?:* She was a long way away; the distance had to be a strain for her. He tried to put more of his own energy into stabilizing the link.

*:Good news, I think. We're recalling you to Horn:*

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. Lissa. He'd crossed paths with her a few times, passing through, but it was always good to see her. *:Thank you.*

*Urgency?:*

*:Low. Take your time: A pause. :Try not to be conspicuous, when you arrive. It's not a secret, but obviously we'd prefer the Karsites find out later and not sooner:*

Which made sense. *:All right. Thank you:*

*:You're welcome. Take care:* There was real warmth in her mindvoice. They had been in contact frequently in recent months, and even though they rarely spoke of anything except logistics, he felt like he knew her.

The brief human contact, even at such a distance, had steadied him. He reached out.

*:Fandes? We're going back to Horn:*

*:Thank Kernos:* Her relief was instant and palpable. *:Why?:*

*:Didn't give a reason. Not urgent:*

*:Well, maybe they've finally decided we've earned a rest and some decent food:*

It was questionable whether camp rations could be called 'decent', but it was certainly better than anything he could cook himself out here in the wilderness. And the Horn camp had a bathhouse, or something that almost counted as one. A laundry. He could wash his uniforms properly...

He caught himself yawning. *:Let's set up camp. No point setting out now, it'll be dark in half a candlemark:* The days were getting shorter fast.

#

Vanyel paced the edge of Lissa's camp, trying to move quickly enough to keep warm.

Autumn came later and gentler here, two hundred miles south of Haven, but there was a bite in the wind and he thought it might frost tonight.

*It's almost Sovvan.* He hadn't been keeping track of the days at all, or realized how soon it was. Three days away. He had never been away from home on Harvestfest, aside from the one year in k'Treva, and that counted almost as home. Certainly never been in a war camp, having to be always alert and functional. He didn't know how he would get through it.

There was just about no one out here he really trusted. Mardic and Donni were on the western edge now, on call to Gate reinforcements from Bakerston as needed. Jonne was still in Deerford, and he wasn't sure this was something he wanted to share with him anyway. Lissa was here, but she had no time to spare. No one had any time to spare to sit with one broken Herald and talk him through his pointless grief.

Somewhere nearby in the darkness, a dog barked. He spun around, his heart racing, strengthening his shields... *Right. Calm down.*

For a moment, oddly, he thought of Leareth – and laughed at the incongruity of going to him for comfort. *Though he's tried to offer me enough, unasked for.* The dreams were the longest conversations he'd had with anyone face to face, in recent months, and sometimes he longed for them.

*What's wrong with my life, that the only person I can think to ask for help is my worst enemy?*

He kicked a stick, sending mud flying. Everything. Everything was wrong with his life. With the world. He knew it was just tiredness speaking – but the future felt grey, empty. It didn't feel like the war could ever end. Too many deaths on both sides. Pointless destruction, a blight on the world, inescapable.

*I don't want to be in a world like this.* He felt like he was finally starting to understand why 'Lendel had called a Final Strike. *When everything's hopelessly broken, sometimes all you want is to burn it all down.* Damn it but he missed 'Lendel. *Wherever you are, ashke, it's better than this.*

And he was part of the problem, wasn't he? He was a weapon, aimed from a distance at people who were only trying to do right by their own country. *I don't see how there'll be anything good left in me by the end of this war.*

He tried to wrench himself out of the pointless loop. *Pull yourself together, Herald.* Tried to focus on the memory of Jonne's face. Jonne, with his poet's soul, who had seen so much beauty and goodness in the world, and in him. He knew he'd been happy, for a while – but he couldn't really remember it. It didn't seem like it could ever have been true.

*Jonne's good. I'm not. I shouldn't be here. Shouldn't exist.*

He kicked another bit of debris. "This is ridiculous," he said out loud. Maybe he ought to go to the mess tent. Get some food, talk to some people. Which was the last thing he felt like doing, but surely it was better than being alone with his thoughts. He needed a distraction. And hot tea would feel good on his sore throat.

He couldn't summon the will to turn back towards the camp. *What's the point? Doesn't fix anything.* Not for the first time, he thought longingly of his vial of argonel. Wished Andrei had given him more...

*Stop it.* He bent over, hands on his knees, trying to breathe through the aching tightness in his chest. *Do something else. Anything's better than walking around the edge of camp in the middle of the night thinking about killing yourself.*

He couldn't face the thought of being around strangers. *But I very clearly shouldn't be alone.* He took a shuddering breath, and unshielded a little. *:Yfandes?:*

*:Mmm?:* She felt drowsy, comfortable, and warm. The Horn camp had a real stable, with actual walls and doors. *:Van, why aren't you sleeping?:*

*:Can I come sleep in your stall? Just for tonight?:* Maybe that would help.

*:Why? What's wrong?:*

*:I don't know. Nothing. Everything. I'm just... Can't sleep:*

He felt her mental sigh. *:And you're walking around by yourself ruminating. Like that ever helps. Van, I'm really not liking the overtones I'm feeling from you. Can you please talk to someone about this? I mean an actual person, other than me. Ideally a Mindhealer:*

He groaned. *:What, and how am I supposed to do that out here?:*

*:Start with asking your sister. There might well be a Mindhealer in Horn, and if not in Dog Inn:*

*:Really?:*

*:Think about it for one second:* He flinched at the impatience in her mindvoice – well, it was his own fault for waking her to complain at her, she was as tired as he was. *:War is very stressful. Sometimes it breaks people. Very useful to have someone who can put them back together:*

Oh. That did make an awful lot of sense. *:Surely they've got higher priorities, then. Don't want to waste their time:*

*:Seriously? Van, you know how much is riding on you. We've been asking a lot; you'd have to be superhuman for it not to get to you. Helping you cope is a very high priority. And you're not coping well right now:*

He knew she was right, but it still irked him. He didn't especially want to spend the night in her stall anymore. *:Fine. I'll talk to Lissa:* He started in the direction of her tent.

Halfway there, he remembered how late it was and thought about turning back, but it felt like too much effort. She would probably forgive him for waking her.

*:Chosen?: Yfandes reached out, tentative. :I'm sorry I snapped at you:*

It was impossible to hold onto his anger. *:You were right. I should've done this sooner:*

*:Still. I could have been nicer: She sent a waft of affection. :We're both tired. No wonder we're snapping at each other. I'll try to do better:*

He reached Lissa's tent in the center of the camp, and nodded to the sentry outside. It was practically a house, with two rooms, wards and weatherproofing spells laid on the heavy double-stitched canvas; still, Lissa could have had a real room in the town if she chose. He knew why she didn't. *Don't see why I should sleep high and mighty when the rest of my people don't, Van.*

The man bowed to him. "Herald-Mage Vanyel."

Right. Well, that avoided the problem of figuring out how to talk his way through; they clearly thought it was perfectly reasonable for him to show up at any time of night and talk to the top-ranked officer in the camp. And there was a crack of light under the tent flap, which meant Lissa was still awake.

He pushed his way through before he could lose his courage. "Major Lissa."

She glanced up from her folding table, where she had been staring at a table of figures, and leapt to her feet, nearly knocking the rickety stool over. "Van! Come in. What are you doing here?"

He picked his way across the floor, and let her hug him; they were in private, it wasn't a breach of decorum. "Liss, do you ever sleep?"

“I was about to go to bed, actually.” There were shadows under her eyes that hadn’t been there before. And new hollows in her cheeks. She looked at him with concern. “What’s wrong?”

He lowered his voice. “I need your help with something.”

“Oh?”

He took a deep breath. “I should probably see a Mindhealer.”

She winced. “Oh. Well, we’ve got Melody at the Healers’ station in town. I can send a runner over, get you put on the list for sometime tomorrow. Unless you need it to be sooner?”

He sighed. “It’s not that urgent. Not worth sending someone over now.”

“Hey. One of the few advantages of being in charge is that I can send messages whenever I like. Doesn’t make up for, you know, actually having to be in charge of this mess. But I’ll use it when I can.” She turned towards the door and raised her voice. “Jaina?”

“Yes?”

“Get me a runner. I have a message to send to town.” Lissa squatted and dug around in a small cabinet against the canvas wall, pulling out an envelope and a square of paper. She scribbled something; Vanyel leaned over, trying to see, but she pulled it away from him and stuffed it into the envelope. Seconds later she had slapped on one of her personal seals – she had a whole stack of them, pre-stamped.

A youngster in the light blue uniform of a Guard page appeared at the door. “Major?”

Lissa smiled at the girl. “Please bring this to the senior Healer on night duty in Horn. Tell her it’s from me.”

“Yes ma’am!” The child bowed stiffly and backed out of the tent.

Lissa grimaced. “I hate it when they look frightened of me.”

“Tell me about it.” Vanyel felt suddenly exhausted. “Liss, I... Can I stay here tonight?”

She looked startled, but quickly smoothed her face. “Of course. Anytime.”

#

Vanyel sat on the edge of the chair, fidgeting with the hem of his tunic and trying not to snuffle. He hadn't gotten much sleep; there was a buzzing feeling in his head, and his body felt like it half didn't belong to him.

In the light of day, he felt a little embarrassed. *I can't believe I barged in on Liss in the middle of the night.* Though she really hadn't seemed to mind; in fact, when she bounced out of her bedroll before the sun was even above the horizon, she had kissed his forehead and said she would like it if he came by more often.

It was a candlemark past noon. Lissa had apparently taken the liberties of putting him on the list for a day of leave. *At least she didn't put me on the sick list.* So he'd had nothing to do with himself all morning, and had taken a bath and spent nearly a candlemark grooming Yfandes' mane before a runner tracked him down with a note and the time of his appointment.

He felt a sneeze coming, and winced, scrabbling for his handkerchief. Which was damp, because everything was.

What was he even going to tell her? He had never needed to explain anything to Lancir, who had been there to see it firsthand.

“Herald Vanyel?”

He glanced up.

“I'm Melody.” She reached to grip his arm for a moment, smiling. “Thank you for coming on time.” He had to give her credit – she must have known who he was, but there was

nothing but ordinary warmth and politeness in her broad face or her intelligent green eyes. Red-haired and freckled, she reminded him a little of Andrel.

“Tea?” There was a pot of it on the sideboard, he realized. He watched dully as she poured herself a cup. It took him a long moment to realize she was asking him a question.

“...Oh. Please.” His throat still hurt. He took the cup with an apologetic smile. “Sorry. I’m very tired.”

“No need to apologize.” She scooted the second, comfortably padded chair closer and sat. “We have two candlemarks. This is the first time I’m seeing you, so I will have to ask a lot of questions. Some things I should explain first. Room’s soundproofed, and everything you tell me is absolutely private. I might take notes if it’s all right with you, I see a lot of people out here and it’s hard to keep them straight. They’re in a cipher I invented, so no one else can read them. Also, I’m a strong Mindspeaker. You as well, correct? I’ll only use it if you agree to it, I’m happy to talk this way if you prefer, but it makes things easier.” Her smile broadened. “And you really don’t have to be nervous. I don’t bite.”

He nodded, and tried to make his shoulders relax. *:Mindspeech is all right with me:*

“Good. By default I’ll follow the standard protocols. You have very good shields, by the way. Who trained you?”

“Herald-Mage Savil. Um, and I trained with the Tayledras.”

Usually that shocked people; she didn’t even blink. “Right. Have you seen a Mindhealer before?”

“Yes.” He felt a little buffeted by the barrage of questions.

“May I ask who?” She looked at him owlishly as she raised the teacup to her lips and sipped. “There aren’t many of us. We all know each other.”

He shrugged. “Lancir.”

“Good man. I was sorry to hear when he passed. Anyway.” She leaned forwards. “Can you tell me the main reason you’re here?”

*This is so embarrassing.* He fixed his eyes on a point just above her head. “Um. Background, I guess. I lost my lifebonded nine years ago. I had a pretty hard time for a while.”

Again, he had to give her credit – she didn’t look at all shocked, or alarmed, or even pitying. “I’m sorry. That must have been very difficult. This is the context in which you saw Lancir?”

“Yes.”

“You know, it’ll make this easier for me if you give me more than monosyllables.” She softened it with a smile. “So, that’s your history. May want to know more in a bit, but. Present?”

*She certainly gets to the point.* He was having trouble keeping his balance. “Well... I always have a harder time when I’m tired, and I’m really, really tired. And I’ve had to do a lot of things I’m not very happy about. Like Fairweather. I feel like a butcherer, and I just spent months running around in the woods by myself because I’m a target, and I’m tired!” He closed his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about wanting to die. I don’t actually want to. Not going to do anything. But I can’t stop thinking about it, and it’s really distracting. I was wondering if you could put in a block or something.”

There was a brief silence. “Thank you for telling me. I may be able to put in a block or redirect, but I’m certainly not going in there blind. It sounds like things are very complicated with you, and I don’t want to make anything worse.”

He opened his eyes. She had her chin propped on her fist and was watching him. Not like Lancir had – her eyes darted around frequently, never staying still.

“Hmm. Trying to figure out where to start. Your lifebonded – did this happen before or after you were Chosen?”

“Before. Right before, I mean, about five minutes.” He blinked back tears; his throat was tightening. *:Can I use Mindspeech? It’s hard to talk about:*

*:Of course:* Her Mindtouch felt like her – clean, crisp, full of curiosity and sharp-edged intelligence. Not like Lancir at all. *:If you can, start at the beginning tell me all of it in sequence:*

*:I’ll try:* Where was the beginning? He didn’t think he’d ever told this to anyone, not all of it. Just bits and pieces and questions he’d tried to dodge. *:Savil is my aunt. I’d just come to Haven. Wasn’t Gifted at that point. That’s when I met him. His name was Tylendel:*

If she was disturbed by his being *shay’a’chern*, she didn’t show a hint of it, not even in the overtones of Mindspeech. *:Go on:*

He closed his eyes. *:He was one of her Herald-trainees. Mage-gifted. He had a twin brother...:*

“How does that feel?” Melody said out loud, two candlemarks later. “Try it out a bit.”

It wasn’t like what Lancir had done with him. He could actually feel the block, an alien structure in his mind, less like a wall than an oilcloth drape covering the door to the void. It felt strange; he kept wanting to prod at it, like a loose tooth. He could look directly if he tried, but if he wasn’t trying, his thoughts slid away, in no particular direction. He wasn’t sure he liked it – but it hurt less. *I’m sure I’ll get used to it.*

“It’s not perfect.” She was sipping her third cup of tea; she seemed to need something in her hands, though she’d set the cup down for part of it to take notes. As promised, the neat

rows of symbols were completely illegible to him. “Can’t do perfect in two candlemarks. You’ve got your mind set up in a very strange way – well, what works for you works. I can see Lancir did a lot of fine work, which he could because he saw you for years. I haven’t got years. Is this enough for now?”

“I think so.” He took a sip of his own cold tea. “Think I just need to get some sleep, now.”

“Yes. That is a big part of your problem. You’ve got a lot of negative patterns of thinking – but you’ve also got some good strategies for handling them, that I think work fine when you’re not bone-tired. Unfortunately, you are. Anyone would be struggling after the workload you’ve been carrying for the last half-year. You need a break, and I’m going to pass that on as an official recommendation – no, don’t look at me like that. It’ll just come from Healers’, so no one needs to know you saw me in particular. Not that there’s any shame in it. You ought to see one of the other Healers anyway, you look like hell.”

*Why do people have to keep telling me that?* He failed to stifle a yawn. *Probably because it’s true.*

“Well. Shoo. Go get some rest.”

Yfandes met him outside the Healers’ station. *:How was it?:* She had been staying back, out of the way for most of it.

He leaned his forehead against hers, closing his eyes. *:I feel like a carriage ran over my brain:* He had forgotten how exhausting the whole process was. *:I’ll be all right. Just need to sleep:*

*:She recommended you take leave? I’m glad:*

He dragged himself wearily into the saddle. *:Well, said she’d recommend it to higher-up. Doubt they’ll be able to grant it:*

Yfandes carried him to his tent, and he slipped off her back and stumbled in. A moment later he realized he probably ought to eat – well, that was why he'd made a habit of keeping some non-perishable food in his tent, sealed by magic against animals, for when he was too tired to go to the mess tent. He stripped off his tunic, closed his eyes, and tested his reserves. Better than he'd expected given how little sleep he'd had – well, he hadn't done any magic today. *I can manage a weather-barrier.*

The tent grew a little warmer as he sat on his bedroll with a blanket over his shoulders, gnawing on jerky and dried fruit and washing it down with gritty water. *I desperately want more tea, but not enough to get up.* He was high-ranking enough to make use of the camp pages, of course, but he never did.

It was only late afternoon, but he lay down and closed his eyes. *Maybe I even have enough for a little self-Healing on this damned cold.* He counted his breaths, slipping into trance, and focused on his sinuses until sleep claimed him.

#

Savil yawned and flicked over another page of notes. *This damned war must've tripled the Treasury budget line for paper alone.*

Harvest-taxes were on their way in – her eyes flicked past the list of landholdings, noting the numbers. Newly trained troops were on their way out, marching to the southern border. More locations, more numbers. Better numbers than she'd hoped, even. Nearly ten thousand bodies – though not all were going south right away. On Keiran's advice, they were sending the green recruits everywhere *but* the border with Karse, to get a little experience, and using them to free up more experienced hands. *We're starting to match them for numbers now, maybe.*

Spy-reports: inconclusive. Unsurprisingly, both the camp cook and the clerk heard frequent mentions of Vanyel. The Karsites had a number of not-very-complimentary titles for him, starting with one that translated roughly as ‘The Butcher in White.’ Gods, she hoped Van hadn’t heard that one. In any case, large troop movements seemed to have settled down, and the pace had slowed when autumn hit – the Karsites had crops to be harvested too, and no one liked fighting wars in winter. There hadn’t been a pitched battle in a long time, only endless raids and skirmishes along the nearly two hundred miles of border. *Which will wear us down in the end.* The Karsites had gnawed off a large chunk of territory east of Crescent Lake; Keiran and the Lord Marshal had judged it wasn’t worth expending any more of their people to take it back. Not when the ground was sown with salt and it wasn’t that strategically important anyway.

They weren’t asking her to Gate much anymore; she needed nearly a day afterwards before she was good for anything but sleeping, and there just wasn’t time for that. On top of all her official duties and all her unofficial ones, she was supposed to be running a class for new Guard recruits on how to work with Herald-Mages. *Reminds me, I should figure out tomorrow’s lesson plan.*

Heralds. She read down the list of items. Deaths: two. Even though it wasn’t a surprise, and she hadn’t known either of them well, she felt her eyes prickle for a moment. Movement: gods, they were sending Arina to the Border. She’d been on one of the gnarlier Pelagirs border circuits for six months, doing very well for herself – still, she’d been in Whites barely over a year. *I hope Van doesn’t take it too badly.* It would be a first for him, one of his students going into real danger when she couldn’t possibly be ready.

Injured list: three. Including Kilchas, who was out with broken ribs. She scowled. *Damn.* Next to Vanyel, he was one of their best for offensive combat.

Other notes... oh. There was a note that the Healers recommended leave for Vanyel, with no further details. *Huh*. Well, he had been out there over six months. Even if there wasn't anything wrong with him in particular, he had to be exhausted. Should she be worried?

*I'll talk to Tantras*. She closed her eyes, centered and grounded. *:Tran? Now a good time?:*

*:Savil? Sure:*

*:Healers recommended leave for Van. I know we've been ignoring their suggestions half the time, but is there any way we could possibly spare him? Even just for a few weeks?:*

She felt Tantras' concern, mixed with weary irritation; gods, she hated to put yet another task on his plate. *:I'll see what I can do:*

#

Vanyel didn't realize he had dozed off until the change in Yfandes' gait woke him. He opened his eyes dully and lifted his head from his chest, coughing and wincing; he wasn't sneezing anymore, but the damned cold had settled into his chest.

He remembered a dirt road, mostly mud in this weather, but now a paved stone road lay under them and her hooves chimed like bells. It was still raining hard. Icy water trickled down his back where his hood didn't cover, and his legs were soaked to the knees, his Whites mud-spattered.

He unshielded a little. *:Fandes, do you need to rest?:* Again, he had been blocking her out from his surface thoughts; she didn't deserve to feel his wet feet, not when she was mired to her hocks in mud, or the rest of the sheer physical discomfort. *I've never wanted anything as much as I want a hot bath right now.*

He felt the fog of fatigue in her answer. *:Almost there. Another few candlemarks. I can make it:* A tendril of affection. *:How's your throat?:*

He swallowed experimentally. *:Still hurts:* His head ached dully as well – well, after this many hours of riding in the cold and wet, he just about hurt all over. *:I'm very ready for a bath, a pot of herb tea and a warm bed:* He could even ring for a page and have them bring a hot brick... Oh, the luxuries of home.

*:And I for a heated stable, a good rub-down and a bucket of sweet-feed. We were out there too long:*

But it was nearly over. Finally. He'd received the message from Liss the day after Sovvan, and set out the morning after. He was already imagining the hot bath he would take once he was back in the Palace. And his bed. Staying at inns and Waystations was a thousand times better than sleeping in his tent in the cold and wet, but he couldn't wait to close his eyes in the safety of his own room.

*Wish I could've Gated,* he thought dully. They'd been on the road for four days – four very long days in the saddle, pushing the pace, because both of them wanted to be home more than anything, and he only had three weeks of leave.

...He must have been more tired than he realized, because despite his discomfort he managed to doze again, and only woke when they passed through the inner city walls to the Palace proper. He greeted the guard, and then Yfandes picked up speed, and within not that many minutes they were at the stables. He slid down from the saddle, wincing, and dug into the last of his energy to remove her tack, which he tossed aside without cleaning it. He pulled out a blanket to rub her down. Gods, she was as underweight as he was – he could feel her ribs, see the shape of her bones through her hide. Her mane was matted, plastered with mud.

*:Go:* she nudged, and he realized he had been drowsing against her shoulder. *:The stableboy will tend me. You're asleep on your feet:*

He nodded, even though he didn't want to, and obeyed. It felt like a very long walk to his rooms, especially when he had to go back outside into the hammering rain, and the saddlebags were incredibly heavy in his hands. Then he was back inside, shedding mud and water everywhere and too exhausted to care, stumbling down the hall to his room past a page who gave him a dirty look, almost to his door...

"Welcome home, Van." Tantras was there, leaning on the doorframe; he straightened up and reached out a hand to take Vanyel's bags. "Yfandes let Taver know you were on your way. I've taken the liberties of ordering you some hot mulled wine, it's awful out there. And a meal in about a candlemark, I figured you'll want to bathe first." He squinted. "You look like hell, by the way. Was it that bad?"

He shrugged. "It was bad. Tran. I... Thank you." He felt pushed off balance by this act of kindness. "Should I report to Randale after?" The King would want to see him, but he didn't think he could face it right now. He coughed into his elbow, wincing at the way it hurt his chest.

"Worry about it tomorrow. You need to get out of those wet clothes. You're shivering."

He looked down at himself. "Am I? Oh." Well, he'd spent most of the last few months shivering, and learning how to block it out. "Think I will take a bath, try to warm up." He shrugged off his sodden cloak, and Tran took it.

"You do that. Why don't I go to Healers' and pick up a tisane for that cough? And take a cup of mulled wine with you. You've earned being a little decadent, yeah?"

He could only nod his gratitude. "You're a good friend, Tran."

#

The bath helped ease his aching joints, the mulled wine soothed his throat, and he felt a little better when he stumbled wearily back to his room. Tran was gone, but the promised meal was

there, on a covered tray, and several labeled packets of herbs. He knew he needed to eat and drink – the dizziness he'd felt on rising from the bath told him he was dehydrated, which wasn't surprising given how long he had been riding today. Still, he was nearly too weary even for that. He did make up a tisane in a mug, the water taken from the jug by his desk and heated with a bit of magic rather than bothering to call a page. Heading to his cabinet, he dug around, looking for stronger painkillers – his head was already so fuzzy with exhaustion, he didn't care that they would make him foggy. *And I don't have to be able to wake up on a second's notice and be ready to fight.* For the first time in so long, he was safe.

He did his best to eat, managing the soup and half of a soft bread roll despite the pain of swallowing. He really ought to report to Randale tonight, and there was a pile of letters on his desk to be dealt with, but his bed beckoned. Gods, it felt good to be horizontal, and the herbs were starting to take the edge off his headache. It wasn't even dusk yet, but he closed his eyes, and sleep claimed him in seconds.

## Chapter Eleven

Vanyel woke to the dawn light falling across the blankets – he had forgotten to close his curtains. He turned over, and immediately groaned. Every part of him hurt. There was the soreness of a full day's riding, but his skin felt tender as well, the sheets unpleasantly rough, and his head was about ready to explode. He was shivering even under the blankets, despite the fire still burning in the grate – he definitely had a fever, though he didn't feel as bad as he had the one time with marsh-fever.

A cough rattled through his chest. Ouch. He flopped over and reached for the bedside drawer with one hand, looking for a handkerchief to spit into.

*:Yfandes?:* She acknowledged him sleepily. *:Cold's worse than I realized. Feel awful. Think there's any way I could put off reporting to Randi?:*

A mental snort. She felt a lot more cheerful this morning. *:You must feel really miserable! I think it can wait. I'll check with Taver:* A pause. *:Tran says not to worry. Focus on resting. He'll send Savil to take a short written report from you:*

*:All right:* He got up and made his way unsteadily from his bedroom to the tiny sitting room, where he dug around his pharmacopeia until he found the powdered willowbark. He did summon a page this time, to ask for hot water – he didn’t like to use magic while feverish.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and immediately regretted it. *Gods, no wonder the page stared at me like that. It’s not because I’m the hero of Fairweather, it’s because I looked terrifying.* Gaunt, pale except for twin spots of red on his cheeks, eyes glassy and sunken with bruised-looking shadows under them. There was a lot more white in his hair, too. He added the rest of the cough-suppressant herbs to the tea he made, and a bit of honey, and then wrapped himself in a warm robe and a blanket and shuffled to the desk. There was quite a stack of letters. He set to work sorting through them, only opening those that sounded pleasant to read and setting the rest aside; he was still working on it when he felt Savil’s presence approaching.

*:Come in:*

She opened the door. “You look like you should be in bed, *ke’chara*,” she said, without further greeting. “And you haven’t been feeding yourself properly either, have you?”

He rolled his eyes, but managed a crooked smile. “It’s good to see you too, aunt. You’re here to take my report to Randi? How is he, by the way?”

She ignored him, reaching to feel his forehead. “You’re running a fever. You really shouldn’t be up.”

“Stop mother-henning me, Savil. I’m resting, aren’t I? Take a seat–” He broke off and tried his best to stifle another coughing fit while digging frantically for a handkerchief.

“Why are all men like this?” She went to pull up a chair, though she kept a fair distance from him; clearly she didn’t want to catch his cold. “All right. Tell me about what you’ve been doing on the Border.”

It wasn't the most cogent report he had every delivered, but Savil knew what questions to ask. By the end of a candlemark, though, he felt worn out; even sitting up was tiring. She must have noticed; she started putting her notes away.

"But I wasn't—"

"Pfah. Go to bed. The rest can keep until tomorrow."

"Thanks, aunt."

#

He lay down and tried to go into trance, to do a bit of self-Healing. He must have fallen asleep at some point; when he woke, he ordered more soup and tea, which he set up on his bedside table and ate propped against the pillow. He fell asleep again midway through eating.

Mid-afternoon found him tossing and turning restlessly. He couldn't get back to sleep, but he didn't have the energy for anything else either. He lay in bed with a row of soiled handkerchiefs on the bedside table, looking irritably at the ceiling.

*: 'Fandes, I'm bored:*

She felt sleepy and contented, though a sliver of worry for him ran through it. *:Bored sounds like an excellent thing, given our last few months. Read a book?:*

He'd tried that, but he couldn't focus even on poetry; his mind was muddled with exhaustion and it made his headache worse.

*:Have you eaten today?:*

*:I had lunch:* He looked with distaste at the cold dregs of soup. *:I'm not hungry.*

*Drinking lots of water though:* Maybe he could preempt the nagging.

*:I'm glad you're being sensible and resting, love. I know it's not your favourite thing:*

A pause. *:Maybe you should see if anyone's around to keep you company for a bit. If Shavri's got time, she could come read a book to you:*

*:There's no way Shavri has time:* He'd exchanged a few letters with her from the Border; hers were short, and he sensed she was very busy. *:I don't want anyone else to catch this, anyway. It's ghastly:* And he wouldn't be good company; he could barely hold onto the thread of his own thoughts, let alone a conversation. *:Maybe I'll take some valerian and just try to sleep more:* Rest would help rebuild his reserves, give him more for self-Healing. Even if he'd felt up for tapping a node, which he didn't, he'd feel silly doing that just to get over a cold faster.

*:Good idea. I might take a nap myself. I feel like I could sleep for a week:*

Vanyel got up and shuffled back out to the living room to look for his valerian, and see if he had any painkillers stronger than willowbark left. *:I feel like an arthritic old man, 'Fandes. This is humiliating:*

Amusement. *:I see why women complain that men are whiny about their illnesses! You're on leave, Van, no one minds you taking a few days to rest. Enjoy the excuse to be lazy – I certainly am! Get some sleep, and you'll feel better in a day or two:* A note of apology. *:I should've made you take better care of yourself out there. Jonne would be disappointed in me:*

*:You did plenty of looking after me:* Vanyel pulled back from the link with her, decided he was too impatient to call a page, and tried to magic the water hot – which was a mistake. His head rang like a gong and he had to sit down and put his head between his knees, fighting dizziness. *And that reminds me why I avoid it.* At least he hadn't been in contact with Yfandes, or she would be giving him a loud 'I told you so'. The water was hot, though, and he made the tea and added drops from several bottles. He drank it fast; it tasted vile. The mix sat uneasily in his stomach as he wove his way back to the bedroom and half-fell into bed.

He was piqued with Yfandes for calling him whiny, even if it was true, and he fell towards sleep without saying goodnight to her.

#

Drugged, dreamless sleep gave way to confused fever dreams – he was back on the Border, looking for a raiding-party he knew was there, it was raining again and he was shivering with cold – then it was a dusty summer day and he was coughing, too hot, trying to fight in armour and dripping with sweat. Then he was cold again, he was lying in a stream full of fish that nibbled at him, no, now it was a forest, birds were singing and he wished they would stop. Shivering, he burrowed under the covers, but a group of Karsite soldiers were yelling insults at him across a creek. He was on his back and one of his cousins was sitting on his chest, calling him names, it was hard to breathe under his weight. His head hurt. He was confusedly trying to check his trap-spells but he couldn't reach the Web properly and kept losing count of how many there were, having to start over. The number of trap-spells was very important. He thought maybe there were thirteen. Geese were flying in skeins overhead and honking, he wished they would stop.

...He struggled awake, pushing the covers off, he was too warm. The only light in the room came from the dull red glow of the fire. He coughed, which sent lancing pain through his chest and head, and scrabbled for a handkerchief from the bedside table. Something fell, and he heard glass breaking and a splash. Oops. *There goes my jug of water.*

His vision was wavering, little spots of colour dancing in the darkness. For a confused moment he thought there were still Karsite soldiers in his room; he could hear their voices. *Gods, I think I'm hallucinating.* It was the fever. He ought to take more willowbark – and drink some water, his lips were cracked and dry with thirst. And maybe see Andrel in the morning, this was at least as bad as the marsh-fever.

He sat up, waited out the painful coughing fit that it triggered, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The soles of his feet felt tender and the cold floor hurt – it was wet, though at least he'd avoided stepping on any broken glass. He ought to summon a page to help clean it up, no, it wasn't worth bothering anyone in the middle of the night.

He waited for the dizziness to pass, then stood up carefully and headed for the other room and his cabinet.

...Halfway there, he started to feel very lightheaded. The spots dancing in his vision intensified. He tried to reach for something to hold onto, but his fingers found only air, and then his knees buckled and he had to sit down abruptly in the middle of the floor. It didn't help; everything was spinning, it was making him nauseated and he felt like he was going to fall right off the earth. He lay down, clinging to the floor, the stone cold under his cheek.

*Damn*, he thought dully. *This is inconvenient*. What time was it? Maybe someone would be awake and could come help him get back to bed. Not that they'd ever let it him live it down. He tried to center and ground, tried to search for Andrel's mind. It was hard to focus and he couldn't seem to extend his Thoughtsensing far enough to reach the Healer's quarters. He tried for Tran, who was closer, and couldn't even manage that.

:*Fandes?*: He could Mindspeak her no matter how distracted he was. But she was deeply asleep. He tried to sit up; he was just dehydrated, he would be all right if he could get more water to drink from the other jug on his desk, even if he had to crawl there... But he could barely raise his head.

:*Yfandes. Help:*

Her half-asleep mind made a shoving motion at him, but then she came fully awake, first with annoyance, then alarm. :*Van? Chosen, what's wrong?:*

*:I'm falling:* He couldn't think with everything spinning like this, and Karsite soldiers were yelling at him again.

*:What? Chosen, you're not making sense. Where are you?:*

He tried to think, tried to push away the fog and fever-hallucinations long enough to form his thoughts into Mindspeech. Where was he again? He must still be in his room, even if there was definitely a forest that hadn't been there before. *:Think I'm...on the floor...fell down...:*

*:Oh, gods! Stay with me, Van, I'm getting help:* He felt her slip into his mind, pulling him into closer rapport. Her strident mindvoice hurt, and he tried to push her away but his shields weren't working properly. There were children playing in a stream nearby and oh, no no, the soldiers were going to find them, he had to warn them but he couldn't move. He was cold again, shivers wracking his body, and the river was freezing over as snow fell, the children would be trapped, he tried to shout a warning but managed only a moan...

*:It's not real. Stay with me, Van. You're ill, they're just fever-dreams:* There was carefully concealed panic in her mindvoice.

He laughed, or tried to. *:I know that...m'fine, just tripped...trying to get more willowbark...:*

*:That is the most ridiculous statement I've ever heard you make, and you've said some pretty ridiculous things to me. You are definitely not fine:*

Running footsteps, coming closer. A knock on the door. "Van?" Tantras' voice. He tried to answer, but he couldn't speak above a whisper.

He heard the rattle of a key-ring. Right. There was a master key for all the doors now, which Tran had. *Probably decided to make it after that time I took too much valerian and scared everyone.* It sometimes felt like his life was a constant series of embarrassing mishaps.

A door opening, then light, someone was holding a candle. He tried to make his eyes focus. Tantras was leaning over him, but his face kept turning into other people. Hands were on his face, icy, then checking the pulse at his neck, and he tried to pull away.

“Gods! You’re burning up. I’m... Here, let me get you back to bed and then I’m bringing a Healer.” He felt arms under him, supporting his head and shoulders, lifting him. The motion made him seasick. “Talk to me, Van.” Something waving in his vision. “How many fingers?”

They wouldn’t stay still long enough to count. He tried to speak but his tongue was too dry, he could only groan. *:Tran, look out...I broke some glass...:* Out of habit, he tried to make a small mage-light, but it didn’t work – nothing happened, only a stabbing pain across his forehead. That alarmed him.

*:Your body’s used up all your energy trying to Heal and you’ve got no reserves left:*  
Yfandes sent, tartly. *:Don’t do that:*

He was in midair now, supported under his knees and back, his head against Tantras’ chest. “Thanks for the warning, I see it.” He felt himself being laid down. “You stay put, now. I almost don’t want to leave you, but... Five minutes, okay? Hang in there.” More running footsteps, this time growing fainter until he couldn’t hear them at all.

He found the strength to burrow under the blankets, and curled up in fetal position, it was hard to breathe and he couldn’t stop shaking. He wanted so badly to sleep...

*:No, don’t sleep yet. Stay with me:*

She stayed in close rapport with him, he wanted to shield her from his sheer physical misery but she wouldn’t let him. He could feel her trying to send him energy through their bond; it didn’t scorch him like node-energy, but he couldn’t find his own center enough to properly take the link and accept it.

A long time later, he heard more footsteps, and voices, low but urgent and coming closer. There was more light through his eyelids; someone was lighting the rest of the candles, he thought.

“Found him collapsed on the floor,” Tantras was saying. “Pulse is really fast, his breathing seems laboured. He’s got a high fever, not that coherent, but he recognized me.”

There was another hand on his forehead. “Hey, hey, can you open your eyes?” He did, and the blur above him slowly resolved into a young woman’s face. He didn’t recognize her, but she wore green robes, and he felt the feather-light touch of her Healing Gift, steadying him, the room wasn’t spinning quite so fast anymore. She spoke slowly and carefully. “Good. Can you tell me your name?”

Gods, Healers were so irritating – he wasn’t that muddled! He tried to suck up some saliva to moisten his tongue. “Vanyel.”

“Very good. Do you know where you are?”

“Haven...my rooms...”

“What’s the date?”

“Gods...I have no idea...past Sovvan?” He started coughing, tears blurring his vision, and felt the young Healer’s hands on his back.

“How long have you been sick?” she said when he had caught his breath.

“He got back from the Border a couple of days ago,” Tantras answered instead.

“Looked like hell then, but not this bad. A moment... Sounds like he picked up a cold a few weeks before the end of their assignment.”

“Well.” He felt her gentle touch again on his forehead. “Herald Vanyel, you’ve got a nasty pneumonia and you’re quite dehydrated – you were starting to go into shock. You’re finding it a little hard to breathe, yeah?”

He managed to nod.

“Well, you should’ve come to us yesterday, but no use crying over spilt milk. Herald Tantras, we need to bring him to the House of Healing, and he certainly can’t walk there. Can you go back and let Gemma know? I’ll stay here with him.”

“But what about—”

“I know about his Gifts. We’ll put him in the shielded room in case he starts projecting. Go, please.”

He went.

“I’m Alia,” the woman said. “I need you to drink some water for me, okay? Here, let’s get you propped up...”

She was strong, with a farmgirl’s sturdy frame, and he helped her as best as he could.

*:’Fandes, this is so humiliating. Everyone’s overreacting:*

*:Shush. You scared the piss out of me, Chosen. Do what the nice Healer says, please:*

The ‘nice Healer’ brought him a cup of water from the other room. He was strong enough to hold it and drink, a little at a time, but he thought it might only be because of the steady infusion of Healing-energy she was keeping up, as she held his other hand with her eyes closed.

A few minutes later, she swore – quietly, but very creatively.

“W-what?” It didn’t seem like a good sign.

She opened her eyes and he tried to make his eyes focus – he could see two of her, both wavering in and out, both very worried. “I suppose if you’re coherent enough to ask, I should tell you. The infection is in your bloodstream – that’s why you’re so shocky and why your fever is so high.” She gave him a disapproving look, lips pursed. “You really should have

come to us yesterday instead of trying to tough it out.” She rolled her eyes. “Damned Heralds.”

*:I'm so sorry, Van – I should've realized you were really ill:*

He was running out of strength; his eyelids felt as heavy as rocks. The half-full cup of water slipped from his hands, some of it spilling onto the bedclothes before Alia could catch it. “Sorry,” she said, with chagrin. Her voice was starting to sound far away.

Pain brought him back – she was pinching the muscle between his neck and shoulder, hard. “Hey,” he mumbled, swatting weakly at her.

“Stay awake. You can't sleep yet, okay? I know it's really hard. I need you to drink more.” She held the cup to his lips. “Another sip and I'll let you rest a minute.”

#

He was barely aware of being carried to the House of Healing – carried, on a litter, with Alia's hand on his shoulder the whole way. They had to go outside for part of it; someone held a canvas over his head, but droplets of rain still blew into his face. He was too hot again and it felt good, soothing. Alia had excellent shields but he could feel her worry and impatience anyway, she hated that it was taking this long.

*:This is the most embarrassing thing that's every happened to me, 'Fandes:*

*:Will you shut up and focus on not dying?:*

*:I'm not that sick!:*

He opened his eyes when they stopped moving, and blinked confusedly, because Yfandes' blue eyes were staring right into his. She nuzzled his cheek.

*:What-:*

*:Shielded room. Stall for me, remember? I'm helping you with your shields, by the way, since I'm sure the nice Healer would rather not have your fever-hallucinations along with you:*

He hadn't even noticed. Tantras, Alia, and two Healer-trainees were sliding him from the stretcher onto a bed. It didn't take any exertion on his part, but somehow it still left him out of breath.

"Thank you, Herald Tantras," Alia was saying. "Why don't you go pack up some of his things that he might want in the morning? We've got it from here." He felt her hand on his forehead again. "Herald Vanyel, we need to bring down your fever – some fever is good, it helps your body fight the infection, but this is high enough to cause damage. I need you to drink some medicine for me, and then we're going to get you out of this disgusting sleeping-robe and sponge you down." She sighed. "What were you doing to yourself down there, anyway?"

He tried to turn away from her voice, which he was thoroughly tired of, especially how she kept speaking to him like he was a rather stupid child. "M' cold...go away..."

*:Listen to her and be cooperative, please:* Yfandes, patient amusement not quite covering up her anxiety.

#

The drugs took the edge off his headache and joint-aches, the tepid sponge bath was miserable but he did feel cleaner afterwards, and there was a wonderful absence of shouting Karsite soldiers – but they wouldn't leave him alone. One of the Healer-trainees, a rawboned boy who couldn't be more than thirteen, kept gently prodding him awake and making him swallow spoonfuls of broth and fruit juice, even though he tried to turn his head away.

*:I need to sleep:* he begged Yfandes.

*:You need fluids more, love. Be patient:*

#

Gemma yawned and fought the urge to lay her head down on the table. *I'm too old for night shifts.* Their patient load wasn't much heavier than usual – with the war so far away, it made sense to set up local Healing stations rather than transporting casualties all the way here – but they were desperately understaffed, with so many Healers down south. She was in charge, and a year ago that would've meant she could sit down at the center station and mainly focus on coordinating everyone else and answering the trainees' questions. But she had been running around all night. Her feet hurt. A lot.

“Gemma?”

She realized she'd been nodding off, and jerked her head up. “What is it, Colby?” She tried to remember which patient he was watching. *I'm not happy with how little we're supervising the trainees, either.*

“Have you seen Alia?”

“She's in room three. What's going on?”

“Um.” He fidgeted with his robes, the paler green of Healer-trainees, too short for him again – he was shooting up like a weed. “Worried about Herald Vanyel.”

She stood up. “I'll come. What's wrong?”

“Just, it's getting harder to wake him. And his Companion seems nervous.”

She sped her pace. *Damn it, Van, you are so inconvenient.* “Why didn't you get someone sooner?”

“Um, he was still talking to me. Mostly telling me to go away. And rambling in some other language. He's not saying words anymore, Alia said that was when I should worry.”

He had left the door to the shielded room ajar. She slipped through after him and shut it. “Heya, Yfandes.” The Companion met her eyes, ears flattened back; she did look very anxious. Gemma dragged over a stool and sat. *No point standing when I don’t have to.* She shook Vanyel’s shoulder. “Hey. Wake up for me.”

He moaned but didn’t open his eyes. She didn’t like how he looked at all – pale with a greyish tint, clammy, breathing rapid and shallow. *Van, I don’t understand how you’re this ill.* He usually bounced back quickly, even from serious injuries, and his little bit of Healing meant he rarely got sick in the first place.

She laid a hand on his forehead, closed her eyes, and reached out with her Othersight. *Gods.* Now she could see why – he had absolutely no reserved energy left. Nothing. She could feel Yfandes trying to send her own energy to him, but it was bouncing off, slipping away uselessly – even a Companion-bond wasn’t deep enough for that kind of sharing when Vanyel was too insensible to hold his end of the link. *If he was still lifebonded he could draw on that...* Of all the pointless things to wish for.

She reached for his mind – Yfandes was holding shields on him, but let her through. She prodded. *:Van. Wake up:* He moaned and stirred, flinching away from the contact, but she couldn’t rouse him.

“Colby,” she said, her voice coming out toneless. “This is a good instructional moment for you. When someone looks like this, it’s very, very bad and you need to get the most senior Healer *immediately.* Which you did, so good job. Now go find me some more help, please, and come right back.”

He darted past.

“Remember you always close the door to the shielded room behind you,” she said. Not that it mattered right now, Vanyel had nothing left to project with, but important to get them into the habit.

It took more feeling around than she liked, but she managed to find his center and get a link to him, so that she could start feeding him her own energy. Slowly, a trickle, just enough to stabilize him. She felt his breathing grow a little steadier; she didn't want to do much more until she had backup. Even the most skilled Healers couldn't provide all the energy themselves – the patient had to offer some, and Vanyel had nothing to give. If she pushed too hard, she would lose him.

*This is very much not what I wanted to deal with tonight.* She sighed and held the link. *At least I can be sitting down.*

She was deep enough in trance that she didn't notice Colby was back until he touched her shoulder. “Gemma? I've got Alia and Tavi.” Tavi was another of the trainees, even newer than Colby.

She opened her eyes. “Heya.”

Alia was looking at her with consternation. “Gemma, I – I checked on him half a candlemark ago and he didn't look nearly this bad. What did I miss?”

“Probably nothing. My guess is he got too drowsy to hold his end of the link with ‘Fandes, would've only had to have been for a moment, and went into a downward spiral. Could've happened in minutes. How're your other folks? You warned someone you'd be in here a while?”

“Um, fine, and I told Katri.”

“Good. We're jumping in a Healing-meld. Colby, Tavi, ever done it before?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

She raised her eyebrows at Tavi. “Lucky you. It’s quite the experience. Alia, join with me first, then pull them in.” She couldn’t spare the attention to manage an uncertain link with a new trainee.

Alia reached for her effortlessly, like clasping hands, and she pulled her into close rapport, then felt the two others joining. She felt around for their shared energy. *Not as much as I’d like, but I can’t pull Katri in as well, she’s the only full Healer left on the ward.*

Well, it was worth asking. “Yfandes? Any chance you’d hop in with us?”

A pause. *:Yes:* The Companion’s mindvoice sounded just like her mother. Gemma had never mindtouched a Companion directly before. A moment later, she felt Yfandes reaching out – and her energy was there, clean, blue-white, not like a human’s aura at all.

*:Thank you:* She took a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

#

He was in a place of formless white mist, and a very familiar figure clad in Herald’s Whites was looking at him. He didn’t feel ill at all – breathing was effortless, and no part of him hurt.

“Let’s get the formalities out–” the Shadow-Lover started to say.

He held up a hand. “Same choice? Any new information?”

“Not as such.”

“Then I’m going back. Again.” He covered his face with both hands. “Are you kidding me? Six months on the border, I’ve been attacked in every way possible, and the closest I’ve come to dying is of a cold?” He stomped angrily over and sat. “This is the most embarrassing thing that’s ever happened to me.”

He had the sense that the Shadow-Lover’s eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“Can you imagine the story? Famous Herald-Mage Vanyel dies in his bed, in Haven, of pneumonia. Only old people die that way. It’s ridiculous. I’ll be a laughingstock.”

“I doubt it.” There was a smile somewhere in that shadowed face. The white-clad figure sat down next to him, close but without touching. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“...Talk about what?”

“About what led up to this. You were not taking very good care of yourself.”

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Please, not you too.” But he had to take it seriously, and it was easier to think about things here – here, where he was never tired or thirsty or in pain, here where even the empty place in the back of his mind stopped aching. He really ought to take advantage of it. “I... I don’t know. I was distracted. I was... I don’t like admitting weakness. I don’t like being weak. I was mostly shielding Yfandes out from how I was feeling because I was guilty, she wasn’t in much better shape. And I was tired of her nagging me. We kept rubbing each other the wrong way.” He shrugged. “That Healer in Deerford told me I needed to pay more attention to my body. Obviously he was right. I was being an idiot.” Yet another mistake he’d repeated, like an fool, another life lesson he should really have learned the first time around. “But it didn’t feel like I had time to worry about it.”

“And was this work at the Border worth your life?”

Well, when you put it that way... “No. Obviously not. Gah.” He looked up, met those sapphire eyes. “I think I was trying to not think about the future, by working really hard on what was in front of me.” He remembered how it had felt, stretching out grey and hopeless, everything broken forever. It was easy to step outside of that now – but at the time, it had encompassed everything.

Seeing Melody had helped, she’d been able to point out that it wasn’t reality – that his exhaustion and the endless parade of horrors explained why he felt that way, but that didn’t

mean it was true. Still, even when he'd been able to remember intellectually that there were good things in the world, still worth protecting, and that someday this would end – even when he repeated the words to himself, he hadn't really been able to believe it. It hadn't felt worth saving anything for a future that was hard to even care about.

“Yes.” An outstretched arm. “Stay here as long as you wish. Take a moment outside Time to rest. You have more than earned it.”

“I fully intend to.” The last thing he wanted to do right now was go back to his body. He looked at the Shadow-Lover, wondered if he still had to ask, and then shrugged mentally and just leaned into his chest. “I'm trying to do the smart thing, the right thing, but I'm tired and it's hard and sometimes too much happens too fast and I make stupid choices.” Like killing a thousand Karsites in an instant. “What if I can't do this? What if I'm not good enough?”

“I know. The world does not make it easy.” The arms of a godlike being held him gently. “Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

“Yes. A lot of things.” Where to even start? He could think so much better here – even if he had trouble remembering their conversations clearly, he could make connections he hadn't before, and remember those. “What Leareth said to me. About guilt wanting to tell me something – about trying to make myself stronger and smarter now, so I'll do better in the future. Melody told me...” He hadn't been able to tell Melody about Leareth, of course, but he'd been able to bring up some things without explaining where or with who the conversations had happened, and she hadn't asked.

“Melody said to remember I was human. To stop expecting that I can always make the right call and do everything perfectly, because that's impossible. That it was harder when everyone else thought I was more than human, that of course I'd be tempted to hold myself to

that standard, but I still had to remember.” He hadn’t realized how much that had been contributing – how much pressure he’d been putting on himself. *Lancir always helped me remember to be gentle with myself, and I thought I’d learned, but I guess I forgot once he wasn’t there to remind me.* “I told her I didn’t matter as much as Valdemar, and she said – she said that was true, and that I was losing sight of it. That the way I was acting, I was clearly trying harder just to be virtuous, to live up to my image, and not thinking about the results anymore. That it ought to be obvious I could do a better job overall if I took care of myself.” It had been a startling, painful comment; he still wasn’t sure he agreed, but he couldn’t ignore it. “She said trying to be perfect, acting like that was even possible, was making it harder for me to be good enough.”

He fell silent.

“A very wise woman,” the Shadow-Lover said. “And what are you going to learn from it?”

He turned the question over. “Well, I think…”

#

–And he was back, swimming up out of the darkness, coughing and gasping, he couldn’t breathe. His head felt ready to split open. There were hands under his chest, supporting him half-sitting and bent over.

*:That’s it: Gemma’s mindvoice. :Keep coughing, clear it out:* A moment later he felt her thumping his back. Which hurt, a lot.

He couldn’t exactly do otherwise – it was involuntary. *This isn’t any more fun than I expected,* he thought with irritation as he spat out a disgusting wad of phlegm. He had spent a very long time talking to the Shadow-Lover, hoping to put it off.

He felt Yfandes' presence, her light all around him. *:Ah, so you did talk to him. I wondered:*

*:What happened?:* Mindspeech felt incredibly effortful. He tried to think of the last thing he remembered. Probably the godforsaken Healer-trainee trying to make him drink juice. Everything had been getting very hazy.

*:You fell asleep. I told you not to:* He felt her mental snort. *:Well, maybe more accurate to say you passed out. I know it wasn't on purpose. I realized my energy wasn't getting through to you anymore, tried to get the trainee's attention, Gemma came in here and started a Healing-meld, I helped, and about ten minutes in your heart stopped beating:*

*:Oh:*

*:Gemma stayed very calm, threw a ton of Healing-energy at you and you came back. Similar to what Shavri did the time by the river. Anyway. You scared the crap out of me, Van! I should've known an old friend just wanted to chat:*

He would have laughed if he'd had any breath to spare.

Gemma's mind brushed his again. *:Van, are you awake? Talk to me:*

*:Gemma:* He knew he wasn't managing the protocol – more like flailing at her. Gods, his control hadn't been this bad since the early days at k'Treva. *:Sorry:*

*:You'd better be. Can't believe you had the gall to pull something like this on night shift:* He could tell she was teasing, though.

It was starting to feel easier to breathe, finally.

“Good,” he heard Gemma say out loud. “Let's lay him down. Tavi, get the pillows.”

He kept his eyes closed as they lifted and settled him with his head and shoulders propped up.

Running footsteps. “Let me in!” Savil's voice, muffled.

Another voice, unfamiliar. “It’s not a good time—”

“Let me in *right now* or I swear to all the gods, I will blast down the door!”

“Let her in,” Gemma said wearily, raising her voice a little. “She’s family.

Herald-Mage Savil, please stop shouting and calm down. He’s fine.”

“Fine was *not* the impression I got.” He felt a gust of air as the door opened and shut, then heard her footsteps moving towards him. He could feel her presence now, and tried to reach for her with Mindspeech, but even that short distance felt like a hundred miles.

“Well, it was touchy for a bit, but everything’s all right now.”

Vanyel felt her hand slip over his, and her mindtouch. *:Ke’chara?:*

*:Savil:* He leaned into the link. She could always make him feel safe. *:Glad you’re*

*here:*

## Chapter Twelve

“So?” Randle said, quietly. “How is he?”

They were in one of the smaller meeting-rooms, just the three of them, Savil and Tantras and the King. With everyone so busy, they often didn’t have time for meetings of the whole Circle.

She shook her head. “Stable. Recovering. He’ll need a while to get his strength back.”

Tantras swallowed. Lowered his head. “I should have brought him home sooner.”

She sighed. “I wish you had, but... I know how limited our options were. And it’s not like he told us how worn down he was, so you weren’t making an informed choice, and that’s not your fault. I’ve spoken to him about that.” Rather sharply. And Vanyel had been quite contrite, to her surprise. She’d expected a great deal more denial, defensiveness, and general insistence that he was definitely fine.

Randle laid a hand on Tantras’ shoulder, briefly. “It’s not your fault.” He paused. “So, Savil? What’s the estimate for how long he needs before we can send him out again?”

Tantras covered his face with his hands. “I don’t want to send him out there again *ever.*”

“Well, that’s not exactly on the table, is it?” Savil said dryly. “Not before Midwinter at the very soonest, Gemma says.” Months away. *How are we going to manage?* It wasn’t the worst time to have him out of action, now that their numbers were finally up, and hopefully the Karsites would take a while to notice that he wasn’t out there anymore. Maybe they could spread some rumours, disinformation. *They’re terrified of him. We can use that.*

“We do need to learn from it,” she went on. “In the short run, he doesn’t need rest as much as our other mages, since he can use node-energy to supplement his reserves. In the long run, he’ll destroy himself doing that. Since this is looking to be a longer war than we hoped, we need to be strategic about when and where we make use of him.”

Tantras had mostly recovered his composure; he nodded. “I’ll do some thinking, talk to Keiran. We maybe shouldn’t have been using him so much for Farsight and Mindspeech coverage, since we do have other Farseers and Mindspeakers. He’s not indispensable there. But he is the only one who can, well, do what he does in major battles.”

They didn’t have anyone else who was both a Farseer and a strong Mindspeaker, Savil thought. Efrem was a much stronger Farseer than Vanyel, but he didn’t have Mindspeech at all. Still, the right two Heralds working together could fill that role. Not perfectly, but they could make do.

“How’s his morale?” Randle said after a moment.

She snorted. “About what you’d expect. He hates being stuck in bed and feels horribly guilty that he’s not being useful. He’s cranky, bored half to death, and taking it out on everyone else. Other than that...” She chewed her lip. “Well, it’s been hard for him. Being treated like a hero when he feels like a murderer.” Her voice came out harsher than she’d intended. “You know he hates attention. Gods, and people being afraid of him. He’s bearing

up well, but it is getting to him.” The look on his face had made her want to cry. Still did, when she remembered.

After a lot of prodding, he had finally told her about seeing a Mindhealer in Horn, and admitted that was why he’d gotten leave at all. It seemed like he’d done it mostly on his own initiative, with only a little pushing from Yfandes – she was proud of him for that. Lancir had put a lot of work into making sure he’d ask for help if he ever needed it. *Gods, this could have been so much worse.* He must have been one bad day away from collapsing out in the field somewhere.

“I’ll make time to visit him,” Tantras said. “Somehow.”

“Well, don’t take it personally if he’s rude to you. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, either.”

Tantras chuckled. “He doesn’t handle it well, does he? Being forced to rest.”

“Most of us don’t.” *I certainly don’t, even now.* It had been one of the worst things about her gruelling Gate-schedule, having to spend a day in bed unable to do anything productive.

“I should visit as well,” Randale said. “Figure he’s earned that, after the miracles he’s wrought for us.”

*Don’t call the miracles to his face,* she thought but didn’t say.

#

Vanyel set down the book he had been trying to read and frowned at Shavri as she closed the door behind her. The door opening had startled him; he was still very jumpy, even a week after leaving the Border, and the inside of his head stung from his reflexive attempt to reach for a node.

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?”

“I’m on break.” She smiled tiredly and pulled over a chair, smoothing down her green robes. “Not often I get to spend it with one of my best friends.”

He raised his eyebrows. She’d come by before, but he had still been very out of it the first few times. Now that he had his wits about him, he really noticed the change in her. She had lost weight, and moved more slowly, with none of her usual bounce. There were dark circles under her eyes and worry-lines around her mouth. *You’re too young to have worry-lines, Shavri*, he thought. *What’s going on?* He didn’t know how to ask.

“You look better,” she said.

“I’m starting to feel better. Finally.” The fever had broken, and he didn’t really feel ill anymore. He was quite comfortable as long as he didn’t move, but he was still as weak as a newborn kitten, and even the effort of sitting up would leave him lightheaded and short of breath.

They had stopped giving him the stronger painkillers, and his mind was clear. It made it nearly intolerable to be stuck in here. He was sleeping a lot, even without the drugs, but not enough to fill all his time. At least he had Yfandes to talk to, though he thought she was getting rather tired of him. “Don’t know why it’s taking so long.” Five days already.

“You’re actually recovering quite fast, given how ill you were,” she said. “You got out of bed today, right?”

He grimaced. It had taken two trainees to get him upright, and he hadn’t even made it as far as the window. *At least this room has windows*. There wasn’t much of a view, but he could see a tiny bit of sky.

*I ought to be recovering faster*. Yfandes had been sharing her energy with him, helping him rebuild his reserves, and whenever he could manage to concentrate, he was spending time in trance working on self-Healing.

“Might help if you ate more,” Shavri said, smiling crookedly.

“I am deeply not excited about soup.” Though at least he could feed himself now.

“Well, maybe I’ll see if I can sneak you something more exciting.” Then her smile faded, eyes staring into the distance. He didn’t think she was seeing the tapestry on the wall.

He reached out with Mindspeech. *:Shavri, what’s bothering you?:*

She shook her head. *:Nothing:*

*:It’s not nothing:* Still she hesitated. *:Shavri, you know you can trust me:*

Jerkily, she smoothed down her hair. *:It’s just... This isn’t the life I wanted, Van:*

*:Randi being King?:*

*:Any of it. Damn it, Van, it’s not fair! Not fair to Randi either, but he’s making the best of it. And I feel like I’m failing him. Because I can’t deal with it. Because I’m sitting here whining like a little girl about how I don’t want to be lifebonded to the King, when half the women in Valdemar would trade places with me in a heartbeat:* She swiped at her eyes, glittering with tears. *:When I should be grateful for what I have. How lucky I am, to be a Gifted Healer, with a wonderful daughter, and a man who loves more more than anything else in the world. More than the kingdom he’s supposed to rule:* She cupped her hands to her face. *:Even though he shouldn’t:*

He had never felt those depths of anguish from her. Not when she’d lost patients – not when she had found out Randi was sterile. Bitterness, resentment, anger, a deep undercurrent of shame.

*:Shavri, please–:*

Her mindvoice cut over his. *:I shouldn’t matter that much. I never wanted to matter, not like this. All I ever wanted was to be a Healer and a mother. I’m not – I wasn’t meant for*

*this. Trying to support Randi, when I hate everything about the work he's doing. I've been trying so hard, to be who he needs, and I can't, Van. I can't do it:*

She was crumpled in the chair, hugging herself with her head down on her knees, and he wished he could hold her. *:Shavri: What he could even say to her? :Shavri, it's all right to resent it. It isn't fair:* No more than his own life.

She lifted her head, dabbing at her red-rimmed eyes, and dug in the pocket of her robes for a handkerchief. *:Sorry, Van. Shouldn't be complaining to you of all people:*

*:It's okay. I really do understand:* Hadn't he said almost the exact same words to Lancir, once?

*:Better than anyone else:* She blew her nose, looking apologetic. *:Gods, Van... You have to deal with so much worse:* She didn't say Leareth's name, but he knew she was thinking it. *:At least you're good at it:*

He bit back a laugh. *:Good at it? Which part? I can throw power around like no one else, but I can't really take credit for that. I'm not good at most of the rest:*

*:You're incredibly dedicated, you've got good judgement, a head for tactics, you're good with people... Gods, Van, I could go on all day:*

He let out his breath. *:Shavri, I really wasn't most of those things, at the start. If you'd met me when I was fifteen, you'd never have picked me for a Herald, let alone... Let alone all the rest. I was a coward, I was arrogant, I was incredibly shallow and I didn't care about anyone except myself. If I'm a good person at all, it's because of Yfandes. And 'Lendel: It hurt less to say his name, now, his thought slipping off the block. :And I didn't exactly have good judgement at the beginning. I had to learn. Took a lot of practice. Making a lot of mistakes. I almost had to become a different person:*

Shavri shook her head helplessly. *:I... I'm not brave like you, Van. I couldn't do all that:*

*:You're one of the bravest people I know:* He meant it. She had never wanted to be a hero, but a Healer had to be brave. And he wasn't brave – that wasn't it. *I'm just not afraid anymore, because the worst that could possibly happen to me already has.* Shavri still had so much to lose.

He reached out to her, though it took far more of his strength than he liked to admit, and she scooted closer and took his hand.

*:Shavri, you care about doing the right thing. A lot. That's why you're hurting so much, isn't it?:*

*:I don't want to be a failure:* Her fingers clenched around his, convulsively. *:But I don't know what I'm here for. If there even is a reason. Taver tried to Choose me. Gods, Van, I keep wondering what he knew that I didn't:* She raised brimming eyes. *:Yfandes helps you be a good person, Van. What if...what if I could be good enough, if only I'd let him Choose me? What if that was my mistake?:*

He closed his eyes. *Not about virtue. Only about results.* Opened them. *:I don't know. Shavri, listen – I really think that anything you can do with a Companion, you can do without. It might take longer, it might be harder – but it'll be all you. You'll know you never gave up who you are. And I'm here, I'll do whatever I can to help. Tantras. Savil. Randi, if you're willing to talk to him about this:* He frowned. *:You haven't yet, have you?:*

She shuddered. *:No. He knows something's wrong, but he's not pushing me. I, I don't want him to think badly of me...:*

*:He won't. I don't think that's possible:* He squeezed her hand. *:Tell him, all right? Please. It's not fair to him to hide this:*

She nodded, sniffing. They sat in silence for a moment.

*:You will do it: Vanyel sent. :Whether or not you can, you will. Somehow. Because you can't walk away: Tied to the world by a silver string, the same crossroads a million times and they would always make the same choice. :You can't see something wrong in the world, know that you and only you can fix it, and turn away:*

*:Damn it, Van, that's the problem: She shook her head. :I sometimes wish I could just...not try. Be an ordinary Healer, raise Jisa, ask Randi not to talk about his work. And he'd let me, and he wouldn't think I was doing anything wrong. But I – I can't. Not when he needs me. Not even if it breaks me:*

He hesitated. It might be the wrong thing to say, but... *:Then we can be broken together:* He met her eyes. No, he couldn't tell her he would always be there for her; it would be a lie. *:I'll be there for you as long as I can:*

#

Tantras sat with his back against the wood of Taver's stall, one hand resting on his Companion's neck. *If I stay here, maybe no one will find me for a bit.*

It had been the longest, hardest year of his life so far. The first blow, Lancir's death, the shock of being Chosen, somehow, a second time – and the second blow, scant months later, a new King, a new war, bad news after bad news. He had been trying so hard – not just the long days, but really thinking, questioning his decisions, checking his judgement. He had known he was out of his depth, and found experienced people he could ask for help. Savil and Jaysen in particular had done so much. And Taver, of course. Their bond was different from his bond to Delian – and the place where that had been still lingered in his mind, not exactly painful, but certainly strange. In those first few months he had gone to see Delian in

Companion's Field every day, even if just for five minutes, but eventually it had started to seem pointless. *He's not my Companion anymore.*

Taver wasn't as close to him, but in some ways he was far more supportive. Delian had always hung back, waiting for him to ask for advice, and sometimes smugly refusing to provide it and telling him he could manage on his own. Taver wasn't nosy, exactly, but he certainly shared more of his opinions. *He knows I need all the help I can get.*

This morning he'd found a white hair. He had just the barest hint of crow's feet around his eyes. Thirty-two years old, and sometimes he felt a hundred.

*I tried so hard, and I nearly killed one of my best friends.* The Healers said Vanyel was out of danger, and he had finally been moved back to his own rooms, but it was taking him a long time to recover his stamina. Tantras had visited frequently, it helped allay his guilt, and Van was better company now that he was in his own bed and could mostly care for himself. *He hates feeling dependent on others.*

He'd spent a half-candlemark there this afternoon, in between two meetings, and Vanyel had had him in gales of laughter, recounting a story about a particular incident with a Guard called Jonne and some hot springs. There had been other, less happy stories as well. Eye-opening. Tantras had known, intellectually, that things were bad down south, but he hadn't really thought about it. Hadn't wanted to think about it. It had been so tempting to reduce it to numbers on a page, trying not to connect the names to specific people.

*:Sometimes the only way to think clearly is to compartmentalize:* Taver sent. There was less of the reaching rapport and warmth there had been with Delian. Touching Taver's mind was like brushing the edges of an old star. *Gods, I should stop comparing them. This isn't helpful.*

*:I do not mind. It is very human:* It was always hard to figure out Taver's emotions; there was an alienness there. *:I am different. You will be used to me in time:*

He leaned against Taver's side. *:I am getting used to you. You're my Companion in my dreams, now:* For months and months, it had still been Delian. *I wonder if he compares me to Lancir...* No, that was probably inappropriate to ask about.

*:Again, I do not mind. The answer is that I cannot really compare one bond to another. You are much like Lancir in some ways, and different in many, because you are different people:*

He hesitated. *:Do you miss him?:*

*:I miss all of them:* But there was no pain in his mindvoice – or, if it was pain, it was inhuman enough to be hard to recognize. *:It is something I can bear, because I am meant to:*

#

Randale stared dully into the fire, fiddling with the paperweight on his desk. Shavri had gone to put Jisa to bed a candlemark ago – their daughter had a governess now, but Shavri still made time, somehow, to read to her every bedtime. She was probably in bed herself; she had an early shift at the House of Healing. He ought to join her soon, if he wanted to have any time to cuddle and talk before she fell asleep – but if he left his own quarters to brave the hallway, someone was likely to stop him and ask him about something or other, and he couldn't handle that right now.

Gods, and Jisa was old enough to start asking questions. *Why don't you and Mama live in the same room?* They had mostly been living together when she was born; Shavri had moved her things to his room in Darvi's suite years before, and only slept in her room at Healers' when she had to stay late and didn't want to wake him. Now he was in the much

larger set of rooms set aside for the King, and the Queen's rooms were empty. *Nothing's ever going to be like it was.*

He missed a lot of things. Having time to just go riding together, to have picnics on the lawn – and not having a guard accompanying him everywhere he went. They'd kept an eye on him from a distance, he knew, but he hadn't been quite so much of a target. *We weren't at war then either.*

Better that Shavri went on staying in the Healers' wing. It wasn't a secret that they were lifebonded, but it wasn't common knowledge, and the longer he could keep that true, the safer she would be. And Jisa. His throat clenched. She wasn't in the line of succession, and if Shavri had her way she never would be – though, gods, he wanted it. *I know I'll never have another child, even if I do marry some stranger.*

But even the King's supposed bastard might be a target for assassination, if they knew a hint of how much he loved her. He would be useless for months if anything happened.

He ought to go to bed. Ought to stop staring into space ruminating on how much better things had been before. It was a pointless waste of energy that he didn't have to spare, and he was doing it anyway, because Sondra was asleep and there was no one there to tell him not to.

“Randi?”

He jerked his head up; he hadn't even heard the door open. Shavri stood there in the candlelight, uncertainly, hair tousled.

“Thought you were in bed,” he said.

“Can't sleep.” She came to him, resting her hands on his shoulders. “I missed you.”

“I’m sorry. Was going to come, but you know how people gang up on me if I show my face.” Even his quarters weren’t safe from that, but at least only the highest-ranking people in Haven felt comfortable bothering him there.

“It’s all right. We can sleep here tonight. Beri’s with Jisa.”

He reached for her mind – he wasn’t much of a Mindspeaker, but it was easier with her. *:I love you, Shavri:*

*:I know:* She kissed the top of his head. *:I love you too:*

He spoke out loud. “Have a drink with me, and then we’ll go to bed?” He stood up and went to find his decanter and two cups, then sat and pulled her into his lap.

She took a drink, and then leaned back and turned her head to look at him. He felt her stiffen just a little – felt, through their bond, how she steeled herself. “How was your day?”

He shook his head. “We don’t have to talk about that.” Though, gods, he wanted to.

“I want to.” She shifted in his arms. “I know I haven’t been much of a partner to you.”

“You’ve been everything I could ever ask for.”

She switched to Mindspeech. *:Is it fair to ask so little of me? I’m not as fragile as all that, Randi:* There was pain in the overtones, but buried under a rock-hard determination. She spoke out loud. Matter-of-fact. “I’ve asked Aber to cut my hours at the House of Healing. So we can have supper together again.”

“Shavri, I’m not sure *I* have time for that!” He usually ate at his desk. Or in meetings.

“Tran says he’ll damn well make sure you have time. Anyway. Tell me what’s on your mind, Randi.”

So many things. “I could start with Lord Leverance. I don’t know how to handle him. He really is extremely competent, and we need that, but he’ll scheme endlessly for his family’s interests. Tries to wring concessions out of me for every single decision that might

impose a cost on his people. Hells, he took me aside in private and said he'd only approve the levy on a quarter of his armymen if I arranged to marry his daughter to Lord Lathan's oldest son!"

"Ew." Shavri wrinkled her nose.

"My thoughts exactly. He thinks it's a fair part of the game, though. I'll probably do it, if I can find a way of checking with his daughter and making sure it won't make her life miserable. It's advantageous for both families, don't see why Lathan wouldn't go along."

Shavri shook her head. "I'll never understand the highborn and their marriage customs. Hmm. This is his eldest daughter? Julietta?"

He felt his eyebrows rising. "You know her?"

"Treated her for marsh-fever when she was a child. A sweet girl. I can probably find a way to ask her, if that would help."

"It really would." He'd had no idea how to go about approaching a young woman he'd never met to ask such a personal question.

"Well, I'll do it. I hear Lord Lathan's son isn't as loathsome as his father, anyway."

He laughed. "How do you know he's loathsome?" She didn't mix at all in Court circles – he had no idea how she could be up to date on gossip.

Shavri laughed as well, though it was a little forced. "Van says Savil complains about him constantly. And all the Healers hate him. He's been in a few times for his gout and he's horrible to us."

"Well, I'm not surprised. He's a toad and he detests Heralds. Reckon he'd hate Healers too."

She shook her head. "I don't understand how anyone could hate Heralds."

“Figure we baffle him. He’s annoyed he can’t bribe us. I’m more puzzled by people who think it’s all right to be rude to Healers, when they put their lives in your hands.” He sighed. “Though he’s otherwise good at his job. Can’t figure it.”

“Well, the one doesn’t always go with—”

The Death Bell rang.

Randi bolted upright in the chair, nearly knocking Shavri out of his lap; he did spill his wine. All over his Whites. *Goddamn it, who was it this time?* There was a heavy, sick feeling in his chest. *I hate it. I hate sending my people out to die.*

He could feel Shavri trying to send love and comfort through their bond – and reaching out with her Healing Gift, tamping down the panic-reaction in his body. He didn’t know of any other Healer who could do that. *She really is amazing...* Focus. He closed his eyes, centering himself, and reached for Sondra.

He could feel her reaching back, first with a wordless rush of reassurance. Then: *:It’s Deedre:*

Oh. *Not someone on the Border.* The relief hit him – and, a moment later, the shame. *How can I be relieved?*

*:She died in her bed. It was quick. Her heart gave out:*

Well, the Herald-Mage had been very old. Older than Elspeth, gods, she must have been past eighty. She’d done little other than research and teaching these recent years, and only worked with advanced trainees who needed little supervision. *We can cover her duties easily enough. Don’t even need to replace her in the Web, since Van made the modifications.* And, again, he felt a wash of guilt – that he could think of her like a game piece, to be removed from the board and replaced by another.

*:You’re the King, Chosen. It’s your job to think that way:*

But, gods, it wasn't right. He didn't even feel especially sad – and the shame of that fact made him feel worse than grief would have. *How can I be this heartless?*

“Randi?”

He squeezed her tight. “Shavri, I... It's Deedre.” *:Sondra, what do I need to do tonight?:*

*:Nothing. Tantras will handle any arrangements we need to make before the morning:*

*:I should–:*

*:No. It's his job. Let him do it:*

“I'm sorry,” she whispered.

“It's all right.” He nudged her gently off his lap, and stood. “I should clean up. And then go to bed. Tran has it covered.”

“Do you–”

“I don't want to talk about it now. Later, maybe.” His voice came out a lot firmer than he'd intended. *I spend so much time trying to command people, I can't even speak gently to my lifebonded.* “I'm sorry, Shavri. Just...”

“I understand.” She brushed a hand across his shoulder, then headed for the cabinet for a cloth.

#

“Gods, Van, I'm tempted to assign you to Haven permanently,” Randi said, a little wonderingly. “You've an incredible head for this. No one's helped me lay it out so clearly.”

They were in his private office. He had changed a lot of the decor in the first months after Elspeth's death. The walls were bare, save for a number of canvases bearing Jisa's early attempts at artwork, a progression from scribbles, to misshapen stick figures, to people that were sometimes recognizable – the lumpy lettering underneath provided identification when

they weren't. *I'd know that one's of me even without the caption*, Vanyel thought. *She's terrifyingly precocious*. Not even four years old yet, and she could already read and write.

Randi's desk was spread with a large plain canvas, covered with a number of broad foolscap sheets, and they had spent the last two candlemarks talking through all of his unformed thoughts on the war effort, from the highest-level strategy down to specific troop placements.

Vanyel just shook his head. "It's how I've dealt with not being smart enough for the work I have to do. Write everything down."

Randi laughed. "It's not just that. Tran writes everything down too, but lists just aren't the same."

*I learned it from Leareth*. The man's odd, mathematical way of looking at the world had changed how he thought about a lot of things.

"Anyway. It's very helpful. Now, you said there were some things you wanted to talk about?" Randi shuffled the papers together into a stack. "Still up for it?"

"Yes." His energy was definitely fading, it was past his usual bedtime, but he wasn't sure when he would have another chance to talk to Randi uninterrupted like this. *Surely I don't actually need the amount of sleep I've been getting*. Twelve candlemarks a night at least.

*:You do. Van, listen to your body. Please don't ignore when you're tired:*

A month ago, he would have snapped something back at Yfandes. He was less easily riled these days. *:I know. I'll manage a while longer:*

*:Well, if you say so. If you wear yourself out and can't get back to your quarters on your own, you've only yourself to blame:*

He smiled a little. It wouldn't be the first time he'd misjudged his strength and had to call on Savil or Andrel for help. They were kind enough not to tease him about it, and this time, it would be a price worth paying.

"Wanted to talk about a few things," he said. "The Web, for one. Secondly – and I know this isn't a good time, with the war and all, but some things to do with policy." He had been doing a lot of thinking. There wasn't much else to do, he was still banned from any duties more strenuous than answering mail.

"Oh?"

"I'll start with the Web. I want to make another round of modifications, as soon as I have the strength for it. Nearly all of our mages are in it now, we've got power to spare, so I'd like to make the alarm threshold more sensitive, and tweak some parameters. And, I have an idea about how we could use it to specifically detect foreign mages." He hesitated.

"Please say more."

"Well, I'm not sure it'll work – and I think it will have to wait until we've figured out an alternate power source. Meaning it needs to happen after I've been able to spend some time at k'Treva." That was the bottleneck now; the reinforced node under the Palace was more than strong enough. "My communication-spell just isn't enough, and it's not guaranteed to be secure." He'd figured that out for himself – and informed Leareth, which had earned him a look of real respect. "Meaning I need to Gate, and I can't in this condition. Wouldn't be safe even if Savil raised the Gate for me."

"There's no way they'll come here?"

His breath escaped in a gust. "Gods, no! They never, ever leave their land, Randi. I'm not sure they *can*."

“Right. Legend says they have that strange pact with their Goddess. Is that really true?”

“Best as I can tell. Don’t know how I’d check it.” He was still dubious, but – well, maybe he ought not to be. He’d met a god personally, or at least part of one. “If not for the war, it would be a very good time to go. They’re moving the Vale.”

Randi looked blank. “Why?”

“They do it every so often. Cleanse the surrounding land, make it safe, then move deeper into the Pelagirs. Most of Valdemar was Tayledras territory, long enough back.” Knowing that, he’d been able to find signs of it as far east as Traderest. “Anyway, it’s been decades since their last move. They’re due.”

“What does that have to do with–”

“They’re moving the Heartstone. Starwind and Moondance can talk me through the theory all they like, but the best chance I’ll have to succeed at this is if I can observe the process.”

Randi was silent for a long moment, staring into the distance while his hands absently rustled the pile of notes. “When would the next opportunity be, after this?” he said finally.

“Not for fifteen or twenty years.” Which, in practice, amounted to never. *Gods, I’m tired of counting down the years like this.* His hair was already about halfway to the way it looked in the dream.

Another pause. “Go after Midwinter,” Randi said. “You’ll be able to handle Gating by then, right?”

He stared at him. “But the war–”

“Will keep. Hasn’t been much movement – there can’t be, winter’s hit. We’ve got fifty Heralds down there, more than twenty Herald-Mages, and by our best guess, our troops

actually outnumber theirs now.” He shrugged. “It’s a gamble, but in the worst case, we could Gate you back and have you functional in a few days, no?”

That was true. Gods, this wasn’t sustainable – the Guard now numbered nearly three percent of the total population, and they were still recruiting to replace the losses. The other three Borders were stripped to minimum levels, and half the inner circuits were uncovered, or amounted to it, with one Herald covering what four once had. They’d done it, but it had come at a cost, which would only get higher over time.

“I think we need to take the risk,” Randi said. “If you can really do this, well, it could turn the tide of the whole war. We can’t afford to be caught thinking short-term anymore.”

His voice was soft, but that ringing authority was in it again. *He’s changed so much*, Vanyel thought, wonderingly. He wouldn’t have thought Randi capable of it – well, and that was unfair to him, wasn’t it? *We all do our best to grow into the roles we need to fill.*

“All right,” he said, bowing his head a little.

The air seemed to hang heavy around them for a second. He closed his eyes for a moment. *What would you think of me now, ‘Lendel? Sitting with the King in his personal office, making plans for the biggest mage-working since King Valdemar built the Web?* There was an ache in his chest, muted, distant behind the block. Oddly, he would have preferred if it were sharper. *It feels like forgetting you, ashke.* He didn’t think he had a choice, right now, he couldn’t afford for it to distract him, but still.

“What else was there?” Randi said, breaking the silence, his voice ordinary again.

Where to start? “Randi, you know I’ve read a ridiculous number of books.” And had, over the years, hundreds of eye-opening conversations in an icy dreamland. “I have some theories – and, well, maybe they’re stupid, but I thought I’d share them anyway.”

Raised eyebrows. “What sort of theories?”

“About ways you could run a kingdom.” He felt a little foolish, bringing it up when Randi had spent so much more of his life being educated for this, but he forged forwards. “Things like... I mean, we do a pretty good job of protecting Valdemar, Heralds, but there a lot of problems we can’t fix. Poverty, crime.” Children starving even in the streets of Haven. “A lot of things we end up cleaning up after the fact. I thought, well, I think there could be some institutional changes. That would make that sort of thing happen less often in the first place.”

He felt the weight of Randi’s gaze on him – wide-open, trusting. *Gods, he thinks I know what I’m talking about.* “Like what?” the King said quietly.

“Well, to start with, education...”

#

*A passage carved between two mountains–*

*“Herald Vanyel.”*

*“Leareth.” He nodded back. “It’s been a while.”*

(Nearly three months, the longest interval he could remember in years. He had been rereading a lot of his books, there wasn’t much else to do with his time, other than go over his plans and calculations for the Web again and again. He’d made the initial modifications already, probably before he was ready – it had left him in bed with backlash for two days – and it was helping, they’d already stopped two major raids that way down at the Border and hunted down a band of Pelagirs-creatures that had been terrorizing Londell Crossing for months.)

*“Yes. Have you thought further on our previous conversation?”*

*He couldn't even remember what it had been about. "I've been thinking about a lot of things. For one – you wrote 'A Lesson on Lessons', didn't you? Or advised whoever did write it."*

(He had found the book, supposedly written by a scholar in the Eastern Empire nearly nine hundred years ago, in the Temple of Astera records in Haven. They were a scholarly order, and had a lot more very old books, and those by foreign authors, than even the Palace library.)

*Leareth looked surprised, and pleased – it showed only in the slightest flicker of an eyelid and twitch of the mouth, but he could read him well now. "I am curious how you discovered the book, Herald Vanyel. It is not well known."*

*"Digging around." He shook his head. "It's very interesting. Do you still agree with it?"*

(Leareth had, often enough, disclaimed that his old ideas were outdated, over-simplistic. Vanyel was amazed that anyone could keep learning and changing his mind decade after decade, century after century – and yet, somehow, without ever losing track of the goal that drove him. Whether or not Vanyel could agree with that goal, there was something incredible about that. He didn't know what to make of it.)

*One eyebrow lifted the barest tilt. "It has shaped the education system of the Empire significantly, and the concepts have been tested, and changed in the process. I do not think that early and frequent standard tests are as valuable as 'A Lesson on Lessons' claims."*

*"Oh? Why not?"*

*Still, steady eyes. "It takes great skill to design a truly good test, one that measures what its author wishes. Any process that requires remarkable talent of its users will not scale well."*

(Ten years ago, even five, he'd have been baffled by that sentence. He understood Leareth's vocabulary and style of thinking well enough now to follow instantly.)

*"I see, I think. There's a big advantage to a system that works well run by ordinary people."*

*"Yes. It is a sad fact of the world that most people are mediocre – and yet with their surroundings set up in the right way, they may do better than otherwise, and so by their own efforts, the world may be a little kinder for them." Leareth paused. "If there is one thing that 'A Lesson on Lessons' undervalues, it is the importance of trial and error. Theory can be very powerful, but it is always a simplification of the world, or else there would be no point. It can blind one to details. To avoid that blindness, one must assume a theory is false, and test it relentlessly, or else it would become impossible to notice those ignored details that in fact change everything."*

*Vanyel realized he was still standing, shivering in the wind, and waved his hand, shaping the snow into a stool, then raising a heat-spell. Leareth smiled, faintly, and sat as well.*

(He would have to visit Sandra, he thought, this reminded him a lot of how she talked about things.)

*"I can see that," he said. "There's the one chapter, on tests that measure learning versus tests that measure intelligence alone..."*

## Chapter Thirteen

“It looks as though Brightstar will be a mage,” Starwind said, and his smile was as broad as it ever got. “And most likely a Healing-Adept. He has the earth-sense.”

They were sitting in the ekele, which blew faintly in the wind. Brightstar was by the window, looking out, Moondance with a hand on his shoulder as he pointed out the stars.

The youngster looked over his shoulder. “Papa, will I be as strong as Uncle Van?”

Starwind chuckled. “Most likely not, *ke’chara*. There is no one else like your Uncle Van, and I think you would not wish to be so powerful. It is a burden as well as a gift. I do think you will be very strong indeed.”

Vanyel smiled. Brightstar’s mage-gift had started to manifest very early, six months ago. *When I was still throwing fireballs at the Karsites down south.* He was nearly eight – a tall, sturdy boy with an infectious grin and the same relentless energy he’d always had, his jet-black hair shot through with fine rays of silver. He wanted to be outdoors all the time, loved to hunt and swim and run. Moondance had been teaching him to read and write the Valdemaran script, but he complained that he was bored by it. Completely unlike Jisa, in so many ways. *But they have the same smile. Gods, I should stop comparing them.*

“Brightstar, would you like to have a soak in the pool before bed?” Moondance said.

“It is rather late.”

“Dada, but—”

His father smiled. “I know you are very excited, but your Uncle Van will still be here in the morning.”

*And a lot happier to play with rambunctious children,* Vanyel thought. He had arrived that morning via Savil’s Gate, and Moondance had immediately set aside his duties and spent a candlemark Healing his channels, but he was still tired. Featherfire had been easier; she had greeted her ‘Uncle Van’ shyly and very politely, and then showed him all of her dolls while he sat comfortably in her mother’s ekele.

Moondance glanced at him, his face slipping easily into a smile. “Good night, Wingbrother. We shall speak on the morrow.”

Starwind watched them climb down the ladder, fondly. “I am a very lucky father.”

“He is quite amazing.” Vanyel curled his legs under him and stared vaguely at the window. “You both seem well. All three of you do. How are things here?” *They look so happy. It shouldn’t hurt but it does.*

“Quite peaceful.” A sigh. “Too peaceful. It is how we know it is time to move on.”

The move to the new Vale was to happen in a week’s time. It was about ten days after Midwinter – he was a little sad he had missed the beautiful Tayledras festivities, but he hadn’t been near well enough to risk Gating before now.

*:Because you kept pushing yourself before you were ready: Yfandes sent. :If you’d been better about staying in bed when the Healers said—:*

*:Then I’d have even less of my strength back:* He had lost so much muscle. It was embarrassing; his first sparring session with Tran, the King’s Own had sent his sword flying

within a second or two three times in a row. *:Well, it'll teach me never to let myself get that sick again:* It had been two months and he was still slower and tired faster than before.

*:It'd better. If you ever do that to me again I'll kick you into the river:* An idle threat, and he was a very good swimmer now anyway – after enough times with Yfandes getting annoyed with his sloppy technique and taking over his limbs, he'd picked up a few things.

“You have changed,” Starwind said. “This war has changed you, I think. It grieves me a little.”

“Oh?”

“You are always watching. Looking for danger. Never relaxed in your skin. You look–”

He held up a hand. “Starwind, if it's all the same to you, I'd really rather not talk about the war.” He would bring it up with Moondance, maybe, but he doubted Starwind would understand how he felt. “Can we talk about the Heartstone instead?” He sighed. “I may not have as much time here as I'd like, so I don't want to dally on learning what I need.”

“If you wish.” Starwind looked a little unhappy, but didn't push. “Tell me what you have planned so far, with your Web-Spell.”

He reached for Starwind's mind, their shields meshing effortlessly – the Tayledras used Mindspeech so differently from most Heralds. *:Let me show you:*

#

“So, how are things?” Vanyel said quietly.

He and Moondance were sitting on top of a rock, overlooking an ornamental waterfall and pool. It was the first time he had been able to catch the Healing-Adept alone.

Moondance glanced up at him. “Much better than the previous time that you were here.”

“I can see that. You seem a lot happier.”

“Life is not so hard as it was.” Moondance ran his fingers absently through a lock of hair. “Brightstar is older, and does not need to be watched so closely – though soon enough he will need teaching. The land is calmer. I must not leave the Vale so often as before.”

“That’s good.” Vanyel leaned back on the rock.

“It is strange.” Moondance spoke thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on the distance. “I try to think of that time, five years ago, and it is as though I was in a fog. There is much I do not remember clearly.” He shook his head. “It was as though all the colour had gone out of the world.”

*Grey and empty, stretching out indefinitely...* Vanyel nodded. “I know that feeling.”

Moondance began braiding a length of hair. “You have always understood, brother.” He paused. “Better than my *shay’kreth’ashke*.”

“Oh?” There was a slight tension in the angle of Moondance’s shoulders. “Are you still finding it hard to talk to Starwind?”

“When it comes to most things, no.” Moondance shrugged. “When it comes to our feelings, we are often at cross-purposes. He tries very hard, but I think that it is difficult for him to understand.”

“Right. Well, I’m glad that he tries.” Vanyel wasn’t sure what to say. “Moondance, if there’s anything that you want to talk about, while I’m here...”

Moondance glanced up, that old quicksilver smile flashing across his face. “You are a very good friend, Van. I will think on it.” He was silent for a moment, and Vanyel waited – just enjoying the spectacular view, and his friend’s company.

“I still do not like when I must rest,” Moondance said finally. “Starwind is very overprotective. He will insist that I take a day to rest after any difficult working, and I – I suppose that I resent it.”

“Still feel like you’re not earning your right to exist when you’re not working?” Vanyel said quietly.

“Perhaps.” Moondance looked up at him. “I do not like to speak of it to Starwind. He will only say I am being foolish.” He grimaced. “And then I feel as though he thinks of me as a child, and that is not how I wish him to see me!”

“Of course not.” Vanyel shook his head. *Damn it, Starwind.* “For what it’s worth – I don’t think it’s like that at all. He respects you a lot, Moondance. Sometimes I think he’s still in disbelief and awe that someone as powerful and skilled and kind as you loves *him*.” Starwind had said something like that the night before, while they shared a drink together.

Moondance’s eyes widened. “That is... I will not claim I understand. Starwind’s power and skill are greater than mine.”

Vanyel almost laughed. “He does have more experience – but I don’t think that’s the case at all. Your mage-gift isn’t quite as powerful, maybe, but you’re a Healing-Adept. The only one, right now.”

Moondance nodded. “Until Brightstar is trained. It will be good, not to work alone.” Joy flashed across his face. “That is another gift you have given to us, brother.”

Vanyel ducked his head, blushing.

“You know that our work is important,” Moondance said after a moment – his voice was casual, but there was a note of something else. “My work, in particular. We make the land safe – and for every day that we dally, something is lost. Perhaps a child killed by a Changecreature, because her family sought fertile land and found it on land that we might

already have cleansed, had we worked faster.” The wind whipped a bit of hair into his eyes, and he pushed it aside. “That is a reason I do not much like to rest.”

“I know.” *Gods, I know. You don’t even know how much.* Vanyel pushed his own hair out of his eyes, black and silver. More silver than before. Counting down the years...

“Moondance, I– The world is like that. There aren’t enough of us and there’s more than we can ever do and every moment we waste, people die.” He shook his head. “But you have to plan for the long term. Because that keeps being true, year after year. And you’ll do more, better work in the long run if you rest enough now.”

Moondance was silent for a long time.

“You would understand,” he said finally. “Starwind did not put it like that. He said only that I deserved to be happy. I – I do not know how to believe that, when there are still so many horrors in the world.”

“You do.” To his surprise, Vanyel felt his eyes prickling. “You and all the other people – even the ones we won’t be able to save.” Lights in the world, Leareth would say, worth protecting. His throat tightened; it was hard to push out the words. *.And that’s a tragedy, and I – I think it’s okay, I think it’s right, for that to hurt. But if you want to do as much as possible, with your life, you need to think about results. Not – not just trying to be a good person by trying as hard as you can all the time, but what will actually work. Since you’re only human, that means sometimes you need to be gentle with yourself:*

Moondance dabbed at his own eyes. “Why are you so wise, brother?”

Vanyel laughed, without much humour. It hurt his throat. “I’m not,” he said out loud, thickly. “Had to have that lesson hammered through my skull more than once.”

#

*It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.*

They were in the new Vale, nearly fifty miles away. Many of the Hawkbrothers had Gated, but Vanyel had chosen to travel ahead with some of the scouts, four days ago – he had spent enough time with Moondance showing him around the old Heartstone, and had learned everything he could. Preparing the new site was the most important part for him to observe, anyway, if he wanted to pull this off.

He wouldn't be able to do it exactly the same way; he didn't have access to a Healing-Adept, for one, nor a team of mages who could do the kind of intimate concert work the Tayledras had mastered. He'd already been mulling over alternatives. *Maybe I could pull in Shavri for some of it.* She didn't have the 'earth-sense', he wasn't sure if the Gift even existed in Valdemar, but she had the Mage-Gift in potential, buried deep inside her, and she was a strong enough Mindspeaker to drop into a meld with him.

And the team of mages was to compensate for the fact that, alone, none of them were anywhere near powerful enough to direct that much energy. Vanyel was pretty sure he wouldn't have that problem.

He was in the heart of what was soon to be k'Treva, linked with Starwind and a circle of other Adept-level mages. Moondance had helped choose the new site, but currently he was back at the old Vale, coaxing the Heartstone into releasing its energies. *Again, not something I need to worry about.* They wouldn't ever need to move the Web-focus.

He wasn't sure how they did this in other Vales, but here they had an advantage – since Starwind and Moondance were lifebonded, they could work in close concert even over such a distance, perfectly in sync.

Starwind had led the final preparations, then given the signal – and the energies flowed. Not through the intervening space, but somewhere else. The void-between-Gates, Starwind called it. With his Othersight he watched the new Heartstone glow brighter and

brighter, swirling, like one of the nebulas Kilchas had once pointed out through his telescope. *Like a swarm of fireflies coming home.* He wasn't sure if the metaphor made sense – and then the Heartstone was too bright and he had to turn his Sight away. It began to pulse, like something alive – that was where the technique got its name. Around him, all of the other Adepts were humming, tapping feet and hands, an interweaving melody and rhythm that stabilized the pattern, holding in the energy that strained to burst free. Vanyel took up his part, singing a single, wordless note.

There was a moment like a string stretched too tight, and then a snap – falling, then something slipping into place, coming to rest.

*:It is finished:* Starwind sent, and dropped out of the meld. A moment later he sagged to his knees; Vanyel lunged to catch him before he could hit the floor. Around him, the others were slumping as well, though none were quite as exhausted as Starwind – his and Moondance's parts had been the hardest.

*:Starwind, are you all right? Do you need to lie down?:*

*:A moment:* Starwind took a deep breath, then another, and then reached with mental hands for the Heartstone, just touching it. Around him, Vanyel could see the other mages doing the same. Checking their work, he thought, but there was something more to it, awe and love in the gesture.

He shrugged and Reached as well.

*A mote in the void – a sky of bottomless black, filled with a hundred million stars – eyes that weren't eyes, that saw him. That recognized him.*

*:Vanyel:*

He snatched his Sight back. *What was that?* It hadn't been Mindspeech, not like any he recognized. Not like anything human. And it didn't seem like any of the other Tayledras had seen the same thing; at least, none of them looked alarmed.

*:Vanyel, what is the matter?:* Starwind was pulling himself upright, already steadier.

*:I don't know:* He shivered. *:It recognized me:*

*:Well, of course. You helped to birth it:*

Birth, not make. Like a living thing. He closed his eyes. It was beautiful, and deeply unsettling.

*:Let us go. We are to be resting now:* Starwind took a step, then swayed, and Vanyel jerked himself out of his daze and slipped a hand under the Hawkbrother's elbow.

*:Yfandes, did you catch that?:*

*:Only a fragment:* She had been close in his thoughts, listening in – he wondered how she had missed it. *:It definitely recognized you, but it's like Starwind said:*

*:Don't like it. Gives me the collywobbles:* God, did it think he was its parent now? No, that wasn't right, it hadn't been like that at all...

#

*He was walking through darkness.*

(Vaguely, he thought that he must be dreaming, but it didn't seem to matter.)

*More than just darkness – he was in the void-behind-the-world, surrounded by arcs of glowing dust. It was very peaceful. Silent, but in the lights, there was a strange sort of music-that-wasn't-sound.*

*He walked on a path made of moonbeams.*

*Ahead, there was a door. His feet moved, taking him towards it. Panes of glass, candlelight shining through. He reached to open it.*

*“Van.”*

*Tylendel sat cross-legged on their bed, in the room with the garden door. A fire burned in the grate, and candles were lit in every sconce. Above him, the violet light of nebulas shone through the high window. It mixed with the candlelight, casting odd shadows.*

(A moment of reflexive confusion. He was dreaming, and it didn't feel like an ordinary dream – and then the thought faded, soothed away by the starlight.)

*“I've been waiting for you.” ‘Lendel patted the bed. “Come here, ashke.”*

*Slowly, he walked towards the bed. Reached out. ‘Lendel’s hand met his, warm, and he flung himself forwards and his lifebonded caught him, he was solid, there, his lips hot as they kissed, Vanyel’s hands tangling in his hair, trying to hold all of him at once.*

*‘Lendel pulled back. “Shh, listen, we don’t have much time.” His brown eyes looked black in the strange light. “I’ve been waiting to talk to you. Van, I – I’m really, really sorry.” He shook his head, helplessly. “I don’t know what I was thinking – no, I do, and that’s worse – and I hurt you, and I can’t–”*

(The surprise of it pulled him out of the dream’s forced calm. This was familiar. It felt like seeing the Shadow-Lover. Whatever real meant, it was real. His mind was spinning, nothing to catch onto, he didn't know what was happening or why or which questions to ask–)

*He grabbed at ‘Lendel’s shoulders. “Where are we?”*

*“Gods, I have no idea. Does it matter? I don’t know why She’s letting us talk, but–”*

*“She?” Then he understood, somehow making the connection in an instant. “Why? What does the Star-Eyed Goddess have to do with either of us?”*

*There was a haunted look in his lover’s eyes. “Something that has to happen, I think.”*

*“Me fighting Leareth.” It made far too much sense. “Guess it would affect Her people, it’s nearby enough.”*

*‘Lendel’s eyes were filling with tears. “Van, I’m sorry. Whatever it is, I should’ve been there! Can you...” He looked away. “I’d understand if you couldn’t forgive me.”*

*Vanyel closed his eyes as it hit him, pain/grief/anger/bitterness, everything he had felt in the last nine-and-some years compressed to an instant. Then it was gone. “I forgave you years ago, ashke,” he said, his voice sounding toneless to his own ears. “That’s not the point. I mean – should you have been here? I wouldn’t have been a mage without what happened.”*

*‘Lendel stared blankly at him, startled, hurt in his face. “I should’ve come with you through the Gate,” he whispered. “If I’d been brave enough... Dying’s easy. Living’s harder.”*

*“I know.”*

*“Van, are you angry with me? I don’t–”*

*“No. Not with you.” He leaned into Tylenel’s chest, wrapping his arms around him. “Ashke, if we haven’t got long, I – I don’t want to try to explain it all.” He wasn’t sure he even could. “Just be with me, please? Hold me? I miss you.”*

He woke with a gasp – and rolled over, curling up, trying to muffle his sobs against the sheets. It hurt unimaginably, like it had in the instant after Tylenel’s Final Strike. Just for a moment, he had been lifebonded again – and now he wasn’t. He could feel his mind streaming off into the emptiness, trying to find what should have been there and wouldn’t ever be again.

*Just feel it. An echo of a memory of Lancir’s voice. You’re big enough to hold it.*

Except he wasn’t; he couldn’t find the edge of it, there was only a storm of pain that filled the whole world. He just lay in the warm darkness for a long time, hardly aware of his

own body. Finally, slowly, he pushed it back, digging his nails into his palms, finding an anchor, trying to carve out a tiny place in his mind that wasn't consumed by the grief.

*What just happened?* He could already feel the memory of it slipping away, everything except for 'Lendel's eyes as he apologized, and the warm solidness of him. *No.* He forced himself to go through it. A path of moonbeams. The Star-Eyed Goddess. Something that had to happen.

*It was him. Really him.* It had to have been – when he had other dreams about Tyrendel, it didn't feel like being lifebonded again. *He looked so young.* Seventeen years old, forever. Trapped in a single instant, bewildered by the person Vanyel had become.

*He thought I was angry with him.* And Vanyel hadn't really tried to reassure him, had he?

Gods, he could have clung forever to the memory of 'Lendel holding him...

No. He had to understand this. Why now, after nine years? What was different? *I touched the Heartstone,* he thought. It had felt like the same starry void. It had known his name.

*He thought I wouldn't ever forgive him.*

No. Focus on the mission. He could think about Tyrendel holding him later, if he wanted, he was pretty sure that part wouldn't ever fade – but the rest of the dream seemed to want him to forget it.

He hauled himself up from the sleeping mat, staggering towards the door. *I'll go talk to it. Maybe it'll let me speak with Her.* It wasn't very logical, he could notice that distantly, but he didn't care. There was an itchy anger in him; it wanted him to move, act, do *something* to understand what was going on.

He thought to check his shields. Unsurprisingly, they were in shreds, and it took a long moment to center and ground enough to repair them. At least he'd put a bit of shielding on the ground-floor spare room under Starwind and Moondance's new ekele, before going to sleep. Probably the only reason he hadn't woken the whole Vale.

*Whatever that was, it certainly wrecked Melody's block.* He'd have to do something about that. Later. He could ask Moondance for help. And an explanation.

*He sees the future in his dreams as well. Maybe he'll believe me.*

Should he wake Yfandes? She would have a million questions, and she would probably think what he was about to do was a stupid idea. She had more respect for the gods than he did; she wouldn't think much of his plan to go shout at the Star-Eyed Goddess.

He weaved his way across the silent, near-empty Vale. No one around to see him. To stop him. *This is a terrible idea.* If he stopped moving, he would lose his courage – so he didn't. A quiet voice in him whispered that he wasn't thinking ahead, wasn't planning, certainly wasn't considering what could go wrong, but he ignored it.

He stumbled across the set-spell into the inner sanctum, crossed the space, and sank to his knees in front of the Heartstone. To his eyes, it looked like simply a spire of rock, silky, like water in shadow. Warm as blood to the touch. To his mage-sight, it pulsed and shone painfully. This time he didn't turn away, even though it was half-blinding him. *Nothing hurts like a broken lifebond anyway.*

He leaned his forehead against the warm stone, and reached out with mental hands. This time, he didn't just brush the surface, but dove in headfirst.

It was like swimming into the sun, and for a moment he was lost in it, everything was blue-white fire. He was a nameless eddy in a nameless sea—

*:Vanyel?:*

The not-Mindspeech brushed him; he felt it touching him, curious tendrils, turning him over. Looking inside him, at what he was and had been and would be.

*Focus on the mission.* An echo of a thought, feeling like it belonged to someone else, because he wasn't a someone anymore. *Speak to the Star-Eyed. I'm here to speak to Her. Let me speak to Her.*

—And he stood on a path of moonbeams, the baleful light of dusty nebulas shining down on him.

There was a woman in front of him, dressed from head to toe in black robes. Her features were Tayledras, but her eyes weren't. *I see why they call her that.* It was quite creepy.

“You are very stubborn,” she said.

Not the first words he had expected a goddess to say to him.

He folded his arms and stared her down. “I would appreciate if you could tell me what's going on. What you're trying to do. You're meddling in my life and I – I don't know how I'm supposed to make *plans* if there's some deep plot of yours I don't know about.”

She wasn't surprised. He didn't think it would have been possible to surprise her. She smiled. “You have a part to play, which you are doing.”

“Doing what? At this point I have no idea if I'm supposed to kill him or ally with him or something else entirely. I mean, if you wanted me to just kill him, why give us dreams where we could have conversations about ethics?”

She just looked at him with those deeply disturbing eyes.

He threw up his hands. “You're going to say you can't tell me. That I won't be able to wrap my head around it. Fine. Just – can you show me something? A hint? The Shadow-Lover gives me hints.”

“I might show you, if you are sure you wish to see.”

*All information is worth having.* “Yes. Yes, I want to see. It’s probably horrifying and mortals aren’t meant to look at it, but I want to see.”

“Then look.”

Suddenly he was in the Web – except not his Web, not quite. It didn’t make sense, but it felt like he was seeing it from inside out. Tangled threads of silver in a blue place, spreading.

*Darkness and death across a thousand futures. A scant few, winding paths, and the widest was his.*

He flinched away from it, and the vision vanished.

“That...” There was no way to put it into words. He’d seen it, seen all of it – but he couldn’t hold it, his mind wasn’t big enough. “All right, I asked and you showed me. Guess that’s fair.”

She just watched him, waiting.

He could still feel the echoing emptiness in his head where ‘Lendel had been. It was starting to be distracting, even through whatever defiant desperation had driven him here. He cupped his hands to his face for a moment, trying to focus, but it was pointless.

“Why?” he said finally. “Why did it have to go that way? Why did you have to make me lifebond to someone, and then lose him, and have everything else happen? Was it – was it just to *create* me, the most powerful mage in the entire world, because that Vanyel had to exist so he could do this?” He was crying again. “B-because I’m not okay with that. It’s not fair. It’s not *right*.”

“It could have happened other ways.” Eyes that held the night sky, the stars that Leareth had named himself for, bored into him. “Would you like to see?”

No. “Yes. I want to see.”

#

*I need you to help me, Tylendel says, his eyes furtive and impassioned. Anything, says the Vanyel who is him and not him. Vengeance. I can't do this on my own. A book, taken from Savil's study. A spell, for a Gate, and a second spell, and he doesn't want to know. Riding through darkened woods, Sovvan-night and the Gate is draining him, he sinks to his knees as Tylendel raises his hands, the terrified Lesharas cowering before him below the Harvestfest decorations. Tylendel's face twists with rage, nothing in his eyes that Vanyel recognizes. Wyrsa. A man dies, screaming. Gala gallops through the Gate and he hears her words, echoing through both of them, cold and flat. You are not my Chosen. Shattered emptiness where the bond was. Confusion, shouts. Savil is there. The Gate crashes down through Vanyel's body, and Tylendel isn't there anymore, he's at the top of the bell-tower, and Vanyel calls his name but it's already too late and he jumps, and the Vanyel-who-is-not-him feels everything in him break. He stumbles towards the river, and then a white shape is there, and she speaks into his mind, my name is Yfandes and I Choose you.*

*And he dreams of ice and an army and a mage in black, and he goes to k'Treva and learns to control his power, he fights and kills a mage named Krebain and the dream stops and he thinks it is over. Nothing is ever all right again, but sometimes it comes close, and he is still a Herald with a duty to his people, and the years pass—*

#

*(And there is still a path through the darkness, but narrower)*

#

*The Gate comes crashing down and Tylendel tries to run but Savil catches onto him, he screams and Vanyel screams until a white shape comes through the darkness, blue eyes that*

*look into his, and he tries to look at Tylendel but Tylendel looks away, rage and jealousy and brokenness that will never be whole and nothing Vanyel can ever do will change that.*

*And they go to k'Treva, together, and he dreams of ice and an army, and Moondance helps Tylendel but not enough, they are together but it is never, ever enough. Vanyel is a Herald with a duty to his people, and he tries, so hard. The dream of ice and an army comes to him sometimes, but this Vanyel never speaks to the mage who is called Leareth. Tylendel sees Lancir every week and it helps, a little. Savil thinks perhaps the dream is Foresight, and he tries to prepare, but Tylendel's pain is always in the back of his mind, distracting him, slowing him. And the years pass—*

#

*(A path, but narrower)*

#

*Gala arrives a moment sooner, before the spell, before the wyrsa, and she trumpets in anger but she does not say the words. Tylendel stares at her uncertainly, rage mixed with confusion now, and then Savil is there, others, someone carries Vanyel through the Gate and they take it down, carefully, properly. There is shouting and anger, and Council meetings, and Savil sits in a room with both of them and apologizes and breaks down in tears. And Tylendel, years later, goes into Whites, he is a Herald with a duty to his people, and Vanyel is not but they are together and that is enough. They are happy. Vanyel dreams of ice, vague, he is in the frozen place with Tylendel and he knows that they will die, but together. Tylendel is a strong mage, more powerful than Savil. A Foreseer at the Palace dreams of an army marching in the north, Herald-Mage Tylendel there with his lifebonded partner, the minstrel who was once heir to a border holding – and Vanyel wonders about his own dream, but he does not know. And the years pass—*

#

*(A path, but narrower)*

#

*The day after Tylendel's death, Vanyel goes out to the temple, and he locks the door behind him and kneels by his lover's body and takes a knife to his wrists. Yfandes calls for help, but the door is locked and Savil does not reach him in time. People speak of it for years, in whispers, and Savil takes leave and goes to k'Treva, and tells Moondance of a boy with Gifts more powerful than she has ever seen, whom she failed to save. And Moondance tells her of his dreams, and she goes back to Haven even though she is still grieving and her brother has never forgiven her. She prepares, because though she is old and tired and no longer trusts her judgement, she is a Herald with a duty to her people, and she knows something is coming, if not what. And the years pass—*

#

*(A path, but narrower)*

#

*They are in the remains of the stone cottage and Tylendel is building the Gate while wyrsa pace outside, and they are a moment too slow and Gala dies. Vanyel hears her in Tylendel's head, her last words, and when Tylendel tells him to go, he clings to him, he will not let go, and Tylendel follows him through the Gate. He tries to take it down but he has never done it before, his mind is shattered in pieces, he sends the Gate-energy lashing through Vanyel and they both fall to the ground until Jaysen finds them seconds later. And not long after, Yfandes comes for Vanyel, and Tylendel weeps but stays by him and holds his hand. Savil makes her way back to Haven, and she takes them both to k'Treva, and Starwind teaches Vanyel while Moondance helps Tylendel learn to live without Gala. So does Lancir, when they go home,*

*and Tylendel is never again whole but he is not quite broken, and they are together and it is almost enough. Vanyel dreams of ice and an army. Tylendel thinks it may be Foresight, and they tell the Queen. But Vanyel never speaks to the Shadow-Lover, and somehow he never thinks to learn to lucid dream, and eventually the dreams stop. Years later Lancir dies and Taver comes to outside their door, and he speaks into Tylendel's mind and says, I Choose you. They are together, and they prepare for what they know is coming, and the years pass—*

#

*(A path, but narrower)*

#

*They are in the stone cottage and they build the Gate in time and pile through with Gala following, and Jaysen runs to meet them and helps walk Tylendel through taking down the Gate. They are home and they are safe. For a long time Vanyel is afraid, and dreams of wyrsa and ropes binding him, but they are together and Tylendel is there for him. Tylendel becomes a Herald, a stronger mage than Savil, and they are together. Vanyel dreams of ice again, and knowing they will die fighting. But together. He thinks perhaps it means something, and they speak of it but cannot figure out anything more, until a Palace Foreseer dreams of an army in the north and both of them there. They do not know if it is true, but it is worth preparing. And the years pass—*

#

*(A path, but narrower)*

#

*They are in the stone cottage and they are a moment too slow, Gala dies and the wyrsa swarm through the doorway and Tylendel tries but he cannot hold them off. Savil does not reach them in time. Her brother never forgives her, and she never forgives herself, but she is a*

*Herald with a duty to her people, there is work to be done, and she pulls herself together. She longs to go to k'Treva, but there is never time, and Lancir helps her with her grief. A Palace Foreseer dreams of an army in the north, sees Savil facing them, and they are not sure if it is true but they prepare. And the years pass—*

#

*(A path, but narrower)*

#

Vanyel stumbled backwards, falling on his rump on the strange moonbeam-surface. He was gasping, heart pounding, but his eyes were dry. With an effort he managed to slow his breathing.

He stood up.

“You see,” the Star-Eyed Goddess said. “It could have happened many other ways, but the world in which you find yourself now is the one where you have the best chance.”

He shook his head, unsure how to feel. He was off-balance, confused. Angry. He wanted to scream, to cry, to throw himself at that calm figure with fists and teeth, to burn something down— He pushed the feelings down. *Focus on the mission. Compartmentalize. You can have feelings about it later.*

“If ‘Lendel survived, I never spoke to Leareth,” he said harshly. “And if Gala survived too, I never even got Chosen. Never had Gifts.” And the visions where *both* of them died, where Savil had to do this on her own... *The one where I killed myself in the temple, gods, I wish I could say I'd never do to her, but I definitely would have.* His mind flinched away from it. “I don't – I don't understand why that has to be true.”

But he'd seen it, the shape of things, even if he didn't understand.

Fine, so apparently he was in the best possible world, from Valdemar's perspective. The one where his lifebonded was dead. And what was he supposed to do with that knowledge? Rage at the gods? What was that supposed to accomplish?

"I'm not going to forgive you for this," he said dully. "But I don't figure you care, do you?" And he sank to his knees on the cool moonlit path, letting his head fall into his hands.

*At least I finally got to say goodbye to you, ashke. That's something.*

#

Someone was shaking his shoulder. "Van! Van, wake up." :*Wake up, please:*

He opened his eyes, blearily. *It feels like a herd of cattle just trampled me.*

"Moondance?" His throat felt raw, like he'd been screaming for candlemarks.

The Healing-Adept stared down into his eyes, concerned. A moment later he realized he was lying on his back on stone – he was inside the set-spell. Next to the Heartstone; he could feel it beside him.

"Brother, what are you doing in here?" Moondance looked very tired, Vanyel thought. Unsurprisingly after last night's work. Was it last night? He couldn't remember what day it was.

"I..." He trailed off. "I don't know."

"We have been searching for you the entire morning!"

He yawned, and tried to sit up; he couldn't manage it until Moondance helped him.

"Morning? What time is it?"

"It is past noon." Moondance laid a hand on his forehead. "How long have you been— Aiii! Vanyel, what is it that has happened to you?"

"What?"

Moondance shook his head. “Your mind is different. I do not know to describe it.” His eyes crinkled in concern.

He had been trying not to think about that. *Streaming out into the void*— How long had he been here? He vaguely remembered stumbling through the Vale in darkness... ‘*Lendel. I dreamed about ‘Lendel.* He could remember only fragments of it now. But enough.

“I saw him,” he said dully. “Tylendel. In a dream. Only it – I think it was real. Really him, I mean.”

Moondance met his eyes, and finally nodded. He didn’t look dubious at all, or even particularly surprised. “You spoke to his spirit. I had wondered.”

Vanyel stared at him. “Is that a thing that *happens*?”

“Not often. Perhaps it explains what I see. Your mind is raw with losing him again.”

He shook his head. *Think about something else.* “And then I must’ve come in here for some reason. Gods, I can’t think why. Maybe I couldn’t sleep and decided to study the Heartstone?” Certainly something strange had happened. It was alarming, how terrible he felt.

“You ought not to do so alone,” Moondance said, disapprovingly. “It is not safe.”

“Well, clearly I did something stupid.” He rubbed at his head. It was starting to hurt a little less – but that only made the aching emptiness more noticeable. He reached out with Mindspeech. *:Moondance, whatever it was, it knocked out the block that the Mindhealer I told you about put in for me: It was all he could do not to cry. :Can you help?:*

*:I will not help you block your feelings, Vanyel, but I can perhaps help you to bear them:*

Moondance lifted him to his feet, and they navigated the set-spell. The instant he crossed it, he felt Yfandes reaching for his mind.

*:Chosen! Where were– Oh. Are you all right? What in the names of all the gods happened to you?:*

*:I talked to ‘Lendel: He dropped his shields against her, letting her slip fully into his mind. He didn’t have any words for her, not right now.*

#

They sat in the pool, side by side, in the midst of the near-empty Vale; Yfandes was curled up on the edge of the water, resting her head on Vanyel’s shoulder. He had barely made it there before breaking down in tears – and Moondance had, without saying anything, thrown up a privacy-barrier and then just held him while he sobbed. For what felt like candlemarks. After which point, utterly exhausted, he might have briefly fallen asleep. Thankfully Moondance had stopped him from drowning himself.

Wincing, he lifted his head from Moondance’s shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he said shakily. “Thank you for...for being here.”

“Are you ready to speak of it, brother?” There was only sympathy and concern in Moondance’s blue eyes – no judgement at all.

“I can try.” Vanyel scrubbed at his eyes, then scooped up a double handful of water and rubbed it over his face. He felt very drained, and his head ached, but the anger was still there in his chest. Itchy, restless. He didn’t know what it wanted from him. “I talked to ‘Lendel,” he said quietly. It was so hard to remember, now; it felt like trying to hold water that tricked out between his fingers. “I’d been...in the dark, there were stars. A sort of void, and there was a path that glowed...”

“The Moonpaths,” Moondance breathed.

“It’s a real place?”

A shrug. “As real as any, in the spirit world. The shamans of the Shin’a’in learn to leave their bodies and to travel there.”

A Shin’a’in shaman had visited the Vale, once, during his previous visit. The old man had been a long way from his home, the Dhorisha Plains in the south.

“I didn’t know that,” Vanyel said. It made the whole thing even more confusing. “Anyway. I followed the path and it went to our old room, that we shared in Haven. And ‘Lendel was waiting for me inside.’” He closed his eyes, riding out the fresh wave of grief. “He – he held me. He said he was sorry. For leaving me. That he should’ve been there for – well, he didn’t seem to know about Leareth, but I think he knew there was something. That I had to do.” He shuddered. “It was like he hadn’t changed at all. Like he’d been frozen in that one moment forever.”

Moondance nodded, solemn. “Spirits do not grow and change, not like the living.” He shrugged. “So it is said.”

Vanyel shook his head. “I– He didn’t understand me. The way he looked at me... gods, like I had two heads.” He closed his eyes, the bottomless ache in his chest deepening. “He t-thought I was angry with him...”

A gentle hand on his shoulder. “Were you?”

“No. I went through all that a long time ago. Gods, I don’t think he had any idea how much time had passed, for me.” Ten years, nearly. “I...I didn’t really think about it from his perspective. I was...I guess I was focused on the mission. Trying to understand what was happening. Learn as much as I could.” He shook his head, blinking away fresh tears. “I hurt him. I should’ve been kinder.”

“It was a very unexpected thing,” Moondance said softly. “And you have become very – what is the word? Focused on your mission. More so since this war.”

Vanyel could see that – how the scope of his world had narrowed, how even the people back home in Haven had stopped seeming real.

“I knew I couldn’t explain it,” he said finally. “Everything that’s happened. Why I was so different. So I just...I asked him to hold me, while we were there.” And everything had felt right with the world, just for that moment, but it had been a lie.

“That sounds like a kindness,” Moondance said. “Even if there had been more time to speak, I think perhaps your *shay’kreth’ashke* would not understand who you are now.”

“No.” And that was the worst part. It felt bitterly unfair. “What if...” But Moondance didn’t know about the conversations with Leareth. “Gods, Moondance, what if that – what if it’s something wrong with me? That I’ve, I’ve lost track of what it means to be a Herald.” Because ‘Lendel had understood that.

“I do not think that is what has happened. The world seems black and white to children. You have grown up, brother, and learned to see all of its shades of grey.”

*Grey emptiness, stretching out forever...* He shook his head. “Sometimes it feels like that’s all I see. Like you said before. No colours left in the world.” None of the blazing certainty ‘Lendel had carried like a mantle.

“That is because you are tired. As I was.” The compassion in Moondance’s soft voice hurt like a knife. “Yet through it all, you hold to what you know is right. There is a great strength in that.”

Useless comfort. *Strength is virtue, but only the results matter.* He took a shuddering breath. “He didn’t get to grow up.” The anger was rising in him again – wordless, nameless, a broken, ugly song. “Because he made a choice. To leave.”

Silence. Moondance didn't try to offer any comfort, for which Vanyel was grateful. He drew his knees into his chest, hugging himself, and the warmth of the water did nothing to ease the burning cold of the void.

He couldn't speak. *:It's not fair. It's not fair and I don't know if I can keep doing this. It hurts. Doesn't feel like there's anything that can make it worthwhile:* Even the future of Valdemar? Right now, that felt as tenuous as a single thread. No kind of scaffolding to hang a life from. *:I didn't ask for this! I never wanted power. Never wanted this burden. Still don't want it, damn it:*

*:And yet you will bear it:* Moondance sent, bone-deep sincerity radiating along with the words. *:As any Herald would in your place:*

Except 'Lendel. Who had set aside that sacred trust, in order to – what? To burn down everything he could, because the world was hopelessly broken. Even though there were still so many lights in the world, worth protecting – and 'Lendel had snuffed out fifty of them in a single instant.

*I've done worse.*

The anger pulsed in him, red-black in the corners of his vision, hot in his ears. And it didn't feel like it was aimed at 'Lendel, or not only him. *I wasn't lying, when I said I wasn't angry with him,* he thought.

*Am I angry with myself, for what I've done?* That didn't feel right either. The guilt and shame were there, a sinking weight in his stomach – but when he regretted his own actions, *anger* wasn't usually the response. Not this kind.

Something was tickling at the edge of his memory, but he couldn't draw it into the light.

He took a deep breath, then another. Focus. Mission. “I wish I remember what I did with the Heartstone,” he said, his voice only a little choked. “It scares me, that I don’t.”

“It frightens me as well.” Moondance shook his head. “Your channels are not damaged. I do not know what can explain this.”

That only made it worse. Even with the lightning incident, back in his early training, he had remembered everything up until the moment he lost consciousness. “You’ve never heard of anything like that?”

“No.”

*I hate it.* K’Treva was supposed to be safe. There had been something important, something critical, and he couldn’t remember it. Couldn’t trust his own mind. How was he supposed to work, plan, when he couldn’t trust himself?

“It will be easier to bear, again, in time,” Moondance said quietly. “Never easy, but you have done it for ten years. You will do it for another ten, if you must.”

And at the end of it all, he would die in a frozen pass in the north. Fighting a man he respected deeply, who had taught him so much. Who was responsible, in the end, for most of how he had changed. For why ‘Lendel, trapped in the past, would never be able to understand him.

*What if that’s where I went wrong?*

#

He was lying on the mat in the spare room, with Moondance – not speaking anymore, but just there together. He still felt raw. The deep current of anger was still there, and he didn’t know where it was coming from. *What would you say to me, anger, if you could speak in words?* He had asked the question half a dozen ways, trying to hold the feeling and prod at it, but he still didn’t know.

Moondance stroked his hair. “Brother, it is good to have you home.”

He said nothing. *It’s always good to be here, but it doesn’t matter.* And he still felt so off-balance. Like he was riding a mudslide, with nowhere solid to put his feet.

He’d spent a night with Daystar, before the scout left to guard the perimeter of the new Vale, but it hadn’t been the same at all. *I feel as though I do not know you anymore,* Daystar had said. *I feel like I don’t know myself,* he had thought but hadn’t said out loud. Now it was even worse. He didn’t trust his reactions or his emotions anymore.

<Van>

He jerked up, startled. *That’s Savil. The communication-spell.* It wasn’t at all like Mindspeech. He sensed only her disembodied voice, except it was flat, more like writing than a voice. There was no touching of minds, only the cool structure of the spell itself.

He held his end, pouring energy in. <Savil, what is it?> Had to get right to the point – at this distance, it was already draining away his reserves.

<Need you at the front. Mardic and Donni can Gate you to Horn. Where are you?>

Oddly, he felt nothing much at her words. <New Vale> Which Mardic and Donni couldn’t Gate to, having never been there before.

<How soon can you be back?>

It would take a full day, riding Yfandes, even if they blasted their way through some of the foliage in the way. <A candlemark> he sent. *I’ll have Starwind or Moondance Gate me back.* He had never gone through two Gates in quick succession, and would have preferred to keep it that way, but they couldn’t afford to waste time. Moondance could maybe Heal him a little in between.

It felt like the worst possible time, but at least he’d seen the new Heartstone. *I have what I came for.* He’d hoped for longer, gods, he’d had only a week with them...

*<I'll tell them>* And the spell dropped away.

He sat up. “Moondance, they need me back home. Can you or Starwind please Gate me back to the old Vale? I have to be there in a candlemark.”

Moondance’s breath hissed out. He was silent a long moment. “Of course, brother,” he said finally. “It grieves me, that you cannot stay – but if your kingdom needs you, you must go.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Vanyel opened his eyes, and immediately wished he hadn't. *Ow*. The light inside the tent was dim, filtered through grey clouds and canvas, but it still made his temples throb urgently.

He remembered hugging Brightstar and the others goodbye, packing his things – he'd brought everything with him, they'd half-expected this eventuality – and crossing the Gate-threshold on his own feet. He didn't remember anything after that; he must have passed out, which didn't usually happen if he was using someone else's Gate, but two in a row, right after whatever fool thing he'd tried with the Heartstone in the middle of the night, had been gruelling.

Yfandes had already told him off copiously for going in there without waking her or telling anyone where he was. *I don't know what I was thinking*. If he'd gone over the dream with her right away, maybe he would have remembered more of it.

Then again, he wasn't sure he wanted to. What he did remember hurt badly enough.

A moment later he realized that someone's hand was on his forehead, warm and callused, sending him a slow trickle of Healing-energy.

"Who's there?" he croaked.

“I’m Roa.” She was keeping her voice low. Thoughtful of her. “We’ve met before, do you remember?”

He did, and relaxed a little. *I can trust her.* He hadn’t known she had come down south.

“How long?” he managed.

“Less than a candlemark. Been trying to bring you out of it a few minutes. How do you feel?”

“Hurts.” And his reserves were desperately low. *No time for this.* “Know you can’t Heal my mage-channels. I can go into trance, do self-Healing...”

“Hmm. I’ve been trying to get at them, but you’re right, I’m not mage-gifted and I can’t see what I’m doing. Did have a thought, maybe... If you start out, I ought to be able to see where you’ve got your Healing Gift aimed, and follow you. Then you can get some sleep.”

“Can’t sleep. Too much pain.” He couldn’t afford to take argonel, he’d be out half a day and anything could happen in the meantime. It would go faster, though, if Roa could help. “Worth a try.”

In trance, the pain was a little more distant. He could feel Yfandes nearby, sending him a gentle flow of her own energy. *She used to only do that in emergencies. Well, I suppose this is one.* And then he felt the touch of Roa’s Gift, overlaid on his own, soothing away the sunburn-like irritation of his channels. It didn’t go as fast as with Moondance – her ‘aim’ wasn’t as precise, she could only follow him approximately – but it was helping a great deal.

Some uncounted time later, the pain was less, and without meaning to he must have fallen asleep.

He opened his eyes again. This time the tent was almost dark; there was only the orange glow of a covered lantern. He reached out with his Thoughtsensing, wincing; he was alone in the tent, though he could feel minds nearby.

*: 'Fandes? :*

*: It's been six candlemarks. Feeling better? :*

*: Much: The inside of his head felt tender, but the acid-like pain was gone. : Should report. What's going on? :*

*: I'll let Lissa explain:*

He sat up, groaning, and dug around for his waterskin in the saddlebags that someone had thoughtfully carried in; his throat was parched.

*: I think I dreamed about 'Lendel: Just an ordinary dream, this time, they'd been in Savil's suite and he'd been playing the lute. Just thinking about it made tears spring to his eyes; he blinked them away, annoyed. : Why couldn't Moondance have just put a block in? :*

*: It's not their way. Remember what Lancir said – it often makes things worse in the long run:*

*: Well, I could really use some help in the short run:*

By the dim lamplight, he pulled off his Tayledras robe, folded it neatly away, and put on a clean pair of Whites. He could hear the hiss of sleet or freezing-rain falling on the canvas, and dug around for his oilcloth to put over the standard Herald's cloak, fastening it with the horn clasp. It had been a very good gift, he thought; it had outlasted all of his uniforms.

He pushed aside the tent-flap and forged out into the sleet. It was freezing; his breath blew in white clouds. Night must have fallen candlemarks ago, but there were lanterns and

candles and torches under every shelter, men and women in blue uniforms that looked black in the dark. He got his bearings, and made his way towards Lissa's tent. The ground was a mess of slush, and his feet were half-frozen by the time he reached it. At least they were dry; he'd laid a weatherproofing spell on his boots.

He bowed politely to the sentry outside, though by then it was all he could do to stay on his feet. "Herald-Mage Vanyel to see Major Lissa." His teeth were chattering.

She greeted him formally, though with warmth in her eyes – but no twinkle. Her face was grim, which meant things were very bad.

Two other Heralds were there, a man and a woman. The man looked vaguely familiar.

Lissa gestured to a page standing at attention against one wall; he rushed to bring over a stool and unfold it.

"Herald Vanyel, meet Herald Marius and Herald Lia," she said.

Marius nodded to him. "We've met. Though you weren't Chosen at the time."

Oh. He remembered. *Coaxing Star through Savil's Gate, on their way to the Frelenny Holding...* He flinched. The last thing he needed right now was any reminder of the past.

"Glad you're back on your feet, Vanyel," Lissa said. "Thought you'd be out till the morning. To get you up to speed – we received a spy-report a day ago. There'd been rumours of large troop movements from the Jaysong Hills garrison. Herald Kieran realized we had to know more, and broke into one of their commanders' offices. He was caught, of course, which he knew he would be. Gave his life for us to get this information." Her voice was perfectly level, matter-of-fact, and but he could read the pain in her downcast eyes. *I didn't feel him die*, Vanyel thought. Normally he felt every Herald's death, echoing through even the

partial, still-underpowered Web. Was it because he'd been outside Valdemar at the time?

Because Kieran had?

Savil had felt 'Lendel die... *No*. Focus.

Lissa went on. "The Karsites are amassing an army of five thousand just east of Deerford. We haven't got anywhere near the strength to stop an attack of that size, even if they don't bring mages, which they most certainly will. Captain Jonne has only five hundred. Herald-Mages Mardic and Donni Gated over, right after they fetched you for us, but they'll need a full day before they'll be good for much. Took another three hundred fifty of the Guard with them, Mardic and Donni couldn't hold the Gate long enough for any more to cross. Took three more of my mages, too. All just Master-level. Wanted to send you, but the Healer took one look and said taking you through another Gate would probably kill you. So I'm afraid we're counting on you to work from a distance again."

He nodded. Tested his reserves. "I could do it now, if I had to, but I'd last about fifteen minutes. Any idea when they're planning to attack?"

"No. Herald Efrem gave me a Farsight report, and we've confirmed there is a force gathering and there could well be five thousand troops there. He's checking briefly every candlemark, can't do more often without wearing himself out." She shook her head. "How they got them all there in the dead of winter, I haven't the least clue. Nor why they thought now was a good time."

Vanyel winced. Could they have known he was in k'Treva? He and Randi hadn't announced the plan to anyone, and he'd Gated over in the middle of the night again, for secrecy. He'd been such a hermit the last two months, no one ought to have noticed his absence...and if the Karsites had spies in Haven, in the Palace itself, that wasn't a good sign at all. *We couldn't get spies anywhere near Sunhame.*

“We’re on high alert,” Lissa said, tiredly. “Reinforcements are marching from Crescent Lake, and we’re sending cavalry over from South Hardorn, but it’s very possible they won’t make it in time. We need you very badly.”

He nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

#

They had pitched their tent on the outskirts of the Deerford camp. Mardic sat on the bedroll, hunched forward over a mug of tea; Donni lay with her head in his lap. As usual, she was a wreck after Gating. It was the first time they’d tried to do it twice in a row; the fact that they hadn’t crossed the first Gate had helped, and they’d been able to unweave it and reclaim most of its energies, but Mardic was still as tired as he ever remembered being.

*And the attack could start anytime.* It wouldn’t be safe for them to use node-energy in this state. The three other Herald-Mages were low Master-level, and none of them were experienced in concert work; Mardic and Donni had been trying to work with them and Lissa’s other Herald-Mages, in the brief moments they could snatch, but there hadn’t been many.

*We could really use Kilchas,* he thought dully, raising the cup and taking a sip. The man was still at Sun’s Hill. Lissandra was on the Border as well, now, down at South Hardorn. Arina was on her way from Crescent Lake, Daren from Victrin Fell, and they were both on the stronger end of Master-level – Arina would have reached Adept easily if she’d had more power to throw, her control was superb despite her youth.

If the Karsites could only hold off long enough for the two of them to recover and the other two to arrive, they’d have seven mages, plus Van working from a distance. Maybe it would be enough.

Donni stirred in his lap. “We could do the ritual.”

Mardic nearly spilled his tea on her face. “What? No. No way.”

“It’ll give us enough energy. Only way we’ll be ready if they attack soon.”

He set down his cup. “Donni, I don’t think I *can*. And you’re worse off than me.”

She started to sit up. “I could rally.”

*You always can*. They had learned the ritual from Starwind and Moondance, in k’Treva. It was rarely practiced even among the Tayledras, because it was finicky, took longer than one usually had in the field, and was certainly a lot more effort than just tapping a node. But he had to admit that, between two lifebonded mages, it worked spectacularly.

“Donni, we are not doing a sex ritual in a tent in the middle of camp!”

“Why not? It’s soundproofed. No one’s going to bother us for ages. And we could ask Rasha and Fortin to guard the door.” Her eyes flashed. A determined line had appeared between her brows. *Gods, she’s beautiful*. The first strands of wiry silver were starting to appear in her dark hair. His, too, but it wasn’t as obvious.

She smirked. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

“It won’t. Donni, all I want to do is go to sleep!” He sighed. “But you’re right. We could fill up our reserves in a candlemark.”

The smile broadened to a grin. “Ever wondered if it’d work in a threesome?”

He stared blankly at her. “No. What?” It sounded like the most awkward thing imaginable.

“It might work even better. Don’t you think?”

He rubbed his eyes. “Your mind goes the strangest places.” Her eyes were sparkling. “You’re thinking of someone in particular, aren’t you? Gods, who?”

She giggled. “Van, obviously.”

“...What?” Take back his previous thought, that was a hundred times more awkward.

“Donni, you are absolutely insane. He wouldn’t– Why would you even think of that?”

“Well, he’s absolutely gorgeous for one. Unfortunately he wouldn’t be interested in *me*, but if you were there... Come on, aren’t you even curious?”

“No.”

“You have no sense of adventure.” She rolled her eyes.

“Donni, why do you always have to be so weird?”

A shrug. “You like me that way. I’m your weird. And you’re my boring old man in a young body.”

“Hey.” He lunged forwards, managing to catch her off guard for once; they both went over onto the canvas floor. “Take that back.” His attempt at a commanding voice was spoiled when, a moment later, he couldn’t hold back laughter anymore. She snaked out an arm to tickle his ribs; he seized both her wrists, normally he couldn’t get near her but she was still slow with fatigue, and pin her arms above her head.

“Oooh. I might, if you keep doing that...” She wriggled.

He snorted. “You did that on purpose. Tease.” He did feel a lot more awake. “Well, if we’re going to do this, let’s at least set up the stupid ritual.”

#

*:Chosen, wake up:*

Yfandes’ mindvoice dragged him out of a deep sleep. He struggled out from under the blankets, trying to remember where he was. *:’Fandes?:*

*:They’re attacking:*

Memory caught up with him, and he groaned. Five thousand Karsite soldiers marching on Jonne's force of less than a quarter those numbers... He shuddered. *:What time is it?:*

*:Two candlemarks before dawn:*

He'd gotten more sleep than he'd expected, then. *:I'm awake:* He'd gone to bed fully clothed, leaving off only his boots and cloak. *:What do we know?:*

*:Four priest-mages, or at least four of them in uniform. Marching fast. They'll be on top of Jonne's people in half a candlemark:*

*:Damn:* He was already cramming his feet into his boots. The tent was warm; he'd had the energy to lay an underpowered weather-barrier, figuring it would be worth it for the better rest it would give him, and he absolutely wasn't looking forwards to going out into the cold.

Get it over with. He flung the cloak over his shoulders, clasped it, and shoved through the flap. It was *very* cold. At some point the sleet must have changed to snow – there was a layer of white over everything, and under it the ground was frozen hard and coated in a slippery layer of ice. He nearly went down on his backside, and barely managed to catch his balance.

The sky was clear. A thousand stars seemed to watch him.

*What would Leareth do?* He would have been more prepared, for one. He'd have some long-laid contingency plan; he would be in control of the situation.

Well, this was what he had. *What are my resources?* His reserves were still low, he hadn't recovered as much during the night as he'd hoped, and he felt a little lightheaded. *Oh right. When did I last eat?* He had some dried fruit in his shoulder-bag, and pulled it out to munch.

Yfandes appeared out of the darkness, and he swung himself up onto her back. She had an easier time navigating the ice; her greater weight broke through the crust, finding purchase.

The central command tent blazed with light, torches blotting out the stars. He nodded to the sentry, who stared at him before fumbling out a deep bow, and walked in. Efreem sat in the corner, clearly in trance, and Marius, a Mindspeaker, sat to him.

Lissa's face was as grave as he'd ever seen it. "Herald Vanyel." She nodded briskly to him, then turned back to the large folding table, which held a detailed map of the Deerford region. One of her captains stood at her shoulder. He shook his head. *Lissa's one of the highest-ranking commanders out here, and she's barely got two companies anymore.* She'd had fifteen hundred of the Guard here at one point, but she had been sending them out to reinforce other areas.

A page came up to him, wide-eyed and shy, and offered him tea; he accepted a mug and went to stand by Herald Lia. She was a very thin woman with hair so blonde it looked white. One of those few Heralds who had more than two or three Gifts – she was a Mindspeaker, Empath, Farseer, and Fetcher – but none were strong.

He sipped the tea, grateful for the warmth, and wished he had the energy to spare for another weather-barrier. There were braziers burning in every corner of the tent, but they made the air smoky and provided little heat.

Lissa spoke in a quiet voice to her captain, who nodded and left the tent. A moment later, another Herald arrived – Luna, a very powerful Projective Empath with a bit of Healing.

Lissa turned to her, nodded, then back to Vanyel.

"Should I go in?" he said.

She shook her head. "Save your energy for when it counts."

Nearly all the Herald-Mages who would be on site were in the Web – with the notable exception of Mardic and Donni, who had been out on the front the entire time. Nearly a year. How had they lasted?

He remembered a letter from them. *We have a week's leave. Donni has made friends with some smallholders north of Dog Inn and we will spend it with them, to save the journey to Haven. I miss our rooms, but home is wherever she is.*

All they had ever needed was each other. It sent a pang through his chest. So much of his life was scaffolding, built up around the void Tylendel had left in him. His routines, his friends, the places where he felt safe. Mardic and Donni didn't need that. Gods, they might still die in this war, they might die *today*, but at least it would be together and that would be enough—

*Don't be maudlin.* He made himself refocus on Lissa's voice.

"...we have there?" she was saying.

Luna raised a paper. "Aside from the mages, we have six Heralds who were there or who've managed to arrive since we got warning. Tavri, Janna, Jores, Luvi, Caren, and Eryn. Janna's a strong Mindspeaker. Not enough to reach Marius, but she can relay through Toby in Victrin Fell. Caren and Eryn have enough short-range Mindspeech to work in collaboration with her. Jores and Tavri aren't Mindspeakers, so Jonne will keep them paired with someone who is, otherwise we have to relay through their Companions which adds delay. Luvi's our wild card – she's the one with Bardic Gift. Jonne's intending to pair her with Daren, he's the one with that incredible talent for illusions. Can keep both of them hidden, and she can make herself incredibly distracting. Arina will be paired with..."

Vanyel flinched. *Gods, Arina, I wish you weren't out there.* She was so young, barely nineteen. But dauntless. She'd come a long way from the shy, traumatized child he had

accompanied home from Polsinn all those years ago. And she was in the Web; she had that advantage. *Gods, the Web must be confused. Moving so many mages around, concentrating them in a small area...*

He looked up as a messenger in light blue stopped in the doorway. “Message for Major Lissa,” he said politely.

Lissa spared a glance for him. “Be right there. Luna, what do we—”

Vanyel recognized the man; he was one of Lissa’s senior messengers, had been around since the founding of the camp at Horn. But something seemed off about the way he stood. Vanyel frowned and opened his Othersight—

“Lissa, *down!*” he shouted, flinging up a hand and sending a levinbolt flying at the man. It bounced off – bounced off his tight shields, the ones spun from the talisman he wore around his neck, under his clothing. The one that held a perfect illusion over his face and body, making him look like a man he wasn’t. He wasn’t mage-gifted, himself, but someone had put a lot of work into keeping him shielded – and the shield was so self-contained, it had been invisible until he Looked. Vanyel recognized the work of the thrice-bedamned Karsite Adept.

His sister started to turn, and he threw himself in front of her, reaching for a node—

The sealed envelope fell to the ground as the man’s hands flashed out. Vanyel flung power into his physical shields, these days he tended to keep them in place all the time but at minimum power—

Too late. The daggers struck him, and penetrated – they shouldn’t have, but they were enchanted, a simple shield-piercing spell. Not especially powerful, or else it would have been impossible to hide the feel of magic on the blades, but Vanyel hadn’t been ready.

The blades buried themselves in his chest and gut, and the pain was shocking. He fought past it, struggling to focus. *Center and ground.* The door-sentry lunged at the man who wasn't a messenger, sword raised – but the blade glanced harmlessly from the man's stomach, the guard stumbled, and died as a third dagger struck him in the throat.

*He's shielded. I'm the only one who can take him out.* Vanyel realized he had fallen to one knee. The pain was blinding, gods, his vision was starting to darken – but he reached for a node and threw lightning, lighting up the inside of the tent as bright as a summer noon.

He felt the man's shields crumple, felt his mind – felt nothing but satisfaction, even as he died.

...He faded out for a moment, and then there were hands, lightly slapping his face.

“Van!” Lissa's voice. “Damn it, Van, hang on! Someone get a Healer!”

He coughed, spat blood. Something was wrong. He couldn't seem to breathe.

Galloping hoofbeats, like bells on the ice. Ripping canvas, and then Yfandes was there, her warm nose nudging at his face. He could feel her sending him energy, and he tried to focus, tried to pour it into his weak Healing Gift, but he could feel his blood leaking around the blades, he was tired, and something was wrong. He couldn't hold onto the power she was sending; it was slipping away. Like his mind was a leaky waterskin.

*:Chosen, the blades are bespelled. They're draining your reserves. Focus! Lissa needs to pull them out. Tell her:*

He had no air to speak. “Liss,” he whispered, but he knew she couldn't hear him.

*:I'll tell her:*

A moment later, he heard her indrawn breath. “We can't,” she said shortly. “He'll bleed to death.” A pause. “If you say so. Luna, Lia, hold pressure when I pull them out– Oh, Roa! Thank the gods, come here–”

There was a brief whispered conference and then he felt the dagger in his belly slide out, felt someone clamp down on it with a wad of cloth. Then the blade in his chest. He hadn't thought it possible, but it hurt even worse. He felt blood gushing out, taking his strength with it. His heart was racing, his body drenched in cold sweat. Something bubbled when he tried to breathe.

"Punctured lung," he heard Roa's voice say, and felt her hand splayed on his chest, felt her Gift trying to seal the wound and failing. "Least the other didn't hit anything important. What happened?"

"Assassin. Don't know how he slipped through – gods, he jumped in front of me!" Lissa's voice cracked. "Wish it'd been the other way round..."

Everything was starting to fade. He tried to focus on the pain, clinging to it, an anchor.

"I need three people for a Healing-Meld, *now*," Roa snapped. "Can't wait for the other Healers. Herald...?"

"Major Lissa." Marius' voice was distant, as though it came from deep underwater. "Attack's starting."

*They timed it perfectly*, Vanyel thought. He would have laughed if he'd been able to breathe. On the heels of that thought: *this was for me*. Not Lissa, or not primarily. They wouldn't have bothered with bespelled blades – and the workmanship had been excellent, in order to conceal them so well from mage-sight, it would have taken an Adept hundreds of hours. The assassin's subtle shield-talisman must have gotten him past several Thoughtsensers when he infiltrated the camp, and Vanyel hadn't even *noticed* it until he looked directly. *I couldn't do work that fine*.

...His thoughts were growing loose, hazy. *I need to go into the Web. Need to help*. But he had no strength. Every bit of power left in his reserves, which was hardly anything at all,

and everything Yfandes could give him, was going towards his Healing Gift, just keeping him alive. He couldn't even tap a node; he had nothing left to control it with.

*:Van, focus on not dying. They'll handle it:*

They wouldn't, though. Seven mages, half of them already tired, Mardic and Donni the most powerful among them by far, and under a thousand Valdemaran Guardsmen – against five thousand troops and their priest-mages. He guessed the Adept wouldn't be among him; whoever it was, they could work from a distance as well as he could.

He could feel Roa's Gift again, with power behind it, moving in his body. Felt the gaping wound close, he could breathe a little easier now, but his blood was still leaking around the pressure someone held on his belly. Even lying still, he was dizzy, and very cold.

Lissa wasn't beside him anymore. He could feel her mind, rushing surface thoughts over her opaque natural shields. She was grim, but calm. Focused. He heard her voice, giving orders, but the words didn't make sense.

Some time passed, and he found the strength to open his eyes. Roa's hand was on his forehead; her eyes were closed, beads of sweat standing out on her forehead, her skin grey under her tan. Luna and Lia, and the two more young Healers who had joined her, didn't look any better. They were draining themselves empty for him.

“Van.” Lissa's voice. He didn't have the strength even to turn his head, but he moved his eyes, and saw her white, worried face through the spots that danced in his vision. Saw her hands, her forearms drenched to the elbows in his blood. “Van, I know we can't possibly ask this, but – but it's not going well over there. They're losing. Can you do anything?”

Mardic and Donni. Arina. Gods, Jonne... *I can't let this happen.*

*:You'll die if you go into the Web: Yfandes sent tartly.*

She was right. Still. He would have long enough to reach them. *I could direct Final Strike from a distance.*

*:Van, it's not worth it. We can recover if we lose this battle. But not from losing you:*

*:Jonne: he sent, barely a whisper.*

*:Jonne isn't worth that to Valdemar: Her mindvoice was soft, but it cut like another knife to his gut. :He's not worth more than you. I'm sorry, but you know it's true:*

He did, and it was the worst part. *Ashke, gods, I know what you would do.* 'Lendel wouldn't just let this happen – he would do anything to protect the people he loved.

And he would be wrong.

*I can't afford to die. I still need to stop Leareth.*

That thought hurt even more.

Vanyel lifted his head, just a fraction, and saw the little page crouched by his side, both hands pushing down on the wadded once-white tunic. Now soaked through, stained crimson with his blood.

Blood.

*If you were fighting a battle, Leareth had said once, and you had drained all the power you could reach, and thousands would die if you failed – you could kill one innocent, for the power bound in their blood, and save many.*

No. NO.

*To do so would be a good trade. In fact, not to do so, to flinch from it merely on principles, to be blinded... It is still a decision.*

He couldn't. Not with his sister watching.

*He's touching me, Vanyel thought dully. I could kill him without moving. They wouldn't know.*

They would guess. Gods, and how much worse would it be, how much more would people fear him, if they knew that the Herald-Mage Vanyel had used blood-magic, the darkest and most corrupt power, to win a battle?

*Would you trade your unsullied honour for the deaths of thousands?*

Everything in his mind rose up, flinching away from the thought.

The boy's eyes were closed in concentration. He couldn't be more than twelve years old, Vanyel thought. And he was here, a Horn local who could have been at home with his mother and father, because his kingdom was in danger and there was something, however small, that he could do to help.

*Herald Vanyel, imagine that you were a farmer's son, conscripted to an army. If you knew that you could save thousands of your kingdom's people, by giving up your life...*

He couldn't make that choice for anyone – but the boy, whose name he didn't even know, had made a choice, hadn't he? The Horn camp was one of the safer places to be, right now, but it wasn't *safe*, especially not since Lissa's forces had been stripped so low. And central command might be the least safe place here, no matter how many guards and sentries were posted – Lissa was a target. He must have asked to serve her anyway.

No.

Even if the alternative was the deaths of over a thousand Valdemarans?

*I could never look myself in the eye again.*

Was that worth losing Mardic and Donni, Arina, Daren, all the other Heralds and Herald-Mages now desperately fighting for their lives? Was it worth losing Jonne?

Yfandes must have known what he was thinking, but she said nothing. She was going to let him make this choice on his own.

*No. There are some lines you don't ever cross.*

He closed his eyes, feeling tears leak under his eyelids. “I can’t,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

#

*:Hold it!:* Donni sent as the barrier faltered. She barely needed to use Mindspeech; her thoughts were melded with his, two bodies with one mind, as they held their positions mounted on their Companions.

Mardic pushed more power into it, and the shimmering mage-barrier steadied. It was still bearing up even against the fire and lightning that two of the priest-mages were throwing at it – but he wasn’t sure how much longer they could maintain it, even with the energy that steadily replaced his draining reserves as Donni fed him from a node through their bond. She was tiring, but he could feel her fierce determination, a hint of exhilaration. *She’s not afraid. She’s never going to give up.* And with her at his side, he could be brave.

*:Now:* She aimed a strike past the barrier, and one of the priest-mages fell to his knees, his robes smoking. Donni pounded at him with levinbolts, but the other mage was still attacking, and Mardic was running out of energy to replenish the barrier–

*:Ten seconds:* he warned Donni, measuring what was left of his strength.

*:I’ll get it:* The priest-mage was crumpled on the ground, but Mardic could still feel his mind – until, a moment later, he couldn’t anymore, and then Donni was back, just in time, slipping more energy to him.

Fortin faltered a little under him. Mardic had felt it as well. You couldn’t hear the Death Bell from here, of course, but–

*:Daren’s down:* Fortin sent.

He was the sixth Herald to die.

*:I'm running out of nodes:* Donni sent. *:Drained for miles around. Damned Adept is using them too. Gods, not even sure what for, he might just be draining them so I can't:*

Donni was better at controlling node-power than he was, maybe just because she enjoyed it. She'd described it as like riding a raft down rapids. *No wonder she likes it.*

*:Just keep it coming another five minutes:* The two companies they had been sheltering had mostly managed to retreat; Jonne had given the order to fall back nearly a quarter-candlemark again. *We can't hold against them,* he had said, relaying orders through one of the Mindspeakers. *No point losing everyone.*

*:I'll try:*

Mardic focused on the barrier. It was easier, now that only one man was trying to bring it down. *Thank the gods Donni pushed to do the ritual.* They'd have been drained unconscious a candlemark ago, otherwise.

The bolt came out of nowhere. Incredibly powerful, it smashed into the barrier, and Mardic strained to hold it but he couldn't. The threads of power snapped, stinging inside his head, and he started to raise his hands—

—Fire drenched them. Everything was white-hot pain, he couldn't see, couldn't breathe, the fire was in his lungs and he couldn't—

He felt Fortin fall to his knees under him. Heard Donni screaming, or rather felt it inside his head; he couldn't hear anything over the roar of flames. He was, barely, managing to hold his personal shields, keeping the fire mostly off his skin, but he felt like he was being cooked alive.

There were minds all around them now, un-Gifted, Karsite soldiers hacking at him. He didn't have the energy left to raise a real barrier.

*:Mardic:* Fortin, his mindvoice laden with pain but clear. *:Grab Donni and get out:*

*:What do you mean– Oh:* He'd gotten a lot of practice with Fetching, during this war. Recently they'd mastered the final technique that Starwind had hypothesized was possible but hadn't been able to teach him – he had Fetched both of them, their own bodies, and transported them ten feet. Even that had left him out with backlash for half a day, and he hadn't been nearly this drained–

*:I don't think I can:*

*:Here:* And he felt Fortin open to him, felt an inflow of clean blue-white energy. *:I'll give you everything I have. Just go:*

*:What about you and Rasha?:* Moving that much weight was well above his capabilities.

*:We'll get out on our own:*

Unable to see, crying out as something heavy struck his head and nearly buckled the remains of his physical shields, he rolled off Fortin's back, reaching for where he knew Donni was. *:Donni. Hold on to me:*

She tumbled towards him as well, wrapping her arms around his chest, and he felt Rasha and Fortin rise on either side. Heard and felt them snapping, snarling, hooves darting out at the Karsite soldiers surrounding them.

Covering them, giving him just long enough to concentrate, as they lay on the scorching-hot earth with their arms around one another.

–He felt the wound as Fortin took it, a sword-blade burying itself in his flank, but then Fortin cut it off, shields rising, leaving only the narrow channel of flowing energy.

*:Go:* he sent. *:Go go go:*

*Center and ground.* It was the hardest thing he had ever done. *:Hold on:* he told Donni again, she was whimpering in pain and he could feel her blood soaking his charred Whites.

He reached for his Fetching. *Here, to there.*

It felt like his insides were tearing apart, but then they were there, lying in a streambed under flowing water. Nearly a mile north and west, the creek was surrounded by dense foliage that even Karsites armed with swords would have trouble crossing. It was a peaceful spot, for all the trouble that went into reaching it; they had eaten a picnic there once, on a quiet day.

*You find joy when you can, out here.*

He could feel the bits of ice that had broken around them as they landed. It felt good, soothing, numbing the pain, but he knew they had to move. Donni was moaning like an animal against him. He still couldn't see.

*:Fortin-:*

His Companion reached out to him, love and pride and everything that lay between them in the last twelve years. *:Mardic. I love you. You will always be my Chosen:*

And he felt him die.

It was the worst pain he had ever felt. Worse than the burns, worse than a sword through his chest. He clung to Donni like a lifeline, like she was the only solid thing left in the world. She was only semiconscious, but he felt her mind reaching back to him anyway, trying to fill the void. She couldn't, she wasn't big enough, half of him was trying to slip away and follow Fortin *but she's my everything* and he wasn't going to leave her, couldn't do that to her, never ever ever.

*At least her Rasha got out.* Through their shared mind, he could feel Donni's Companion, a mile distant, galloping in the opposite direction. Throwing the Karsites off their trail. Fortin must have covered her retreat, giving her that one thing, a final gift.

It was all he could do to cling to consciousness, but he managed to drag them both out of the stream, onto the soft muddy bank. Donni was weakening, slipping into

unconsciousness; he felt her hot blood pooling against his stomach, and his eyes still weren't working, there was nothing but red-black pain, but he reached with his hands and felt where the blood gushed from her leg. With the last of his strength he pulled off his belt and fumbled it around her thigh, pulling it tight until the bleeding slowed. *Stay with me, Donni. You're the only thing I have left.*

He held her until everything faded out.

## Chapter Fifteen

Vanyel opened his eyes to sunlight.

He was in quite a lot of pain, especially his belly. And he was still cold, despite the wool blankets pulled to his chin and the brazier he could hear crackling nearby. Everything felt dreamlike, though, and it didn't bother him so much. *They must have given me poppy-syrup.* Nothing else felt like it.

*: 'Fandes? :*

A moment later he realized she was there next to him, as her warm nose nudged at his cheek. *: You're awake. How do you feel? :*

*: Like I've been run over by a carriage. What ha— Gods! :* Memory had finally caught up with him, and alarm pushed through the poppy-haze. *: The battle! Is it— :* Was there still time?

*: It was two days ago, Van :*

He'd been out that long?

*: Roa judged it best. You were very weak, and delirious. Kept trying to climb out of bed. She used her Gift to put you under so your body could recover :*

Oh. He tried to lift his head, and gave up; even that small movement made everything spin. *:Why am I so dizzy?:*

*:You lost nearly half your blood. I'm not surprised:*

He wasn't going to let her distract him. *:The battle. What happened?:*

*:Well, we lost. Obviously:* There was a deep tide of grief in her mindvoice. *:Jonne called a retreat when he realized it was hopeless. Got nearly two hundred of his people out:* She said it like it was an incredible accomplishment.

Which it was, given what they'd faced. Still. *:Jonne. Is he--:* But he already knew the answer.

*:No. He didn't make it. I'm sorry, Van:*

He closed his eyes against the tide of grief. *Jonne. I failed you.* If he'd been willing to use blood-magic—

*:No, Van. I think you made the right choice. Jonne wouldn't have wanted you to save him. Not at that price:*

Tears leaked down his face. *:Not just him. All of them:*

*:Even then. Van, I – I'm not going to say it was an obvious choice. I don't know. But it wasn't the kind of decision to make in seconds under that kind of pressure. I don't think you would ever have trusted your judgement again, if you had:*

What, and this was better? *:Fandes, I'll never trust myself again anyway! I could have saved them, and I made a choice not to. Because I didn't want people to think badly of me! What does that make me?:* A coward, he thought. Putting virtue over results.

*:No. That was part of the reason, but only a small part. I don't know if it's true there are lines you should never cross. Don't know if you can have that much certainty about anything. But there are lines that, almost every time you're tempted to cross them, it's the*

wrong decision. And we're fallible. We will make mistakes – and some types of mistakes we can't afford to make even once. So we set rules, even if they're not perfect. You made the right call:

He hesitated. *:Fandes, what would you have done? If I'd decided the other way?*

*Would you have–:*

*:Gods, no! Van, I wouldn't ever repudiate you. I don't know how you can even think that. I... I guess I'd have tried my best to help you forgive yourself:* He felt her mental shudder. *:Like I will now. But I'm glad we didn't end up in that world:*

He let himself just bask in her light for a moment. It made him feel a little better even if it shouldn't have.

*'Lendel, what would you think?* That was easy to answer. 'Lendel wouldn't have had any doubts at all, and he'd have been horrified and appalled that Vanyel had even considered it for a moment. *You don't compromise with monsters,* he had said once.

*:He was very black-and-white in his morality:* Yfandes sent. *:You know that. And there's a strength in it. But the world isn't that simple. I think it does credit to you, that you were able to consider the option. It doesn't make you evil:*

How could she be so sure? *What if Leareth's made me like him,* he thought dully.

*:Maybe he has, a little. I don't think it's all bad. We have to understand our enemies, to be able to fight them effectively:*

*:What if fighting him isn't what I need to do?:*

Her mindvoice was dry. *:You know I haven't got any doubts. But I think it does you credit, as well, that you're willing to consider it:*

He wished she would stop using that word. *It's not about virtue.* He didn't want to ask, but– *:What about the Heralds?:*

*:We lost nearly everyone. Eleven deaths. I'm afraid Arina was one of them:*

He wasn't surprised, but – gods. One blow after another. His first student. *I should have been there to protect her*, he thought dully. He remembered how she'd looked in her crisp new whites – laughing, cheerful, a young woman ready to take on the world. *Well, she did. And lost.*

He felt Yfandes' gentle reassurance. *:Some good news. Mardic and Donni got out:*

The relief hit like an avalanche. But then he noticed her hesitation. *:What?:*

A mental sigh. *:They're out of the war effort for the foreseeable future. They were badly injured. And Mardic lost Fortin:*

*:Oh gods:* On the tailcoats of relief, the shock hurt even more. *:How did he survive?:*

*:He didn't want to leave Donni:*

Like a punch to the ribs. 'Lendel, eyes dark in the candlelight, apologizing.

I should've been there, he had said. *But you aren't, ashke*, he thought. *You aren't here.*

Had Mardic loved Donni that much more?

*:Chosen, no, I didn't mean it that way:* Contrition in her mindvoice. *:It isn't–:*

But it was the same, or close enough. Wasn't it? Gods, couldn't he be glad his friends were alive, instead of being angry? Instead of being *jealous*? They didn't deserve it. They hadn't done anything to hurt him.

*No. Ashke, you're the one that did that to me.* He couldn't muster anger towards 'Lendel, though, not anymore. The bitterness had nowhere to go; it sat in his chest like a weight.

Focus on the practical. *:They knew I was here:* he sent. *:That attack was aimed at me. Planned:*

*:It seems so:*

*:How? It's supposed to be a secret I'm here at all. Hells, Mardic and Donni did the first Gate behind shields. Even their Adept shouldn't know about it:* How could they have gotten a spy-report in and back so quickly? Or had the Karsite agent been there all along in their camp? No, he couldn't have been, the talisman couldn't have contained enough power to hold that illusion more than eight candlemarks, and the un-Gifted man would have had no way to replenish it.

*:I don't know:* Yfandes felt very worried. *:It makes me uncomfortable:*

*:They always seemed to know where I was:* Hells, even when he'd been wandering the woods alone, he'd run into scout-parties and raids far more often than chance would have explained. *I thought I was just unlucky.* What if it was more than that? *:Fandes, is there any way they could track my location?:*

Hesitation. *:Maybe. If they were able to plant some kind of token on you...:*

Gods. It seemed impossible, but... *:Have to check:* He started to sit up. *Ow.* He fell back, the room spinning around him. *:Have to search my things:* he sent dully. Surely he couldn't have missed carrying around a homing-talisman for a year! Though he had nearly missed seeing the agent's shield, it had been that well-hidden, and he hadn't sensed the bespelled blades at all until they were buried in his flesh.

*:It can wait:* She blew into his hair. *:Rest:*

*:It can't. They could come after me again, while I'm vulnerable:*

*:Trust me, they can't. Lissa has the whole camp on lockdown. She feels terrible about what happened:*

*:Wasn't her fault:* He closed his eyes. *:Have someone bring my things. I can't move, but my mage-sight should still work:*

#

“Tell me,” Randi said firmly.

Herald Katha fidgeted. “Sir, it’s...” She swallowed. “We found out how they knew Herald Vanyel was there.”

He winced. *We hauled him back from k'Treva just so he could nearly die again.* They couldn’t have known in advance, and he knew it had been the right call in expectation, but it still rankled.

“They’d planted an item on him,” she said. “A cloak-pin. He said he should have realized, he didn’t remember packing it, but who would have thought? It was a very simple homing-spell, dormant most of the time, and a lot of effort went into concealing it. He wouldn’t have seen it unless he was paying attention right when they happened to ping it.”

*And half of Van’s things are enchanted in some way,* Randi thought. Not his fault he hadn’t noticed. “How did they plant it on him?”

An unhappy shrug. “We’re not sure. We think the Karsites might have had an agent in Major Lissa’s supply depot, but it would’ve been nearly a year ago.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. We shouldn’t have let this happen.”

“It’s no one’s fault, Katha.” He tried to make his voice reassuring.

She gulped, then seemed to gather herself. “In some ways this is good news,” she said. “The item’s destroyed. We had thought they must have remarkably good penetration of our security, but in hindsight, this could explain most of it. We’re checking, of course, but we’ve only turned up a few low-level agents. And my people say the crack-down isn’t affecting morale as much as it could. Apparently no one minds going under Truth Spell when it’s to catch the people who nearly killed our Herald-Mage Vanyel.”

“He does have a lot of respect.”

Katha nodded. There was a hint of awe in her eyes. “He took out the assassin even after the man had gotten his blades in him. A lot more people would’ve died, otherwise. We think the agent intended the second dagger for Major Lissa, but Vanyel intercepted both. We only lost one sentry, no one else was even hurt.”

Randi nodded. “How bad are his injuries?”

She looked unhappy. “The Healers got to him very quickly, but he lost a lot of blood. He’ll need a few weeks.”

*Just at the time we can’t afford not to have him.* “Can he be moved safely?” Randi made himself say.

“Sure, why—”

“I want him brought back to Haven. If he’s going to be out of action anyway, I’d like to have him make his modifications to the Web. We need every advantage we can get.”

“It’ll delay getting him to the front,” Katha said hesitantly.

He knew it would. Not just the distance. Van would surely be worn out after he attempted the Web-modifications; he would need to recover from that as well. “It’s worth it,” he said firmly. “We can’t afford to think short-term.”

Dismissing her with a nod, he leaned back in his chair, and waited until she was gone to pinch the bridge of his nose. The war was wearing him down. He had been trying to get enough sleep, but he never felt rested in the mornings anymore. *I’m twenty-three and some days I feel eighty.*

It was still sinking in, what had happened. *We can recover from this, but it’s a blow.* Their numbers were quite good, there were nearly ten thousand of the Guard down south, but they had them spread fairly evenly across all two hundred miles of Border – most posts didn’t

have more than two or three companies. They could stop a raid everywhere, but they couldn't stop a concentrated attack anywhere. Not without Van.

#

Shavri had just raised her hand to knock when she felt the brush of Vanyel's mind. *:Come in:*

He sounded tired, which wasn't surprising. She opened the door, which he had left unlocked, and crossed his small sitting room into the bedroom. He was sitting with his back against the headboard, his face nearly as pale as the sheets, a book in his lap; he'd been making notes on a paper pinned to a thin board. *He never stops working*, she thought.

He raised his eyes to meet hers. "Thanks for coming."

"You're welcome." She sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry. About the people you lost."

Pain flashed across his face, but then it was gone. "What's done is done." There was a shuttered look in his eyes. Well, she wasn't going to push him to talk about it if she didn't want to. He set down the book. "How are things here?"

"Very busy, but we're managing." She tried to smile, searching for a happier topic. "Jisa's reading books on her own now."

"Sounds like your daughter."

Shavri smiled. *Your daughter too*, she thought but didn't say. "She's a handful. Drives poor Beri to distraction with her questions. Not shy at all. I remember I was terrified of most grownups at that age, but she'll go right up to any sentry or, hells, any Herald. Wants to know everything about Companions. The foals down at Companion's Field let her play with them."

Vanyel blinked, his eyes suspiciously shiny. "That's wonderful. Figure she'll be Chosen?"

“Who can know?” She let her arms fall to her sides, suddenly tired. *It’s all right*, she reminded herself. *Even if she is Chosen, she won’t be a Herald for years. Won’t have to fight in this war.*

Vanyel cleared his throat. “I wanted to talk to you about the Web. I’m just about ready – well, I will be as soon as I can walk two steps without passing out. I’m planning to work with Savil. And I wanted to ask you.”

“Ask me?” She stared blankly at him. “I’m not a mage, Van.”

“No, but you’re a Healer. The Tayledras have – well, they call them Healing-Adepts, it’s not a mix of Gifts you see around here. They’re instrumental in creating a Heartstone, which is approximately what I’m trying to do here. And you’re used to working in very close concert, with Healing-Melds. If I can pull you into a close meld, work together with my mage-gift and your Healing... Maybe we can do it.”

She thought about it. Nodded. “I’m willing to try.”

“Good. I do have something I want to try now. A sort of test.”

She nodded, wondering where this was going.

“I want to teach you to cast a Truth Spell.”

She stared at him. “What? But I’m not a mage—”

He raised a hand, and then let it fall, as though even that small motion had tired him.

“Doesn’t matter. You don’t have to be. The name is misleading – it’s not really a spell at all. Do you know much about it?”

She shook her head. “Only a little. Deedre invented it, no?” The late Herald-Mage had done a great deal of spell research in her long life, and written several books. Vanyel had often referred to her work in past conversations.

“More like discovered it. Did a lot of testing, and it seems only Heralds can cast it – but *all* Heralds can cast the first stage. Even those without any major Gifts. Heralds with strong Gifts can cast a higher-level version, the coercive Truth Spell – the first stage only detects whether people are lying, the second stage forces them to speak the truth. But they don’t have to be Mage-Gifted. Any strong Gift will do.”

She nodded slowly. “I see. You think I might be able to learn it because I have a strong Healing Gift?”

“I don’t know, which is why it’s a test. Deedre did test it with Healers and Bards, including those with stronger Mindspeech than yours, and it didn’t work for any of them. She was never able to figure out why. Thought maybe it was something the Companions helped with, except they didn’t seem to be doing anything!”

Shavri ran a hand over her hair. “So we should expect I won’t be able to do it.”

“Maybe. But you were Chosen, Shavri, even if you didn’t accept it. Meaning that if there’s something that makes Heralds different from other people, other than Gifts, you have it.”

She shivered. *I don’t like that.* Why not? She couldn’t quite put her finger on the unease. *Damn it, though, I don’t want to be special.*

“I’d like you to try. It’s very simple. I’ll explain how it works afterwards, but I don’t want to bias you. You want to picture a cloud, a little wisp with blue eyes, and say the following rhyme nine times...”

She tried it, concentrating hard. When she opened her eyes, she gasped. There was a blue halo of light over Vanyel’s head.

He smiled. “Ask me a question.”

She blinked at him. “What did you eat for breakfast?”

“Eggs and toast.”

The light blinked out. She gasped again.

Vanyel’s smile broadened. “Ask me what I really ate for breakfast.”

She asked.

“Porridge. And disgusting meat broth. The Healers have me drinking it constantly, apparently it’ll help give my body what it needs to make more blood or something.”

The light had reappeared.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Vanyel looked very smug now. “Told you, ‘Fandes.’ He paused. “Let’s try the second-stage. I want you to picture that blue cloud, and give it a little push. The way you push with your Gift when you’re Healing someone.”

She nodded and tried it. The light seemed to settle more firmly on Vanyel’s head.

“Ask me something else?”

She tried to think of something. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.” He blinked. “That worked. I meant to say I was twenty-one.”

“You could still pass for it, if it wasn’t for your hair.” He was so short and slim, it always made him look younger, and he had the sort of face that didn’t show its age.

He pushed a lock of it behind his ears, self-consciously. “You know, most Tayledras mages go entirely white in their teens.”

“It would look very dignified on you.” She was smiling. “I can’t believe it, Van! I can cast a spell!”

“I told you, it isn’t really a spell. Not in the sense of using mage-energy. Do you know what *vrondi* are?”

She shook her head.

“They’re air-elementals. Very simple creatures, if you can even call them that. Not much mind to speak of, but they’re perceptive in their own way, and they can’t abide falsehood. It’s hard to give them any complex task, they don’t have much of an attention span, but they’re very good at watching things.”

“Oh.” She tried to think back to what she’d read about the four Elemental Planes. It had seemed relevant to some of her Healing-research, once. “This has something to do with the Web?”

“Yes. They would make very good sentries, if only there was a way to keep them on task. I think I can set up, well, a sort of pact with them through the Web. Have them watch Valdemar. I’ll need an energy-source to offer them, but if I can get the Web centered on a Heartstone, I can do that.”

“That makes sense. What sorts of things would you have them watching for?”

“Mages, for one. They can detect the use of mage-energy; it would give us way of knowing if any foreign mage crossed our borders. And it could help us find mage-gifted children earlier.”

She knew why that would be useful. *We have no way of knowing if this damned Master Dark is still killing our children.* Just the thought of it made her chest clench.

#

Savil settled her rose-quartz focus down on the stone table, and tried to push down her nerves. *Just because I’ll be working with more power than I ever have in my life—* She pushed that thought away too. They had redone the calculations a thousand times, and Van knew what he was doing.

She would have liked to have Kilchas and Sandra as well, the next two most powerful mages in the kingdom. Or Mardic and Donni. But Mardic and Donni were still at Dog Inn,

not yet recovered enough to be moved, and the other two were holding their respective sections on the Border and couldn't be spared.

They had Shavri, there to play whatever part Van thought was essential – Savil didn't really understand it – and Tantras had volunteered to spot them. Very brave of him, given how much energy they would be throwing around, and how badly it could go if they messed up. Van had built him an even stronger shield-talisman, but still.

Her nephew still looked pale, but he said he was fine and the Healers had cleared him. *Surely Shavri wouldn't let him do this if he weren't recovered enough*, she reminded herself. *Oh, Van, I wish people would stop trying to kill you.*

She watched him as he sat on the edge of the bench, a slender figure in white, silver eyes focused on the stone table and the large, unkeyed quartz globe they had laid in the middle. It was to provide a physical anchor for the Heartstone. *He still looks so young. And so old.* There was a lot more white in his hair after the last year. He wasn't gaunt like he'd been a few months ago, but his cheeks were still hollower than she liked.

He had seemed troubled, ever since the battle – well, who wouldn't be? *Gods, I know how much Jonne meant to him. And Arina was his first student.* But she thought it was more than grief. More than guilt. Whatever it was, he wouldn't speak of it. Which bothered her. He didn't often hide things from her. Maybe he would tell her later, when he was ready.

*Focus on what we're doing*, she told herself.

She heard footsteps, and glanced up to see Shavri entering with Jaysen, followed by Tantras, who closed the door behind them. Vanyel had asked Jaysen after some consideration – the man was only Master-level, but he was experienced, and four was a much more stable configuration for concert work than three.

Shavri came over and sat next to Vanyel, resting her hand on his shoulder for a moment, while Tran unfolded a stool and settled himself by the door. Jaysen sat down next to Savil, leaning in to give her a peck on the cheek.

*:Thank you for doing this, Jay:* she sent.

*:Anything for you, Savil:* He felt a little nervous, but he had it well under control.

Tantras, though, was looking at them with trepidation. “Ready for this?” she asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” He shook himself. “Be careful.”

“We intend to be.” She turned back to the other two. “On your call, Van.”

He glanced up and met her eyes, sparing a tight smile for her. “I’m ready. Why don’t I pull Shavri in first, then you join and pull Jay in after you?”

She nodded, and opened her Othersight, watching as Vanyel threw out a mental link to Shavri and they effortlessly meshed shields. *As easily as lovers*, she thought, though obviously that wasn’t the case.

Jaysen reached out to her, and she joined with him, relished the solid, unshakeable granite feel of his mind. Then she held out a mental hand to Van, and he pulled her in. The meld wobbled and stabilized.

*:Remember, I’ll be leading this, but you’ll each have your part:* he sent. *:First, let’s look at the Web so we can pull our Companions in:*

She couldn’t reach Kellan directly, the room’s shielding was more than enough to block off their bond, but oddly enough they’d discovered years ago that they could reach their Companions anyway if they were ‘in’ the Web. She laid her hand on the table, and the Web was there. Silver and blue, an intricate pattern. *:Kellan?:*

*:Here, love:* She felt the other two Companions join as well. Then, a moment later, Taver. Vanyel had asked Tantras, and for some reason she couldn’t fathom, Taver had agreed

to join and support Shavri. The Companions would be helping them stay grounded, so that they weren't lost in the incredible power they would be moving.

Through them, through the Web, she felt all of the other Companions, everywhere in Valdemar. All of the Heralds. *Like holding my kingdom in the palm of my hand*, she thought, wonderingly.

*:Ready?:* Vanyel sent.

One by one, they replied. Shavri was the last.

*:All right:* He began to thump on his knee with one hand, a steady rhythm, then to sing, wordlessly, his baritone oddly muted by the room's shields. Savil joined, humming. She wasn't especially musical, and it had taken a *lot* of practice for her to learn her part well enough to stay on key. Vanyel said a few missed notes ought not to disturb the working.

Jaysen joined, humming as well – he had a voice like a donkey, he claimed – and then Shavri. Her voice was high and clear as water.

They were building a container, a shape to tell the energy where to go. She felt it grow stronger and more solid around them.

*:Now:* Vanyel sent, and she felt him reach downwards, mental hands passing effortlessly through the earth below them, to the incredibly powerful node that now lived under the Palace. He had to do that part alone; the rest of them weren't nearly strong enough.

Deep in trance, she could barely feel her body, keeping the rhythm and interweaving tune going.

Even Vanyel faltered for a moment, caught up in the incredible currents of energy. *He was molten stone, he was riven earth, he had forgotten his name—*

*:Van:* She leaned further into the meld, trying to provide stability. Jaysen and Shavri were doing the same; she felt them with her, close, and the Companions with them.

It was Taver who anchored them, in the end. *:Herald Vanyel:* His mindvoice rang, implacable, through their shared minds.

*:Hold the containment:* Vanyel sent, and then he was back, rising up from the bedrock that lay below them, dragging the node-energy after him. It strained against all of their minds, pouring up through the earth, and the rhythm and song shaped it, directing it into the waiting crystal.

*:Shavri:* Vanyel sent.

Savil felt the Healer take a deep breath and then her voice rose, a single pure, bell-like note. She was reaching out with her Gift – not pushing, but coaxing. Her song held the laughter of children, the spring rains soaking the earth, flowers bending towards the sun. The warmth of a hearthfire, walls that kept out the snow. The feeling of coming home.

*This is your home,* Shavri said, with her Gift. *Come home now.*

It nearly blinded Savil's mage-sight, as the tremendous energies settled into the crystal. The blazing light faded to just a glow, settling into place like a snake coiling up in a sunny field.

The Web held.

*:Let's see if it worked:* Vanyel sent, and a moment later the Companions dropped out of the meld.

The Web held steady.

*:Think we're done:* Vanyel sent, and Savil pulled out of the mind-meld and opened her eyes just to see him start to fall. Shavri moved faster, catching his shoulders before he could smash his face open on the table. She pushed his head down between his knees.

*That's a good thought.* Savil put her head down in her hands. She was going to have an awful reaction-headache in a moment, and she felt very lightheaded.

Had they succeeded. “Tran?” she said out loud. “Do you feel anything?”

“Yes.” There was wonder in his voice. “There’s something that wasn’t there before…”

*It worked. Gods, it worked.* They had pulled all of the Heralds into the Web now, not just the mages, anchoring them through their Companions. The Web already had some level of intelligence, built into it by the first King Valdemar, added to by Vanyel – now it had something like a mind of its own as well, some degree of volition. Whenever there was a threat to Valdemar that fell within the alarm-parameters, it would alert the nearest Herald, and they would find themselves knowing where they needed to be.

Would it be enough to turn the tide of the war? Maybe. She wasn’t sure.

She sat up. Vanyel was doing the same, with Shavri supporting him; he held his forehead with one hand.

“I thought about adding the vrondi today,” he said shakily, “but I don’t think I can manage. Hells. I’m not sure I can stand!”

Tantras jumped up. “I can get you to your quarters. Are the rest of you all right?”

Savil nodded. She wasn’t sure she wanted to try standing just yet, but she thought she had enough strength to make it as far as her bed. Vanyel’s part had been by far the hardest.

*We did it.* She still felt giddy. Like a little girl. *The biggest mage-working since King Valdemar himself, and I was a part of it.*

#

Donni sat on the side of the cot, fidgeting with a piece of wood she had been carving into a duck just to give her hands something to do. The stump of her right leg itched abominably; she couldn’t reach through the bandages to scratch it. *If that’s the thing bothering me I must be feeling better,* she thought.

She didn't remember anything after the flames. Mardic had Fetched them out of the line of fire, and they must have lain unconscious for nearly six candelmarks before Rasha was able to direct help to them. She had woken on a cot in a makeshift Healers' tent, in agony, with her leg gone and burns over two-thirds of her body. And Mardic beside her, curled into a ball, his face turned away from the light.

He hadn't fought the Healers when they cared for him, but he hadn't helped either; he had let them turn and clean and spoon-feed him, submitting to it all with blank-eyed passivity. Hadn't make a sound when they cleaned and re-banded his burns, though she knew how painful it had to be – gods, despite poppy-syrup she had been screaming every time. His shields were locked tightly in place, blocking her out of his mind. A week had passed before he spoke a single word to her.

Now they were back in Haven – carried in a cart, like invalids, which they were but it had still irritated her – and at least he sometimes answered her questions in monosyllables, though he never spoke unprompted. At least, sometimes, he would let her hold him.

Right now he was curled on his bed, against the other wall in the room they shared, in the long-term ward at the House of Healing. His face was turned away from her and he lay still, but she knew he wasn't sleeping. She could always tell.

She set down the carving-knife and misshapen duck, reached for her crutches, and levered herself to her feet. Foot. It took a lot of effort, and she winced as the scars on her torso and shoulders stretched, but she made it the four paces to his side of the room. She laid the crutches against the wall.

“Mardic,” she said quietly. *I don't know what to say. Van would know.* But he was gone, he'd left for the Border again two days before they got back. Gods, she wished she'd

had a chance to see him, if only to tell him that what had happened at Deerford hadn't been his fault. If she knew one thing about him, it was that he would blame himself for all of it.

Her lifebonded didn't stir.

"Mardic." She lowered herself onto the bed, wincing. "Mardic, I know you're awake. You should get up for a bit. We could ask one of the trainees to take us outside." It was a nice day; through their small window, she could see a patch of blue sky, sun shining down on the snow.

Not that Mardic would be able to see it. The Healers had, finally, given up on trying to restore his eyes. *I'd like to kick whatever god decided to take that from him, too.* But at least he could feel the wind on his face. Surely that would help?

"No," he mumbled. His voice was rough; both of theirs were, damage from inhaling smoke. The Healers said it might be better eventually. *I miss being able to sing,* she thought.

He never wanted to do anything. The Healers tried to encourage him to get out of bed, physically he was in better shape than she was, but he refused. It was a trial just getting him to eat.

"You can't just lie there forever," she snapped, immediately regretting it. She stroked his hair. "I'm sorry, love. I know it's hard." *That's what Van would say, isn't it?*

He said nothing.

A Mindhealer had come to see him, when they were still in the Healers' compound in Dog Inn. He had refused to talk to the woman at all, and she had shrugged and said he needed time. She had told Donni to be gentle with him, to be there to listen without pushing.

*Well, I would listen, if he would ever talk to me.* She was trying to be gentle, she really was, but it *hurt*, being locked out of his mind. She felt the strain on their bond like an arrow

through the chest. It had been nearly a month, and gods, she was trying, but she wasn't sure how much longer she could be patient.

*At least he lets me touch him*, she reminded herself. *That's progress*. Despite herself, she felt tears of frustration spring into her eyes. *What if he doesn't get any better than this?*

She took a deep breath and reminded herself that he was alive, and that was an incredible, precious gift. Most Heralds didn't survive the deaths of their Companions, in fact, she wasn't sure she'd ever heard of anyone who had.

*Sometimes I wish we'd both died on the battlefield*. It wasn't something she'd ever thought she would catch herself thinking. And, overall, she was glad to be alive – but things felt so messy, so complicated, nothing was ever going to be the same and it wasn't *fair*.

Mardic still lay with his face towards the wall. She sighed and lay down, curling herself against his back, and he let her slip her arm around him.

*I'm here, love, but how much time are you going to need?*

#

*White snow on a grey sky–*

*“Herald Vanyel.”*

*“Leareth.”*

*They stood facing each other across an expanse of ice, and Leareth was smiling slightly.*

*“What?” Vanyel said finally.*

(He wasn't especially in the mood for a conversation; a week back on the Border, and he was already exhausted.)

*“You have done something very remarkable, Herald of Valdemar. I assume that it was you.”*

*Vanyel just looked back at him, saying nothing.*

*“I speak of this guardian spell you have built. Completed, I should say. Quite an impressive addition.”*

(Oh. It would have been long enough, he supposed. Leareth might well have felt echoes of it through the ley-lines, any large working would cause a disturbance, and he could have sent agents to investigate and received their reports by now.)

*“It is a finer Adept working than I have seen in many centuries. I am curious about a number of aspects. In particular, how you are powering it.” His eyebrows lifted very slightly. “I hypothesize that you have built a Tale’edras Heartstone.”*

(He pronounced it oddly. It wasn’t the first time he had used a word that sounded like it might come from the Tayledras language, but was slightly different. Maybe it was because he had first learned the ‘Kala’da’in’ language?)

*“In which case I am especially curious. It is a working I have never managed to replicate, though I have studied a number of their abandoned sites in great detail. I have never seen a live Heartstone up close, as I am afraid the Tale’edras do not like me.”*

*Vanyel couldn’t help smirking. “They wouldn’t.”*

*“They are a strange people. I hear they are very open-minded in some ways, and yet they will kill any stranger who enters their lands. They bring such dedication to the work they do – and yet they will not take responsibility for others, though they could help the world a great deal with the power that they have. With their knowledge, if they were willing to share it.”*

(Vanyel had never thought of it that way. It was true; with the number of powerful mages they had, and Healers, they could do a lot of good anywhere they went. Though it seemed like they were busy enough just managing the project that, apparently, their Goddess

had tasked them with – making the land damaged in the ancient Mage Wars safe to live in again.)

*“In any case. You must have a close friendship with them, if they were willing to share this knowledge. And perhaps their Goddess has her eye on you as well. Lore says that She puts a shard of herself into each of their Heartstones, and that is why it is like they have minds. I have never been able to create such a thing with magic alone, nothing beyond simple algorithms, and I assure you that I have tried.”*

(A shard of the Star-Eyed? He wasn't sure he liked that idea at all – and he wasn't sure why it made him so uncomfortable.)

*“You seem displeased by that,” Leareth said.*

(Damn it, why could he always guess how Vanyel was feeling, no matter how hard he tried to control his face?)

*“I do not like to have the gods meddling in my work either,” Leareth went on. “I do not consider them to be on my side. On our side.” He shook his head slightly, black hair swaying in the wind. “The world would look very different, if they had the best interests of humankind as their goal.”*

(I wonder how he keeps his hair from turning white, Vanyel thought, he must use node-magic all the time. A pointless thought. So Leareth didn't like the gods meddling? There was a thought just out of his reach, the trailing edge of a memory that he couldn't quite pull into the light – and the restless anger was there, that odd drive to do something, anything. He tried to ignore it; he couldn't afford to let it affect his judgement, not now.)

*“In any case. You have done it.” There was real respect in Leareth's eyes.*

*“I'm surprised you're happy about it,” Vanyel said. “Surely it makes your job harder. Trying to invade Valdemar and all.”*

*Another slight smile. “Perhaps, but it will make your fellow countrymen safer from many dangers, for a long time to come. That is worth something in itself. And perhaps, in time, we will truly be friends, and you will share with me what you have learned.”*

*“I doubt that.”*

*“We will see, Herald Vanyel.” There was a pause. “You are troubled. I would have thought you would be pleased, after this accomplishment.”*

(It was his first dream since the battle, Vanyel thought. Gods, his first dream since k'Treva. So much had happened. Nearly a month – could Leareth know about Deerford by now? Not many details, surely. He ought not to reveal anything – but he was surprised how badly he wanted to talk about it. He’s my enemy and I don’t trust him, he thought, but damn it, he would understand.)

*“I had to make a hard choice,” he said quietly. “There weren’t any good options, and I – I would regret having chosen the other way as well.”*

*Leareth nodded slowly. “I see. I do know what that is like, Herald Vanyel.”*

*Vanyel felt a crooked smile come to his lips. “I didn’t do what you would have. I – I didn’t compromise what I think is right.” And so I lost people, he thought.*

*To his surprise, Leareth laughed, though without much humour. “Is that what you think? Herald Vanyel, all decisions involve a compromise. Otherwise the answer would be obvious, and there would not truly be a choice. I suppose you mean that in the tradeoff between actions you think are right and results you think are good, you chose the virtuous action, perhaps at the cost of failure.” He paused, eyes like still water resting on Vanyel. “It is a simplification to say I would always choose the other way, Herald,” he said finally. “I think that everything is grounded in results, in the end – but the world is very messy, and sometimes there is not time to explore and chart out the results I anticipate from each path. Sometimes,*

*when time is short, it is in fact better to fall back on rules I have set, before, when things were not so rushed. And so I choose an action based on what you might call virtue, and afterwards when there is time I evaluate if, in fact, that is the decision process I should have been running, that would have had the best results over all the possible scenarios, and if not I change it. But in the heat of battle, I do not often break those rules I have set, even if I am greatly tempted.”*

*Vanyel stared at him. “That’s very nuanced,” he said finally.*

*“I have had a great many years to consider this. You have not, Herald Vanyel – and yet I think you do better than I did at your age.”*

*(Vanyel thought of a line from Seldasen. If I see further and more clearly, it is only because I stand on the shoulders of giants. He hadn’t been starting fresh on his own, had he? He had Seldasen’s writings to build on – and he had Leareth. The man who, for better had worse, had shaped the way he thought about the world more than anyone else.)*

*“I’m flattered,” he said dryly.*

*Leareth smiled again, thinly. “Believe it or not, in my youth I was quite reckless. Perhaps I ought to tell you a story.”*

## Chapter Sixteen

Tantras spoke calmly, palms resting on the table overtop his notes. “I’m afraid it isn’t good news. We lost two more Herald-Mages and a Mindspeech-relay this week.” He shook his head. “Whatever’s going on by South Hardorn, I don’t like it.”

Randi nodded. “We have confirmation that the war is spilling into Hardorn, then? Keiran?”

The Lord Marshal’s Herald lifted her eyes. “I’m afraid so. Received an official request for aid from King Festil yesterday. Which, unfortunately, we really can’t provide.”

Savil scribbled a note on her piece of paper, and resisted the urge to rub her eyes, which felt hot and itchy with fatigue. She’d been up later than she ought the night before, preparing notes for another lecture to new Guard recruits. The new Web meant reevaluating a lot of how they did things. It was for the better, of course, but it was still extra work. *I want this war to be over yesterday*, she thought dully.

It was already summer. Vanyel had been out there for three months, and even she wasn’t exactly sure where he was. Better that way; when they’d left him stationed at Horn for the first three weeks, the Karsites had massed an attack that they’d barely held off. She didn’t

like it that he was alone out there – but his letters, which he dropped off on forays past various posts, still seemed cheerful enough.

Another two Herald-Mages. They'd lost over a dozen since the start of the war. Lately she felt the deaths as they happened, usually quite painfully – she'd confirmed that Jaysen had the same experience, and she had to assume Van did as well. She wasn't sure why; other Heralds and Herald-Mages had confirmed that they immediately knew when someone had died and who, but not that they felt the pain of it. Maybe it was because the three of them had been involved in the working? She wondered if Shavri felt it too.

She jerked herself out of daydreams. "...at South Hardorn?" Randi was saying.

Tantras fidgeted with his papers. "We're not sure. Initially we thought they'd somehow brought Pelagirs-creatures over there, but Karse doesn't even border on the Pelagirs. Whatever it is, it's nasty. We're losing a lot of scouts and sentries. And we think there's blood-magic involved."

Savil wrinkled her nose. *That's going far even for the Karsites.*

"That's not a good sign," Randi said. "I'm thinking it's time to send Herald Vanyel in to investigate. Can we pass word to him?"

Tantras nodded. "I'll take care of it. Think he's somewhere east of the Terilee right now, so hopefully he can be there in a few days."

Savil sighed. *I don't like how much we're relying on him.* But, for better or worse, Vanyel represented a very large chunk of their remaining firepower.

Randi turned to Keiran. "Update on our troop placements?"

#

"Well?" the weaponsmaster said. "What are you here for, girl?"

*No one's called me girl in years.* Kayla was very intimidating, Shavri thought, but she faced her steadily. "I want to learn to defend myself."

"And why do you think you need to do that, exactly?"

She folded her arms. "You know who I am." They were alone in the salle; she had waited until after the usual evening lessons were over to speak to Kayla alone.

"The King's lifebonded," Kayla said flatly. "Though not his wife." A hint of disapproval in her voice. "Meaning that you and your daughter are quite well protected."

"And that we could be targets." Shavri could feel her cheeks growing warm. *Damn it, I don't want to be here either, please don't make this harder.* "I know Randi's Guard is discreetly keeping an eye on us. I'm not blind. But something could still happen." She took a deep breath. "And I don't want to be relying on others. I'm tired of being afraid."

The weaponsmaster's eyes softened. "Girl, say I do agree to train you – you won't be any less afraid. Might be more so. You're a woman; you're never going to be as strong as a man. You're starting late, and I doubt you can spare four candelmarks a day to train. Not when you're one of the top Healers in Haven. I can teach you, but you might find all you learn is how vulnerable you are."

She shook her head. "Then maybe I ought to be more afraid. So I remember to be careful."

There was a long silence, as Kayla regarded her steadily.

"What's this really about?" she said finally. "Gods – do you have any reason to think you're in particular danger?"

"No." She closed her eyes, her throat tightening. *Don't cry, you'll look like a fool.* "It's just...I know I won't be able to fight off a trained assassin, ever. But what if something happens when Randi's guards aren't right there? What if – what if learning to defend myself,

even a little, means I could hold them off me and my daughter just long enough for help to reach us? It could be what makes the difference. Even a small chance is worth some effort.” *I don’t want to be one of Randi’s weaknesses.*

Silence. She dared to open her eyes.

“That is true,” Kayla said. “And realistic. All right. I’m guessing you would rather not be put in a class with the youngsters, so I’ll see what I can do to arrange a tutor for you.

Preference for weapons?”

She shrugged. “Anything I can keep hidden.”

She caught a flash of what she thought was respect in the woman’s eyes. “I see. Good. Daggers, maybe. Are you comfortable with blades?”

No. “Yes.”

“Well, you won’t be getting to that right away. You’ll have to start with some basic conditioning. Strengthen your arms and shoulders. We can give you some exercises to do in your quarters, and I will expect you to put in the time.”

She nodded. *I’ll make time. Somehow.* “I will, ma’am.”

The barest hint of a smile. “Good. Why don’t we start now?” A pause. “Did you bring something else to wear?”

She looked down at her Healers’ robes. “No. Should I have?”

Kayla made a disgusted face. “Yes. You can’t train in *those*. Let me see if I can find you some castoffs.”

A candlemark later, every muscle in her arms burning and with sweat dripping into her eyes, she was starting to regret ever coming. *This is humiliating.* Kayla had made her run laps

around the salle until her sides cramped and she wanted to vomit, then given her only a minute or two to rest before teaching her a series of exercises that must have been designed as torture.

“Good,” Kayla said. “Much better than I expected. I’ll expect you here every day, girl. Two candlemarks after sunset.”

She struggled to catch her breath. “Y-yes, ma’am.” *I’m not going to be able to move tomorrow*, she thought dully.

Still, she was smiling a little as she trooped back towards her quarters through the warm summer night, her green robes over one arm.

#

Vanyel stood by the sign-post, staring at the heat-shimmer over the road. Behind him, it was paved in the smooth, cement-like substance he had laid thousands of miles of, though he hadn’t been responsible for this section in particular – ahead, there was only packed gravel.

He turned and looked at the neat Hardornen script painted on the sign. *Twenty miles to Stony Tor*.

He didn’t have express permission to leave Valdemar. And he figured that was exactly why whichever damned priest-mage was responsible for the mysterious attacks had been staging on the other side of the Border.

He sighed and wiped at his brow. High summer, and the sun was beating down on him. There wasn’t a cloud in sight. At this time of year, the foliage and crops on either side should still have been deep green – instead, they were withered and parched. Months of rampant mage-work up and down this stretch had thrown off the weather patterns, and Horn was getting all the rain due to this region – Lissa had complained bitterly about it in her letters. He had no time or energy to spare for weather-magic.

*I can't justify crossing the Border.* He sighed and started to turn – and stopped.

“Fandes, what's that?”

She had been cropping wearily at some not-quite-dead grass; she turned and cantered over. *:What?:*

He pointed. The road was straight and flat as far as the eye could see, and there was definitely something there – a dark blot, barely visible, moving closer.

*:Gods. More of them?:*

The blot came closer, and he could make out the shapes of people. He winced. He knew the official Valdemaran position on refugees from Hardorn, and the reason for it – it would be far too easy for the Karsites to slip spies in that way. Still, it rankled.

The group of people came closer, seeming to step through puddles of silvery water that he knew were heat-illusions. He started to make out details. Men, thin and sunburned, carrying bundles; women with scarves over their hair, carrying toddlers, children straggling after them. Nearly fifty people, this time.

He stayed where he was, one hand on Yfandes' neck. They approached, and stopped, looking at him with uncertainty.

A man stepped forwards. He had the dark hair and eyes common to the region. A scar crossed one cheek, distorting his handsome features.

“Herald,” he said politely. “We would request sanctuary.” His Valdemaran was accented, but otherwise quite good.

Vanyel shook his head, trying not to look at the scrawny children that stared, wide-eyed, from behind their mothers' skirts. “I'm sorry. You are not of Valdemar.” *And why should it matter where they were born,* he thought bitterly.

“Please,” the man said – dignity in his posture, only a hint of desperation in his eyes.

“I know that we ask a great deal, but there is nowhere we can go.”

“I am sorry. Can you not request the protection of your own King?”

The man shook his head. “We have tried, Herald. Sent a message to the capital a month ago. We received no answer.”

*Gods, and I'm not surprised.* Hardorn was in disarray after the recent crop failures – *and that's my fault as much as anyone's*, he thought darkly, he'd certainly done his part to disrupt the climate.

“What do you flee?” he asked. *Maybe I can get some information from them on what the hell that mage is doing.*

Fear in the man's face. “Dark creatures, Herald. Evil. They come in the night and they take us.”

He nodded, keeping his face impassive.

The farmer took a step forwards. “You are Herald Vanyel, are you not? They speak of you. Silver eyes, and silver in your hair. You are a mage of great power, and you protect the common people.”

He sighed. *Damned Bards.* Once or twice he had taken a day to help border villages build defences, when there was nothing obviously better for him to do, and explain to them the best ways to fight mages. Now it seemed like everyone knew about it.

“You could help us,” the man said, pleading. “If you will not let us cross your borders... Please show us how to protect ourselves from these creatures of the night.”

*I don't even know what the creatures are.* The Web could detect them, but they moved fast, and he'd never been able to Farsee in time to identify them. They were infernally good at defeating the trap-spells he had been laying.

*I shouldn't do this.* “All right,” he said after a moment. “Stay here, and I’ll go see what I can do. Do you have any other information?”

The man bowed deeply. “Thank you, Herald! Thank you. We have heard a name. There is a man who is called Lord Nedren, of Karse, and they say he has a dark mage with him...”

*Never heard of him.* Vanyel raised his hand. “I’m going to put up a shield for you, all right? It ought to hold until tomorrow morning, and a single man can guard the door.” He had long since perfected the technique he’d used on impulse in Polsinn, all those years ago.

*:Van:* Yfandes sent. *:Chosen, please at least tell someone where you’re going:*

She was right; it would be irresponsible of him to go off into Hardorn without warning anyone. With the mage-barrier raised – and all the farmers staring at him in awe and wonder – he centered and grounded, and reached. *:Shallan?:* She was still with Colonel Alban at Dog Inn.

*:Van?:*

*:I’m going after the damned mage who’s been terrorizing South Hardorn. Need to cross the Border, since he’s not obliging enough to come to me:*

*:All right:* There was no hint of doubt in her voice. *They trust me with so much,* he thought. *:Be careful:*

*:I will be:* He dropped the connection – it was long-range even for him. “Let’s go, ‘Fandes.”

They reached the place that must be Stony Tor about two candlemarks later. It must have once been a village – now there was nothing left but burned ruins. The remains of a temple stood at the crossroads, blackened stones, empty doors and windows gaping like missing teeth.

*I feel half-blind without the Web.* He reached out with his Thoughtsensing; it took a lot more effort without the Web there to scaffold him.

*:You're getting lazy:* Yfandes teased.

*:Shut up, horse:* His momentary smile faded. *:There they are:*

Less than a half-mile away, hidden somewhere in the ruins. Forty men at least, and one of them radiated the sick, heavy wrongness of blood-magic. Unfortunately, they weren't alone; somewhat to his surprise, some of the townspeople were still around. Hiding in basements, mostly, and there were several children huddled in what was left of the temple's attic. He wondered why they hadn't all fled.

*:People hate to leave their homes:* Yfandes reminded him.

Vanyel doubted the mage knew he was there yet; he had been shielding very tightly, and activated his new talisman, based on the one they'd found on the damned assassin's body.

*I'd rather they come to me.* He deactivated the talisman and loosened his shields, enough to leak some of his mage-aura.

About ten minutes later, his wish was granted, as a party emerged from between two ruined cottages. None were dressed in the Karsite army uniform; the man in front, riding a handsome chestnut war-steed, wore the belted over-robe, split tunic, and high boots currently in fashion among Karsite nobles, and he was flanked by armsmen in boiled leather armour and what looked like livery. Two armsmen carried a standard – not the usual Sun-in-Glory, but a modified version that included a family crest.

The mage's robes were in the same style as the more usual red-and-gold, but they were black. *Haven't seen that before*, Vanyel thought, blinking.

A quick browse of the unguarded surface thoughts told him what he needed to know. "Lord Nedren," he said.

The nobleman stopped about twenty paces short. "Herald Vanyel you must be. When you would come we wondered. Cross the border you dared." His Valdemaran was quite good, though he had the common Karsite speech pattern of leaving the verb at the end of his sentences.

"I've come to ask you politely to please leave the Hardornens alone," Vanyel said. "Karse isn't at war with Hardorn, and even if you were, they're civilians."

The man smiled, raising one eyebrow. "Yet Hardorden you are not, Herald Vanyel. Your people they are not."

"A Herald must protect all innocents." Not strictly true, but still. "You're clearly not military, so I'll offer you a deal. Go back to Karse, and I won't strike you down along with every one of your men."

The noble's smile broadened. "A deal in return I offer. Stand aside, and you we will not kill."

"Fine, so we fight." *Take out the mage first*. Vanyel had been paying attention to the man's aura, trying to gauge his shields. He had the feel of a bloodpath mage who had recently 'fed' on death and pain, so he might have quite a lot of power to throw. He raised his hand—

The mage raised his first, chanting out a phrase.

Something out of a nightmare exploded from nowhere. Black, scaly, too many limbs; his eyes didn't want to focus on it.

*:What the hell is that?:* he sent to Yfandes. He didn't know of any Pelagius-Creatures that looked like it.

*:A being from the Abyssal Plane. What you'd call a demon – look out!:*

The creatures had no body plan that he recognized, the placement of their limbs and multiple heads seemed mostly random, but they certainly had claws. One of them was on top of him, nearly knocking him from Yfandes' back, and his shields barely turned the claws. He felt the pressure of them, not just on his skin, but on his mind, the creature trying to tear its way in–

He flung it aside with a blast of raw force. *:'Fandes, how do I fight them?:* There were over a dozen of the creatures, pouring from a crack in the air.

*:There must be a way to banish them, or bind them, but I don't know it. Take out the mage before he summons more!:*

Focus. The creatures were swarming him now, a solid wall of scaly jointed wrongness, tearing away at the shields over his mind. They were disrupting his mage-sight, too, he couldn't see the damned black-robed mage well enough to aim–

*Well, he's somewhere in that area.* Vanyel reached out, tapped a node, and flung a massively overpowered levinbolt where he thought the man might be standing. *Nope, not there.* He tried again, guessing. *Not there either.* Though he'd hit two of the armsmen without meaning to.

He started to open his Thoughtsensing–

*:Don't!:* Yfandes sent. *:If you unshield your Mindspeech channels, the demons will crawl right through and possess you!:*

*:They can do that?:*

*:Yes!:*

Damn it, how was he even supposed to fight, then? He kept throwing the horrible creatures back, but it seemed impossible to hurt them, and they just came at him again. *I can't believe he sent these things after helpless farmers...* How many Hardornen children had died already because he didn't want to cross the Border?

*:Focus!:* Yfandes sent.

He couldn't use any of his Gifts except mage-sight; every time he tried to Reach, he felt the creatures rush for the opening in his shields. He smashed at them, wildly, trying to clear enough of an opening to see with his ordinary eyes–

*:There!:* And he directed a blast of lightning with all the power of a node behind it, flattening the black-robed mage to the earth. He felt the man's shields resist, they had the oil-slick feeling of blood-magic, but even that power was no match for what he could channel, and he felt them crumble.

The demon-creatures stopped attacking. They hovered in the air, undirected, uncertain. He could feel their simple will – almost mindless, they weren't very intelligent, but they wanted. They were hungry.

If he didn't give them a target...

With a twisting mental motion, he showed them Lord Nedren and his armymen, just now starting to react–

*Oh, gods, that is the grossest thing I've ever seen.* It took a great deal of willpower not to lose his lunch.

While the demons were distracted, he raised a mage-barrier over them. *:'Fandes, how do I banish them?:*

*:Not sure. Binding them might be easier, you can probably use the same chant and ritual for elemental spirits:*

The demons still weren't paying him any attention; they were busy feeding, he could feel something like pleasure and satisfaction in their tiny minds. He raised his hands, reached for another node, and chanted a simple binding spell, throwing the full power of the node into it.

The demons stopped in midair. Not in time to save a single one of Lord Nedren's men, though; they lay in ribbons on the ground. Piles of steaming entrails, nothing recognizably human—

He leaned over to the side and retched. A moment later the reaction-headache hit.

*:Get down and rest a little:* Yfandes sent. *:The binding will last a few candlemarks.*

*We can figure something out then:*

He slid down from her saddle, nearly collapsing as his knees buckled. Something was wrong with his head...

*:They did a lot of damage to your shields:* she sent. *:I know you haven't got the energy to fix them right now. I'll cover you with mine. Rest for a bit:*

He sank to the ground, and Yfandes settled herself next to him; he let his head rest on her side.

Some time later, he felt a hand tugging at his shoulder. Jerked out of a dose, he nearly sent whoever it was flying – and stopped just in time.

A girl of about thirteen was crouching next to him. “Herald?” she said – the Hardornen word for it. “Are you hurt?”

She spoke slowly and clearly, enough that he could understand her tolerably well. His Hardornen wasn't very good. “Not hurt,” he managed to say. “Don't be here. Not safe.”

She pushed a bit of lank hair out of her eyes. "Can't go. My brother's sick. Are you sure you aren't hurt?"

He looked down at himself. Gods. His Whites were in shreds, hanging off his body, and there were a couple of deep score-marks across his chest. He reached to prod at them, and felt nothing, just a strange numbness.

"The demons scratched you," the girl said. She sounded worried. "That's what happened to my brother. They won't heal."

*: 'Fandes, is that true?':* he asked.

*: I don't know. They're not normal wounds, but whatever it is, it's not getting worse:*

"Let me clean them for you," the girl said. "I found a herb that helps. I'll be back."

He slumped back against Yfandes' neck, and checked his reserves. *I feel more tired than I should.* She was back a minute or two later, carrying a bowl, a cloth, and a waterskin, none of which looked very clean, as well as a bundle of withered flowers. He watched dully as she crushed the flower-heads between her grimy fingers, dropping them in the bowl, then uncorked the waterskin. It appeared to contain wine.

"Turn over," she said. "Let me." Her fingers tugged at what was left of his Whites, baring his chest. She touched one of the scratches, frowned, and dipped the cloth into the liquid.

"Dirty," he complained to her.

She shrugged. "Best I can do. Hold still." She dabbed at one of the scratches, and he bit back a yelp. *Ow.*

"It should sting," she said calmly. "That's good. Means it isn't dead." Ignoring his protests, she scrubbed at the wounds, dripping cloudy wine down his torso. Then she laid her fingers flat against his chest, and closed her eyes.

*:She's a Healer!:* he sent to Yfandes. He recognized the touch of her Gift – clumsy, untrained, but confident.

*:It appears she does have a bit of Healing Gift. And she's managed to learn to shield on her own, I reckon, which is quite impressive. I don't think she knows what she's doing consciously at all:*

The young girl took her hand away. “Better,” she said.

Vanyel wasn't sure about that – the scratches hadn't hurt at all before, but now they burned. And itched.

The girl was looking past him, now, in awe. She raised a hand, pointed to the shimmering mage-barrier. “You bound them,” she said. “The demons. You killed the black-robe, I saw.”

He nodded. “Won't hurt you now.” His eyelids were feeling very heavy.

“Rest,” she said. “I'll guard you.” She pulled a knife from nowhere, and sat back on her heels.

He almost laughed at the thought, that this youngster thought she could keep him safe. He bit it back, though, and only nodded solemnly before closing his eyes.

*:I'll keep a lookout as well:* Yfandes sent. *:Though I wouldn't discount her protection. She must be very brave and very smart, to have survived this long on her own:*

He woke to slanting light. The sky was hazy, the horizon turning lavender and gold.

The Hardornen girl was still there, munching on what looked like plain oats from a bag. Food for horses, not people. She offered him a handful; he shook his head.

Yfandes still had the saddle and her light saddlebags on. He dug in one of them and pulled out a cloth bag of jerky and dried fruit; he took some for himself and held it out to her.

She smiled – a real smile, wide-open and disarming. “Thank you, Herald.”

Another, younger girl peeked out from behind her. They were clearly sisters; they had the same eyes and jawlines. “Are you Herald Vanyel?” the child said. “From the stories?”

*Gods, and there are stories about me twenty miles deep into Hardorn.* He thought about lying, but what was the point? “Yes,” he said.

Her face lit up, and she turned to look at her older sister. “I told you he was real!”

Her sister rolled her eyes and said nothing. “Are you better?” she said to Vanyel.

“A little.” He swallowed his mouthful, then levered himself to his feet, carefully; he was a little lightheaded, but it was manageable. *:Yfandes, let’s figure out what to do about these damned demons:*

A full candlemark later, with the light fading, he had to admit defeat. The demons resisted every single attempt at a banishing-ritual. It seemed that they very, very badly didn’t want to go back to the Abyssal Plane.

*:I don’t know what to do:* he sent to Yfandes. *:Can’t leave them here, they’ll break out of my barrier in a day:*

She sidled close to him, and he twined his hand into her mane. *:You can lay a permanent binding on them:* she sent. *:And send them back into Karse:*

*:No!:*

He felt her mental sigh. *:They won't last more than a week, in our world. You can give them direction to only move south. They haven't got much brain but they're smart enough to do that:*

*:I can't send them after innocent people:*

*:Most of the Karsite civilians near here must have fled as well, what with their crops failing and the army constantly marching through their farms. Chances are any group they run into will be military:*

Still. *:I can't:*

*:The alternative is staying here to guard them until they fade out. Or taking them back with you into Valdemar:*

Neither of those things was an option. Clearly. *:I'll keep trying to banish them:* he insisted.

*:Van, we've tried everything we can think of, and you're exhausted. You need to get back to safety:*

She was right. He didn't even have his tent with him. Still, he racked his brain for a long moment, trying to think of any other way.

*:Fine:* He approached the mage-barrier, cautiously, and tapped another node before repeating the binding-ritual chant, this time with an added element. *South. Go south, and never come back here.*

The demons watched him, placidly, with their eyes that weren't eyes. Then they strained against the wall of the barrier. South. They wanted to go south. The desire filled their simple minds.

He dropped the barrier.

They swarmed past, ignoring him, and were out of sight in seconds.

“Where did you send them?”

He spun around. The girls was watching him again, her hand on her sister’s shoulder.

“Karse,” he said tonelessly.

The older girl smiled; her younger sister let out a whoop, her face full of the most bloodthirsty expression he had ever seen on a child.

He turned away. “I go home now.”

#

“Mama,” Jisa said. “Where do people go when they die?”

Shavri’s head jerked up. She was seated at her writing-desk in their quarters, mulling over the results from one of her recent experiments. “Love, why are you asking that?”

Jisa looked steadily at her, brown eyes solemn, mouth in a stubborn line. “Papa said the bell is for when a Herald dies, and when someone dies they go away. But where do they go?”

Shavri felt her eyes prickle. *Oh, love, you’re not old enough to be asking that question.* Though Jisa seemed bigger every time she looked. *Can’t believe she’ll be five years old in the spring.*

What was she supposed to tell her? “No one really knows, sweet. Maybe people go to the Havens. That’s... It’s a place where there isn’t any war, where nothing bad happens. Where you can rest.”

Jisa took a step closer. “But then why is Papa sad when the bell rings?”

Shavri shook her head. “It’s not... Well, we don’t get to see people anymore, when they die. Even if they go someplace better, we – we miss them.”

Jisa nodded. She looked so serious, standing there in her flannel sleeping-robe and slippers. “Is Uncle Van going to die?” she said.

“What? No! Why would you think that?”

“Papa said they want to kill him. The Karsites.”

*Gods, Randi, what have you been telling our daughter?* “Maybe they do,” Shavri allowed. “But he’s very powerful. He can keep himself safe, and other people too.”

Jisa fiddled with her sleeve. “Does Uncle Van kill people?”

Gods! “Jisa... Why are you asking me all this?”

Her daughter looked down at the ground. “Beri said he was a hero. Because he won lots of battles. When you win battles you kill the other army.”

*I need to have a talk with Beri as well,* Shavri thought. Jisa asked so many questions, but some of them weren’t age-appropriate to answer. “Not always,” she said. “Sometimes you just have to scare them into going away. But yes, sometimes Uncle Van has to kill people.”

Jisa was silent for a long moment.

“Why are they fighting us?” she said finally.

“I don’t really know. Maybe because they want us to worship their god. Because they think anyone who doesn’t is evil.” She held out her arms. “Come here, sweet. We don’t believe that here in Valdemar. We think people should be able to worship whichever god they choose. Like how we go to the Temple of Kernos, but Beri goes to the Temple of Astera.”

Jisa crawled into her lap, and Shavri squeezed her daughter, breathing in the smell of her hair. She opened her Othersight for a moment, and as usual, the Sight of the healthy life that flowed in Jisa’s veins made her heart want to burst. *I love her so much. I want to make the world perfect for her – and I can’t.*

#

Vanyel sat on a log next to the fire, savouring every bite of the hot, spiced stew; it wasn’t often he got to eat food cooked by someone else. *It’s as good as what Jonne’s cook used to—*

He blinked against the burning in his eyes, swallowed the ache in his throat, and pushed the thought away. Later. There would be time to grieve properly later, at the end of this godforsaken war.

Autumn was approaching; the days were still hot, but the temperature dropped at night, and the leaves were just starting to turn colour. He'd caught himself staring at an oak tree without moving, captivated by the pattern of red and gold showing in the green. *You find beauty where you can* – and that had reminded him of Jonne as well, but in a bittersweet way. He wanted to remember that. Wanted to remember that, no matter what else was happening, there were good things in the world. Worth protecting.

Nearby, a group of soldiers were sharing watered wine from a flask, passing it around. He had declined; he wasn't used to it anymore, and he was tired enough that it would put him right to sleep. The Crescent Lake camp had a minstrel, too, who played the gittern indifferently but had a pleasant enough voice.

The man was warming up for another song now. He started strumming out a tune. *I don't recognize that one*, Vanyel thought, listening with half an ear as he stared into the dusk.

#

*Along the road in Hardorn,*

*A place called Stony Tor*

*A fearful band of farmers*

*Flees Karsite border war*

#

Vanyel jerked his head up, listening.

#

*Now up rides Herald Vanyel,*

*"Why then such haste?" says he*

*"Now who is it pursuing,*

*Who's anger do you flee?*

*You are all of Hardorn*

*Why seek you Valdemar?*

*Is Festil no protection*

*Or bide all his men too far?"*

#

He rolled his eyes. *That is not what I said.* Close enough, though. He thought about moving elsewhere, but no one seemed to be staring at him, and he was curious.

#

*Now only Herald Vanyel*

*Stands blocking Nedren's way*

*"Now who are you, fool -*

*Nothing! That dares to tell me nay!"*

*Now up speaks Herald Vanyel,*

*His voice like brittle glass:*

*"The Herald Mage called Vanyel*

*And tis I you shall not pass!"*

#

He growled under his breath. *Brittle glass indeed. Who the hell wrote this?* He could feel his cheeks growing hot.

#

*"Let be: I'll give you silver*

*And I shall give you gold  
And I shall give you jewels fair  
That sparkle bright and bold  
And I shall give you pearls  
Or treasures of the sea  
If you will step aside here  
Leaving these poor fools to me!"*

#

“Someone’s taken some artistic liberties,” he muttered. It hadn’t happened that way at all; he’d exchanged barely five words with Lord Nedren. The soldiers next to the fire *were* looking at him now, and several were clapping along to the song.

#

*"What need have I of silver  
With sweet Yfandes here?  
And all the gold I cherish  
Is sunlight bright and clear  
The only jewel I treasure  
Is a bright and shining star --  
And I protect all helpless  
Not just those of Valdemar!"*

#

“Okay, this is just embarrassing!” He turned his back and focused on his stew. :’Fandes, *why in the name of all hells do people keep writing terrible songs about me?:*

He felt her amusement. *:Really? I think this one is quite good, for once:* He could feel the tickle that meant she was listening through his ears. *:Makes you sound very heroic:*  
*:Because that's exactly what I need. More people thinking I'm a damned hero:*  
Laughter like popping chestnuts. *:I don't know what else you expect:*

#

*Now Vanyel calls the farmers*

*"Go tell you near and far*

*How thus are served the tyrants*

*Who would take Valdemar!*

*I am the bane of demons*

*Their quarry I defend*

*Thus Heralds serve a foeman*

*And thus Heralds save a friend!"*

#

"I definitely didn't say that!" He'd barely spoken to the huddle of farmers, when he passed them on his way back into Valdemar; he'd been barely able to sit up in Yfandes' saddle by then and he wasn't even sure what he'd said. "I am the bane of demons indeed," he growled. "Damned Bards." There were quite a lot of adventurous, or foolhardy, minstrels and Bards crawling around the Border by now; they were good for camp morale, so the Guard was happy to have them, and a war in progress meant lots of fodder for songs.

*In another life I might've been down here as a minstrel, following 'Lendel around...*  
He closed his eyes against the sharpening ache of grief. No point in speculating on might-have-beens. *I'll drive myself insane.*

*:More than you already are?:* Yfandes teased.

*:You're in a good mood tonight:* he sent, grumpily.

*:Why wouldn't I be? I'm in a warm stable, even if it does have canvas for walls, and they even gave me a hot mash!:*

He felt his lips curve up a little. *:You've certainly earned it:* He swallowed the last bite of stew and stood up. *:I'd better get to bed. Before they start singing any of the other songs about me:* He had to admit that the new one was, on artistic merits alone, almost decent. Just completely inaccurate.

*:People need their stories:* Yfandes sent. *:Their larger-than-life heroes. Don't deny them that:*

#

“I'm proud of you,” Donni said, reaching out to lay a hand on Mardic's shoulder. “Truly.”

It was a rare warm evening, and they were in the gardens, watching the sunset – or at least, she was. It had been a hot, dry summer, and the grass was parched and yellow, but the gardeners were keeping the shrubbery watered, and the leaves were starting to turn colours. The reds and yellows looked even brighter in the slanting golden light. It was beautiful; she had already tried a few sketches, to fill in with watercolours later. There wasn't much to do with herself except draw and make carvings; their room was full of them now.

*I wish you could see it, love.*

The Mindhealer had come today, and Mardic had let her talk to him. He still refused about half the time, but she thought it was less because he didn't want it, and more because often he was too tired. He didn't have much energy, even now, and she knew he found the process exhausting.

“Reckon she's right,” he said. His voice was still gravelly, and flat, but he spoke more lately, to her if not to anyone else. “Not fair to you, not to try.”

“Mardic, I...” She wasn’t sure how to say it. There were a lot of things she couldn’t find the right words for, lately. “That’s not why. I – I wouldn’t care if you never spoke to me or touched me again. It’s enough that you’re alive.”

“I know.” And his voice softened just a little, a hint of expression coming into his face. Not a smile, it was darker than that, but something in that direction. “I’ll try. Not to shut you out.”

“What about the other things she said? About seeing other people?”

He shook his head. “Maybe later. It’s too hard.” He still wouldn’t speak to anyone else. Not even Savil.

“All right.” *Be patient*, she reminded herself. “Mardic, I... Can I Mindtouch you? Just for a moment?” She chewed her lip. “I want to show you the garden.”

A long silence.

“If you’re sure.” And he opened his shields to her, just a little.

She reached for him and – gods, it was worse than she could have imagined, she could *feel* the emptiness, the place where Fortin had been, the parts of him torn out and still bleeding into nothingness. She wanted to flinch away – but there was a rightness in it, too. *He’s mine, even now.* This, too, was sacred.

She reached out, and she showed him the leaves. *:Isn’t it beautiful?:*

*:It is:* There wasn’t much inflection even in his mindvoice, but she knew he was telling the truth. You couldn’t like with Mindspeech.

*We find beauty where we can*, she thought.

## Chapter Seventeen

*I've almost got you,* Vanyel thought fiercely.

The leaves were starting to fall, carpeting the ground. A year and a half that they'd been at war. He had spent months trying to hunt down the Adept through the Web. He hadn't the chance to set up the *vrondi* as part of the Web alarms before he was called away from Haven – to tell the truth, he wasn't totally confident that his plan for it was ready – but it could still detect someone tapping enough node energy. Once he'd found the Adept, he had started tracking his location, trying to intercept him. *Or her*, he reminded himself. The Karsite combat mages were predominantly men, but not all, and the Web couldn't tell the difference.

He didn't think he had ever looked forwards to killing someone so much. The damned Adept had taken out so many people. *He would've killed me at Terilee Crossing if not for Jonne.* Vanyel could think Jonne's name with only an echo of pain, now – he had ruminated on it for so many candlemarks, and Yfandes was right. He had done all he could, and Jonne wouldn't have wanted him to use the darkest magic to save him. *If I'd only been smart enough to find the homing-token sooner...*

But he hadn't, and he couldn't undo the past. No point letting it haunt him forever once he'd already learned the lesson his guilt had to teach. *Never trust anyone.* He checked his belongings every night when he set up camp, and used his Thoughtsensing to skim the surface thoughts of every non-Herald he interacted with.

The Adept was surely responsible for most of the deaths at Deerford, and for Mardic and Donni's injuries. For killing Fortin. The two of them were as recovered as they were going to get, physically, and it wouldn't have been enough for them to go into the field again even if Mardic had been more functional. He was making some progress, Donni said in her letters, but he still barely went outside or spoke to anyone, and he hadn't written to Vanyel at all himself. *I'll visit him when I have leave,* he promised himself.

Focus. He crouched in the dry underbrush, holding himself perfectly still, every shield in place. The Adept and his party were gradually approaching, returning to their makeshift camp. He prayed that he'd been careful enough, hadn't left any signs of his passage... *Just a little closer and you're mine.*

Gods, he was angry. He felt uncomfortable with the depths of his rage. *:Yfandes, I shouldn't want anyone dead this much:*

*:It's very understandable, love. I want him just as much, trust me:*

Again, he wasn't sure the anger was entirely about the Adept. There was that nameless, itchy feeling to it. He didn't like it; didn't like what this war was turning him into. But there wasn't time to ruminate on it now. There would be time later, when he had a moment's breathing space, to put himself back together. *If I ever have that. If this damned war ever ends.*

*:He's done more to hurt Valdemar than all their other mages combined, even that awful black-robe:*

Some discreet enquiries through their spy-network had turned up that the ‘black-robos’ were a type of priest – very rare in the past, but it seemed more and more of the Karsite priest-mages were hanging up their sun-coloured robes for the black. Black-robed mages summoned demons. Vanyel still hadn’t found a way to banish them, and they were mostly immune to mage-energy, so all he could do was turn them back at the Border. He hated it, but maybe the Karsites would eventually stop summoning them if they realized all it was doing was hurting their own people.

The Adept was within earshot, now, though Vanyel still couldn’t see him; he could hear crunching leaves. He held his breath. *Just let me catch a glimpse of you.*

They had planned this in detail. The man had to have incredibly good shields, to have stayed hidden so well for so long; Vanyel had him outclassed for raw power, but not skill. *I hate to admit it, but he’s better-trained than me.* Defensive magic took less power than attacks, meaning it was possible that even Vanyel wouldn’t be able to break through his shields.

So he had another kind of plan. Shavri had given him the idea, actually, one day back in Haven when he had visited her in her quarters and she’d been talking about her research. *I just have to touch him, only for a moment.*

He didn’t dare unlock his shields enough to use any of his Mind-Gifts; he had to assume the Adept would detect his presence. *The only way this can work is if I catch him by surprise.* Holding perfectly still, the muscles in his thighs burning, he peered intently through the foliage. He had rolled in mud earlier, so his Whites ought to be well camouflaged against the brown leaves. Another uniform ruined. It would be worth it if this worked.

He caught sight of rust-brown, barely visible. Guards, then. He poured even more energy into his shields and waited, barely daring to breathe.

A flash of red and gold—

Donni had told him about how Mardic had transported them to safety, and that was the other half of his plan. His Fetching Gift wasn't nearly as strong; he couldn't move himself a mile, he could barely manage fifty feet, and the reaction-headache was awful. But he had filled his reserves to nearly bursting with node-energy, and he didn't care if he was out for a day after this. *It'll be worth it.*

*Here to there.*

He landed on top of the man, flinging his arms around him. The mage grunted in surprise, keeping his footing; Vanyel wasn't heavy enough to knock him over. *Especially not when I've been on Guard rations for months.* The man's aura flared, preparing for an attack.

Vanyel reached through his shields with the one Gift that almost no one could shield against.

*Doesn't take a lot of Healing-energy to disrupt the heart rhythm,* Shavri had told him. She used mice and rats as subjects for her Healing-research, and sometimes she had to euthanize and dissect them. She'd sounded so matter-of-fact about it. *Best way to kill them painlessly.*

With nearly the last of his strength, his head already pounding with agony, Vanyel reached out a tendril of Healing and stopped the Adept's heart.

They both fell.

He ended up underneath the man, who even as he died had nearly gotten an attack out in time. He was an old man, grey-haired, but still powerfully built. *He looks a bit like Lancir,* Vanyel thought vaguely, his vision already going foggy.

A moment later, one of the uniformed soldiers was pulling the dead Adept off him. They were all shouting. Someone already had a sword raised—

–Yfandes galloped out from where she had been hiding, snarling, hooves flashing in the weak sunlight. Vanyel closed his eyes, listening to the men crying out in alarm and pain.

*:It's done:* he sent. He ought to have felt relieved, satisfied, even proud – but he couldn't feel anything except sick.

#

“Good news and bad,” Tantras said wearily, leaning on Randi's doorframe. “Figured I'd come tell you now, so you won't be surprised at tomorrow's meeting. Which do you want first?”

It was late. Randi had a number of candles burning, an attempt to feel more awake. It wasn't working.

“Um. Come sit down.” He gestured at the padded chair. “Bad first, please.” *Gods, he looks as tired as I feel.* They were all trying to pace themselves, as the war dragged on, but Randi knew he had been putting a lot on his King's Own. Savil had been helping out until a week ago, but she had, yet again, tried to work through a cold and nearly ended up with pneumonia. *No wonder, she's nearly seventy.*

“Kilchas is out,” Tantras said quietly. “He's alive, thank the gods, but it's going to be a long recovery.”

“What happened?”

A shrug. “He killed one of their priests in a mage-duel, but he wore himself out in the process, and wasn't able to get out of the way of their cavalry. They trampled him and left him for dead. Broke nearly every bone in his body, the Healers said, it's a miracle he survived at all and he wouldn't have if they'd gotten to him even five minutes later.”

Gods. Randi winced and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Where is he now?”

“Healers' post in Sun's Hill. Not totally safe, but he won't be stable enough to move for weeks, unless we Gate him.”

And no one but Vanyel was available for it right now. There was no way the Healers would clear Savil to raise a Gate, it was too far for Jaysen, and Mardic and Donni were still on sick leave. “We can’t,” Randi said wearily. Gods, and Sun’s Hill was understrength for troops, they’d been relying a lot on Kilchas’ firepower. “Talk to Keiran, please, see if we can divert reinforcements there from Horn. We’ll Gate him back here as soon as Savil’s up for it. Now can you please give me some good news?”

Tantras leaned back in the chair. “Van took out their Adept.”

Randi raised his eyebrows. Vanyel had killed several mages of Adept-potential, but... “*The* Adept?” he said, with emphasis.

“Yes. Tracked him down through the Web. He’d been traveling alone with a small guard.”

Much like they’d had Vanyel doing. It was what made sense, for someone who could cast at a distance. “Gods. How?”

Tantras shrugged. “Didn’t say. He wasn’t hurt, except for some backlash. The message he passed was that he was intending to rest in the Victrin Fell area for a few days and start patrolling again.”

A brief silence. “That is good news,” Randi said quietly. Somehow, it didn’t feel like enough. *Even if the war ends today, we’ve already lost too many people.*

“Are you all right?” Tantras said hesitantly. “You look a bit worn out.”

“Do I?” Randi shook his head. “Probably because I’ve been lying awake worrying. Know it’s not productive, but just... I’m responsible for this, you know?” *And I never asked to be.* He was able to keep the resentment out of his thoughts, most of the time, it wasn’t helpful. Nonetheless.

He wasn't sure he could have done it at all without Shavri. She understood how little he wanted this, and she would never judge him for it; he could vent his pointless bitterness to her, and feel a little more human afterwards.

"I know." Tantras laid a hand over his. "You're doing a good job, Randi."

He raised his eyebrows. "Better than everyone expected, you mean?"

"No, I mean actually good. You stay levelheaded, you delegate well, and you make all your people feel like you care."

*I do care. That's what keeps me awake.* But it helped to hear. "Really?"

"Really."

He closed his eyes. *Remember that you're only human, and just do the best you can.* It was what Sondra told him constantly. What Vanyel would have told him, if he'd been here instead of fighting demons and mages out on the border. *You're not exactly good at following your own advice, Van,* he thought, and chuckled a little.

Tantras smiled. "What is it?"

"Just thinking about Vanyel. Have you heard the new song yet?"

"What, the Demonsbreath one?"

"Demonsbane. I think it's quite good. I bet Van hates it."

"Of course he does." Tantras smirked. "I'm tempted to learn it just to sing it to him when he comes home."

Randi raised his eyebrows. "You sing?"

"Terribly."

#

Vanyel knelt in his tent. Nothing but trees for miles around – and somehow he still felt less alone than he had at the Sun's Hill camp a day ago. He had visited Kilchas, who was still

unconscious, and helped the Guard forces lay a few fortifications and magical protections. He had been very distracted. *I only stopped by because I hoped they would have a Mindhealer.* They hadn't, and Horn was too far to travel in a day, so he was here, alone in a forest with only squirrels and snakes to keep him company. And Yfandes.

*:I'm with you, Chosen: she sent. :Always:*

She was outside the tent, huddled under the canvas tarp he'd swung over a branch. It was raining steadily, which felt appropriate. *Like even the sky is weeping.* Even inside the tent his breath steamed.

*Ten years, ashke. Ten years.*

It was Sovvan. Somehow it felt appropriate to be out here, alone, looking down at a small bundle of candles he'd begged from the quartermaster in Sun's Hill. He had known he wasn't going to be good for much once the sun went down, so he had laid a wide perimeter of wards and trap-spells.

*No one to see me cry.*

It hurt, gods, the ache in his chest was nearly unbearable. *I miss you, 'Lendel.*

There was a new song about him, and it was the worst week for it. Yet again they made him sound like a hero, when it hadn't been like that at all. *Stumbling through mist, sobbing, no point in any of it...* It hadn't been real, he knew that now. The one they had called the 'Singer of the Shadows' was dead, and they had finally explained the strange bad luck that had seemed to haunt the area between Sun's Hill and Horn.

She'd been a priestess and a mage, though not much of one, not even Master-potential. But she'd had a strong Bardic Gift as well, and perhaps some kind of Wild Gift that allowed her to combine them as effectively as she had. Illusions, ghosts that haunted the men and women patrolling the Border through bitter autumn rains – but illusions that had

emotion in them. That robbed people of hope, of everything that made life feel worth living, of the will to go on.

*Not that I had much to begin with.*

He'd never imagined using the Bardic Gift in combat that way. Valdemaran Bards were sometimes on the Guard payroll, and they did a lot to increase morale – but he would never have thought of sending them to *decrease* the morale of their enemies. *I wonder if I could learn it.* He'd used Empathy-blasts a few times in tight situations, but it generally wasn't a good idea; it meant he had to lean into his own pain, at a time when he was trying as hard as he could to ignore it. When he couldn't afford to let it distract him.

Except tonight. *Tonight, I can remember you, ashke.*

He'll always be a part of you, Lancir had said once. Honour that.

It was nearly dark now.

Ten years ago, on this day, he had been tied up in a barn, shivering, terrified. Just another un-Gifted highborn youth, nothing at all special about him – except that Tylenel had loved him. He remembered how his heart had leapt when 'Lendel arrived. How, for just a little while, he had thought everything would be all right.

*In another world...* For a moment he felt a strange echo, like memory but not. *In another world, we were fast enough, and we went through the Gate together. He was a Herald and I wasn't but we were together and we were happy...* But that wasn't what had happened. The past was fixed, forever, nothing was going to bring 'Lendel back. *I'll always be alone.*

*:You're not alone, love. You have me. And many friends, who care deeply about you:*

But fewer of them now.

Efrem was dead, killed in a surprise raid on Horn, Vanyel had intervened from a distance as soon as he could but he hadn't been fast enough. *I can never do enough.* He and the other Herald had drifted apart somewhat in recent years, Efrem wasn't good at letter-writing and they'd spent so little time assigned to the same location. They'd shared a drink in Horn just a few months ago, catching up on a fraction of the lives they had both lived. *And now he's gone.*

Since the start of the war, they had lost nearly twenty Herald-Mages. Now Kilchas was out for the foreseeable future. *It's just me and Sandra on the Border.* She was at Horn; she had learned to Gate, though it exhausted her for days afterwards, and she was on call to transport reinforcements. *She's desperately unhappy out here.* Keeping her at Horn was the best they could do; Lissa's camp had the most amenities. He knew Sandra hated the mess and disorder of war, for all that her quarters back in Haven had never exactly been tidy. She had never even liked going on circuit.

They had no choice but to keep her out here anyway.

He had made a tiny altar out of a slab of wood, using his power to carve out holes for the candles. With a touch of Firestarting, he lit the first.

"For Herald-Mage Tylandel," he said, barely able to force out the words. "Wind to thy wings, ashke." The tears came, hot on his cheeks. "For Herald-Mage Lancir." He had missed Lance even more sharply than usual this year. "For Captain Jonne..."

He lit candles for Umbria, for Jores, for Efrem. Even Fortin. They blazed in front of him, set in the board, filling the whole tent with flickering light and shadow.

So many.

*And every one of them feels like a piece torn out of my soul.* Tylandel's piece was just the biggest. *How long until there's nothing left of me?*

Yfandes knew enough not to offer comfort. She was just there, offering her light to him. Her presence. Not enough, never enough, but it was something.

#

“All right, everyone,” Randi said calmly. “That’s everything on the table for today. Any questions?”

The Council meeting-room was only two-thirds full. Maybe more of them would have showed up if they’d known what Randi planned to discuss, Savil thought. She knew he had done it deliberately. Lord Lathan was away at his son’s wedding, and so was Lord Leverance – it was his daughter who was marrying Lathan’s heir. Lord Kathar was unexpectedly away as well; his wife was in labour with their third child. *And they’re the three most likely to oppose Randi’s proposals*, she thought. *Gods but he’s gotten sneaky.*

Lord Nuaren stood up. “I’d like to hear more detail on this education proposal,” he said. “You’re saying it’ll be run through the temples – well, how are we actually going to enforce that? And how do we make sure they’re teaching reading and figuring, not just their religious dogma?” His face twisted on the last words. Right – he was the one who vehemently hated all religions. Savil wasn’t sure she could blame him. *The war would be over by now if prayer accomplished anything*, she thought bitterly.

But, deities aside, most of the temple orders were well-run, staffed by competent people who cared deeply about Valdemar. It was a valuable resource.

“Jaysen?” Randi said.

The Seneschal’s Herald stood up. “We have put some thought into that. We’re going to run a basic standardized test every year at census-time, and collect the results using that system. Any temple order with systemically bad scores will get a visit from one of our administrators. We won’t assume it’s their fault, of course – some areas are going to be

starting at a large disadvantage. We'll assume they need our support, and provide extra resources. If their scores don't improve, or if they're uncooperative, we will remove them from the list of approved schools."

Lord Nuaren nodded tightly and sat.

Another voice: "How are we going to motivate children to go to school and sit through boring lessons when they could be playing? Or persuade their parents to let them instead of putting them to work?"

"We may not be able to reach everyone right away," Jaysen said simply. "We'll offer and suggest it, but we don't have the resources right now to provide a stipend for parents who do send their children in. We're going to have to assume that most rural children will miss a month or two of their classes around harvest-time, and work around it. But I think that with time, we can encourage most families, even the poorest, to take advantage of this. Children aren't stupid – and the less privileged they are, the faster they have to grow up. They and their parents are going to start realizing how many opportunities being literate opens. How many chances for a better life." He paused. "And there's additional motivation. Children who do very well on the tests will be offered a place in the new Collegium that we're planning to officially open."

Lord Nuaren stood again. "Yes, I would like to hear more about that."

"Well, as you may know, some nobles in Haven have been putting their children in classes at Bardic rather than provide tutors for years. We'd like to make that an official third Collegium, though of course it will share some classes and teachers with Bardic and Healers. It'll be open to any noble family in Haven that wishes to use it, and in addition, we'll offer stipends for especially promising lowborn children. It'll be a center of higher education, where they can learn more than just basic writing and figuring." He glanced down at his

notes. “Law, history, higher mathematics and natural sciences. Similar to a Herald’s education, except that we’ll let children choose an area of specialty if they wish and show particular talent. Valdemar relies a great deal on people who aren’t Heralds. Engineers, magistrates, clerks, teachers. It seems only fair that such avenues are open to all children, regardless of who their parents are.”

Based on the mutters and looks around the room, Savil thought that didn’t seem at all obvious to most of the Council members.

Lord Elbert stood up. “I’d like to ask the question that I’m sure we’re all asking ourselves. How are we intending to *pay* for this?”

The discussion went on for nearly a candlemark. Savil tried her best to pay attention, making notes for her own reference. *At least I can be sitting down.* She was feeling a lot better, but she still didn’t have much stamina. At one point she ended up in a side conversation with Jaysen and Tantras via Mindspeech, and missed an entire exchange – well, she could review the minutes later.

At the end of it, Randi stood. The side conversations kept going for a moment – he still didn’t have the kind of respect and command Elspeth had, able to fill the whole room with her presence and silence unruly Councillors with a look.

“Enough, please,” he said, and his voice was low but there was granite in it.

The room fell silent.

“Good. Let’s please vote on today’s proposals, then, so we can all be off to our beds.”

He looked tired, she thought, though he hid it well. *You’re too young to have worry-lines around your eyes, Randi.* Not even twenty-four.

But he was incredible. Gods, he’d instituted more reforms in a year than Elspeth had in the last twenty, and that during a war. *He’s not afraid of change, that’s for sure.* She

wondered where he was getting his ideas from. Books, maybe, he said Vanyel had recommended a few.

Things were going fairly well on the front. She thought they were finally turning the tide, now that they'd gotten rid of that godawful Adept. Their troop numbers had evened out, and Van was worth ten of the Karsite priest-mages. *We put so much on him – all this on top of what's coming.* Still no way to know where Leareth was in his plans, and Vanyel hadn't been up north to Farsee the pass in over two years.

Yet again, with a pang in her heart, she found herself wishing she could take this on instead. *But what am I? A tired old woman, that's what.* Even thirty years ago, someone like Leareth would have flattened her in a heartbeat. *I can't take this burden from you, ke'chara, for all that I wish I could.*

*:You're woolgathering:* Kellan prodded, and she glanced down and realized someone had pushed a ballot-paper in front of her. She sighed and unfolded it. *I know which way I'm voting.*

She wasn't sure exactly when Randi had so deeply captured her loyalty. Certainly she hadn't felt this way, yet, when she made her oath to him. She had said the ancient words by rote. Now they rang true.

*I would take a sword for you, Randi. I don't know exactly what it is you're planning to do with my Valdemar – but where you lead, I cannot be afraid.*

#

Vanyel dropped the mental contact with Shallan and swore, loudly and creatively. It wasn't like anyone was going to hear him – he was somewhere east of Deerford, alone in a snowy forest, shivering even inside the weather-barrier he'd laid on his tent.

“Damn it, Sandra, what were you thinking?” he muttered out loud. Shallan had contacted him urgently, waking him in the middle of the night, to warn him that the other Herald-Mage had taken an arrow to the throat during yet another unexpected raid. She was alive, miraculously, but she was going to be out for a long time. *And Kilchas is still recovering.* The Healers thought he would walk again, eventually, but he was likely to be in the long-term ward at the House of Healing for months yet. *For the gods’ sake, Sandra, why weren’t you shielding?* It wasn’t like her to be careless. She must have been very tired – well, so was he.

*I’m the only one left.*

There were technically two other Herald-Mages still on the Border, but theirs were minor Gifts, barely hedge-wizard potential; in both cases, their primary Gifts were something else, Fetching and Foresight respectively. Both useful, of course, for any number of purposes. But not nearly as good for killing large numbers of Karsites without ever seeing their faces.

It couldn’t be more than a week until Midwinter. He’d lost track of the exact date, again, the days and weeks blurring together in a fog of fatigue. Having the new Web did help a great deal – he could rely on it to warn him of threats, rather than having to spend candlemarks a day in trance scanning the Border. He was incredibly grateful that Randi had pushed him to go to k’Treva and, later, to come back to Haven long enough to set it up. *Even though they had to carry me in a cart.* The Healers had refused to clear him for transport by Gate, and it had been one of his more embarrassing experiences, if not quite as embarrassing as nearly dying of a cold.

In any case. The Web made it feasible for him to singlehandedly cover two hundred miles of Border, but that didn’t mean it was easy, and it did mean he wasn’t likely to get leave for a very, very long time.

*I need a break.* Solitude and exhaustion were wearing him down. Emotionally, he had never had a chance to find his balance after Sovvan and the Singer of the Shadows. Physically, he wasn't in terrible shape, but he was constantly short on rest – it was impossible to sleep deeply when he was alone out here, always on the alert for danger, and the Web tended to wake him with alarms at least every candlemark. He'd started spreading his sleep out throughout the day, taking catnaps whenever the exhaustion began weighing him down, but it wasn't the same. Though it felt like he was eating enough, with Yfandes nagging him constantly, he was still losing weight, maybe because he was using so much node-power. *Or burning energy just to stay warm.* Winter had come on sudden and hard a few weeks ago, dropping two feet of snow in a single night, and hadn't let up since.

*:Fandes, how long til Midwinter?:* He knew the Karsites had a very important religious festival on that night, the longest of the year. Something to do with their Vkandis Sunlord returning. It meant a large attack was quite unlikely.

*:I'm not exactly sure either. A week at most:*

*:I'd like to go back to Horn:* They weren't sure they had rooted out all the spies, and so he tried to stay away from major camps, but he badly wanted to be around other people. People who weren't strangers. Lissa in particular. *:Just for the one day, even:*

*:I think we can swing it. And you should see Melody while you're there:*

She was probably right. He didn't especially want to send that request through the Mindspeech relay, but maybe he could get Lissa to pull rank again and fit him in on short notice. *:All right:*

#

Shavri yawned and stretched, then tried to focus on the notes in front of her. It was late, after midnight, and she ought really to be in her bed, but she had been neglecting her research

lately. There was always so much to do. So many things that had to come first – Randi, Jisa, her weapons training.

*I think I'm making some progress.* She was a lot stronger now; she could do all of the exercises Kayla had assigned her easily, and the weaponsmaster had given her some weighted bars to use at home. She hadn't started any actual weapons work yet, not even with weighted daggers – mainly, she practiced running away. Which was very practical, she had to admit.

She stared down at the paper without seeing it.

Randi had been asking her opinion on a number of things to do with his educational proposal. Which, at least, was something she didn't mind mulling over – though the politics of pushing it through with the Council still gave her that sick feeling. As he had pointed out, she would have been an ideal candidate for the merit-based branch of the new Collegium, if she hadn't ended up a Healer. She'd been a child of poverty, though she'd never really thought of it that way – there had always been enough to eat, growing up. But neither of her parents had known how to read or write. She'd been lucky, that her parents had recognized her interests and the town priest had fed her desire for learning early.

Books, she had told him. That was what would have helped her most, as a child. There hadn't been many, at the temple, and most had been religious tomes. *Gods, I still struggle with figuring.* She had learned her sums, but no higher mathematics, not until much later when it became relevant to her research. It would have been easier to learn young.

It was a long time since she had thought of her childhood. Of her parents. Her father was dead now – and when she had gone home for his funeral, years ago, it hadn't felt the same at all. Not like home. *My own mother barely recognized me.* Her siblings might have been strangers.

She would do better by Jisa, she thought. It was one silver lining of being lifebonded to the King. Jisa would never want for anything. She was the pet of the whole Palace – and remarkably unspoiled for it.

Midwinter was coming, and Jisa was nearly delirious with excitement. Shavri had agreed to let her stay up all night for the ceremonies, or at least to try; she doubted the child would make it until dawn. Jisa was very interested in religious ceremonies, lately. She had asked to go to both parts of Harvestfest, the party as well as the remembrance of the dead, and she had solemnly lit and held a candle for Arina, the only one of the dead at Deerford who she remembered clearly. And for Deedre. The old woman hadn't exactly liked children, but Jisa had inexplicably adored her and the Herald-Mage had tolerated her questions.

Every time the Death Bell rang – still too often, even now – Jisa asked, wide-eyed, if it had been her Uncle Van. It broke Shavri's heart. *No child should have to grow up during a war.*

–And she felt the hardening resolve in her chest, almost defiance, overlaying the despair that had once been her only response to that thought. *We'll make the world safe for you, love.* Whatever she could do – and it might be little enough, but it was something – she would fight for her daughter's future. If she had to rebuild herself from the ground up, become a different person, because there was a hole in the world that she wasn't the right shape to fill, not yet – she would do it. Whatever it took.

#

They were in the Companions' Stables, and great effort had gone into decorating. Garlands of evergreen plants hung everywhere, woven with hothouse flowers, and the number of torches and lanterns made the high-ceilinged room as bright as day. There were kegs of ale, and a

great deal of wine and stronger spirits. Bard Breda had been persuaded to come out, bringing a number of her students, and the music was excellent.

Savil sat on a hay bale, legs splayed in front of her. Her bad leg ached again, in this cold snap, but her second cup of wine was helping take off the edge.

*Just for this one night, we think about something other than war.* It was a new year; a new century. Eight hundred years since the first King Valdemar had planted his flag in unclaimed newly-cleansed land on the edge of the Pelagirs, built a sanctuary for his people, and named it Haven.

Randi was there, with two blue-uniformed guards discreetly following him around, and he had brought Shavri and Jisa out. They both looked amazing, in matching gowns of forest green velvet. *Can't believe how big she is already.* Jisa was running around, interrupting conversations to ask people questions, and had already needed to be dissuaded from climbing into the rafters.

She ran a hand over the embroidered silk of her Tayledras robe; she had decided to wear it instead, after noticing that her formal Whites no longer fit especially well. *I'm getting out of shape.* She had been too busy to exercise – and, to tell the truth, her joints bothered her enough that she no longer liked sparring at all. Her formal Whites were ten years old, and now they were loose around the shoulders, where she had lost muscle, and tight on her belly, where she had put on a little paunch. Her face looked older in the mirror these days, too, lines cutting deeper around her mouth. *At least Andy still thinks I'm attractive,* she reminded herself. And the goldenrod brown with pale yellow embroidery did suit her much better than white.

She sipped from her wine, watching the dancers. Tantras was dancing with Shavri right now; they were both quite good. *Tran's certainly better than Randi.* The King must have had years of dancing lessons, as part of his Court etiquette, and he still danced like a mule.

Shavri looked very fit, she found herself thinking. She moved differently – not just when she danced, but when she walked. Her slim arms and shoulders looked a little more muscular, as did her bare calves. *Gods, if even Shavri can find time to exercise, what's wrong with me?* The young Healer certainly had incredible stamina for dancing; they were on their third dance now and she didn't even look out of breath.

Randi was sitting with Keiran, who was talking animatedly. He looked like like he was having fun, she thought. Randi had been looking so worn down lately, and she worried for him, but now there was colour in his cheeks and a real smile on his lips.

“Aunty Savil?”

She looked around. “Oh, hello, Jisa. Are you having fun?”

The child nodded solemnly and took a step closer. “Can I ride on your Companion?”

She smiled. “Well, I'll have to ask Kellan.” *:Love, would you let her? It makes her so happy:*

*:Of course, Chosen:* Kellan sounded very amused. *:I'm coming:* He cantered over from the area by the stalls, where a number of the Companions had congregated and she knew he had been enjoying some pleasant flirtation with Randi's Sondra. She had taken the time to comb out his mane and braid bells into it, and she thought he looked very dashing.

Savil scooped Jisa up, wincing as her back twinged, and set her down on Kellan's bare back. “There. Now, be careful. Remember not to pull on his mane.”

Jisa nodded and giggled. “Thank you, Aunty Savil!”

Her gap-toothed grin looked very familiar for a moment. *Now, who does she remind me of?* Huh. She looked a bit like Withen when he was a little boy. Funny, those random resemblances you found sometimes.

*:Be careful with her, Kellan:* she sent. She'd feel more comfortable if he had his saddle on.

*:Don't worry, I'll keep her on:*

She sat back down, and a moment later felt a hand on her shoulder. "Jay! Wasn't sure you'd come."

He bent to kiss her, then held out his hand. "More wine?"

"Please. And some food, if you can find some." On an empty stomach, the wine was already going to her head – which she didn't mind, it was Midwinter after all, but she ought to pace herself.

He returned moments later with a tray – wine for her, ale for himself, and an assortment of little pastries. She took one eagerly. "Mmm!" It had sausage baked inside. He had thoughtfully brought glasses of water for both of them as well, and she drained hers before taking the wine again.

They ate and drank in silence, Jay resting a hand on her knee. *Ten years ago I'd have told him to stop being inappropriate in public, but who has time for that now?* The Bardic students were playing a slow love ballad, and she saw Shavri and Randi dancing, holding each other close.

She was looking vaguely at the door, listening to Jaysen ramble about his current student, when she saw them come in. She reached out with her mind, without thinking.

*:Mardic?:*

His shields were tight, and didn't budge for her, but she saw his head jerk up in her direction. Though of course he couldn't see her. Donni was holding his arm, and a moment later she looked up as well. Saw Savil, and her face lit up with a smile. She started to pull him over.

Savil nudged Jaysen, who was still talking. "Look."

He glanced over, and his eyes widened. "Oh."

The two of them had moved back into a room in the Heralds' Wing several months ago, but they were still on leave, and she had barely seen Mardic outside their room at all – and then only pulled in Donni's wake, shuffling with his head down as she clomped along on her new wooden leg.

He wasn't as horrifying to look at now. The Healers had done an incredibly good job with the scarring on his face, given what they were starting with. His eyes, slightly visible through mostly-closed eyelids, were still milky, but she was used to it. He hadn't cut his hair in a long time, and it fell past his shoulders, but at least it was clean.

*He won't let anyone but me Mindspeak with him anymore, Donni had told her. Says he can't subject anyone to the overtones he leaks.* She should have remembered. At least he was letting his lifebonded partner into his mind again. That had taken six months of sessions with a Mindhealer.

The two of them crossed the room, slowly, until they reached her. She stood up, setting down her glass, and held out her arms. "Mardic. Donni. It's very good to see you."

"Savil." His voice was gravelly, and toneless. He reached out, the sleeve of his formal Whites falling back from his thin wrist, and found her shoulder. His fingers moved, finding her neck, then her face. She let him explore her features, fingertips resting lightly on her

cheek, nose, brow. “It’s good to see you, too,” he said – still in that same flat voice, with no emotion in his face, but a moment later he stepped forwards into her arms.

She held him, pressing her cheek to his, feeling the wings of his shoulder blades through the cloth. “Oh, Mardic.” Her eyes burned. “I’ve missed you, *ke’chara*.”

“I’m still here,” he said into her hair.

Savil opened her arms a little. “Donni, you too.” The girl slipped in, her head barely coming to Savil’s shoulder. Her hair had grown back in, dark curls shot with white, and the worst of her scarring was under her clothes. She wore a boot on her artificial leg, and with the leg of her trows falling over it, you couldn’t really tell.

She didn’t want to let them go, ever, but finally she did, taking a step back and sitting. She gestured to the bale next to her, and Donni guided Mardic over and pushed him down onto it.

Donni glanced around, seeming to check who was in earshot. “Mardic, tell her,” she said.

Mardic picked at his thumbnail. “I talked to Katha today,” he said. “Asked what sort of duties I can do. I can’t see, but I can still use mage-sight and Thoughtsensing. Reckon I’d make a plausible beggar. No one’d give me a second glance and I’d hear all sorts of things.”

“Katha thought it was an excellent idea,” Donni said – and there was life in her voice, at least. “Said she’d been wanting to ask but didn’t want to push.”

“That’s wonderful.” She hadn’t been sure if Mardic would ever be up for any kind of duties again – and if he wasn’t, Donni wasn’t, she was hardly willing to spend a candlemark a day away from him.

“So we’re going to be spies again,” Donni said – quietly, seriously, without the glee that would once have been in her voice. “Means a bit of danger, but we are Heralds.” She closed her eyes. “Maybe we’re not whole anymore, but at least we’re together.”

Savil blinked away tears. *Damn it, I’m getting sentimental in my old age.* She reached to retrieve her wineglass. “Drinks, either of you?”

“Please,” Donni said. Mardic shook his head.

She glanced over. “Jay?” He nodded and rose.

They sat in silence, listening to the music – now a romping, lighthearted tune, something about mowing the hay. Someone must have rescued Kellan from Jisa; the child was dancing with Tantras now, with great enthusiasm and without much skill, and he was bent nearly double trying to keep hold of her hands. Savil chuckled.

Mardic’s face had slipped into that empty expression again, though he held Donni close against him. *Van used to look like that half the time.* Not since the early nineties, though. Maybe Mardic would get better, too, maybe he’d find a way to live with the part of him missing – gods, she didn’t even like to think about it.

She felt the brush of Jaysen’s mind on her shields. *:The war leaves so many ghosts.*

*Dead and living:*

*:I know:* She shivered. *:Jay, let’s not talk about the war tonight:*

*:All right:* He set down his empty tankard and held out a hand. “Dance with me, Herald-Mage Savil?”

He knew she was an awful dancer – but she smiled anyway. Donni offered to take her glass, and she stood.

*Tomorrow, we think about the war. Tonight, we just dance.*

#

Horn was a hive of muted celebration. Someone had put a lot of effort into making it festive, Vanyel thought. Not that they had much to work with – but branches of pine and cedar were tied into the approximate shape of wreaths and hung on every tent, torches were lit everywhere despite the profligate waste of fuel, and quite a generous amount of wine and ale had been set out. There was even music, thanks to a Bard who had installed himself in Lissa’s camp, and two minstrels who had joined him. It was snowing, but if anything that made everything more picturesque.

He could think of much better ways to open a new century – but he could think of worse ones too.

And Lissa’s Guards were dancing.

The music was lighthearted, one raucous drinking-song after another. There would be a lot of sore heads tomorrow, he thought. He was slowly nursing his cup of watered wine; he wasn’t used to it anymore. Besides, he was on the list to see Melody first thing tomorrow, and he didn’t especially want to do it with a hangover.

Lissa, perched on a stool next to him, tapped his shoulder. “Penny for your thoughts, Van?”

“Was I woolgathering?” He looked over at her, tried to smile. “I’m glad to be spending Midwinter with you, Liss.”

“Oh? I’d much rather be at home, myself.” She stuck out her hands, warming them on the little heat-spell he had set up between them.

He wrinkled his nose. “With Mother simpering at you about the latest scandal in her little Court, and all the cousins trying to drag you out to dance? Gods, Meke would probably drink himself sick and vomit on your gown again.”

Her eyes twinkled. “That was one time! And he’s grown up, with little ones and all. I’m sure his Roshya wouldn’t let him do anything like that. It is exhausting, going back home – but I miss them. Don’t you?”

He hadn’t really thought about it. Hadn’t thought about family much at all. Father had sent him a few letters, with an increasing tone of respect as the war went on – he replied briefly, and then tried not to think about it again. Certainly didn’t read them over and over on lonely nights, like he did with those few letters he still had from Jonne. Mother’s letters had been fewer. Probably she didn’t like the thought of him out at war and tried not to think about it at all.

“Not really,” he said.

“Well, I do. Even though I know they’d drive me up the walls within a day, I’d like to have that day. And some of the cousins are very good dancers.”

He smirked. “Really?”

“Radeval’s quite chivalrous, too. Think he likes me. I have wondered if he’s as good in bed as he is on the dance floor.”

“Liss!” He spluttered. She had startled him into spitting a mouthful of wine onto the mud. “He’s your cousin!”

“I can still wonder, can’t I?”

He shook his head. “I don’t understand you.”

“Well, I don’t understand you. Have you even bedded anyone since Jonne?”

He glared at her, feeling his cheeks flame. “Liss, please don’t ask me that in public!”  
*And please don’t remind me about him,* he thought but didn’t say. It still hurt to think about.

“You’re such a prude.” She drained her tankard and stood up. “Come on, let’s dance.”

“But I–”

She took his cup from his hand and set it down on her stool next to the tankard. “It’s Midwinter. Dancing’s what you do at Midwinter.”

“Fine.” He let her pull him to his feet, and drag him out to the ‘dance floor’, what there was of one – a square of snow trampled flat.

Her eyes lit up suddenly. “Van, can you make some pretty lights or something? It’s the new century, we should make it a real party.”

“What– Oh, I guess.” He hadn’t needed to do much magic today, and his reserves were in good shape. Focusing for a moment, he sent one mage-light after another flying into the air, in all the colours of the rainbow, letting them swirl above his head.

He heard several gasps, then a cheer, and bowed ironically to the group of soldiers now clapping for him.

“There,” Lissa said with satisfaction. “Much better. Let’s dance.”

## Chapter Eighteen

“No, that’s not very good news,” Randi said. He rubbed his eyes. *I slept enough last night. Why am I still tired?* “Why didn’t I hear about this sooner?”

“Because I can’t brief you on every single thing, or you’d never have any time,” Jaysen said calmly. “I didn’t judge it important enough for your personal attention. Until now.”

He looked back down at the map in front of him. *I didn’t even know we had a treaty with Lineas.* Presumably he’d been briefed on it at some point and forgotten. “We’ve got someone over there?” he said slowly.

“Yes. Herald Lores.”

Randi raised his eyebrows. “I don’t recall the name...”

“He’s been our ambassador in Lineas for ten years. Would’ve come back briefly to make his oath to you, but you took a lot of oaths in one day, so I’m not surprised you don’t remember.”

*Not to mention I was spectacularly hungover,* he thought, grimacing. “I see.”

“Unfortunately he’s not a Mindspeaker, so he can only make reports by courier. And he’s – well, he’s quite a good diplomat, but he’s not very flexible. If things are going to heat up over there, I’d rather have someone more, well, creative on site. Though I know we can’t spare anyone right now.”

“Hmm.” *Can we spare anyone?* It was spring, the year was 801, and war was already more than three years old. Vanyel was still the only Herald-Mage on the entire Border. Had been for over a year. Kilchas was doing well, but he might never be able to walk without a cane again, and the Mindhealer in Haven had strongly recommended against sending Sandra to the front again. The Karsites were definitely losing momentum, and Van seemed to be holding up, but still. *We’ve lost two dozen Herald-Mages and again that number of other Heralds.* More than fifty deaths; the Heralds numbered under a hundred for the first time in decades. There were a lot of new trainees, which didn’t make things any better in the short run, finding someone to *train* them was a constant struggle. Tantras had been stuffing them into classes at the new Collegium and set up a sort of temporary barracks in the old Healers’ wing, but the youngsters were crammed in three to a room without much adult supervision, and that was asking for trouble. *We need an official Herald’s Collegium,* he thought again – but getting that approved by the Heraldic Circle was proving even harder than pushing his kingdom-wide schooling proposal through with the Council.

Jaysen cleared his throat discreetly, and Randi jerked back to the present. “Right. Let me think. Who can we... How about Herald-Mages Mardic and Donni?”

Jaysen looked a little startled. “What?”

“I mean, it sounds like we need a spy over there, more than anything. Sounds like there’s a lot going on behind the scenes, that Herald Lores isn’t even in a position to know about. We can spare them, it’s certainly not an active combat zone and should be safe enough,

and we know they both have excellent judgement.” It was still a little disturbing taking reports from Mardic, with his milky eyes and dead expression, but the young man had done a remarkable job ferreting out several crime rings in the Exile’s Gate sector of Haven. Randi smirked to himself. *Young man? He’s older than me.*

“We probably don’t want to send in another Herald, officially,” he added. “Don’t want to get their backs up. And don’t they hate mages?” He vaguely remembered that from a briefing.

“They do. Mage-craft is banned from the whole kingdom. It’s odd. Especially since they border on Baires, and they’re *all* mages – gods, no wonder they end up at war every few generations!”

He remembered now. *Elsbeth brokered the last peace treaty between them, didn’t she? A state marriage...* “Do we know much about how Baires is reacting to this, officially?” he said quietly.

“What, to their King claiming his eldest son and heir is a bastard fathered by his wife’s own brother?” Jaysen shook his head. “Nothing official, as far as I know. We’ll look into it.”

“Thank you.” Randi pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment. “Let’s discuss this at the Circle meeting tomorrow. Ask Katha what she thinks about sending Mardic and Donni.”

Jaysen nodded. “I’ll see to it.” He stood up.

Randi watched him go, and once he had closed the door behind him, gave in to the urge to put his head down on the desk. Just for a moment.

*Is this war never going to end?*

Valdemar had the upper hand, now, but it coming at a cost. Ten thousand warm bodies down south, just holding the Border – that was a lot of able-bodied men and women who weren't back in their home villages or landholdings, keeping the basics of Valdemar's economy going. It was already taking a toll – harvests were lower this year. No one was starving, but it was only a matter of time.

*We need a peace treaty.* But, whatever was going on with the Karsite government – and based on inconclusive spy-reports he thought there was *something* – they weren't in the mood for peace. They had killed and disemboweled his last envoy, which made him disinclined to send another. *I could send a Herald, they'd stand a better chance* – but no, losing a Herald would be ten times more costly. A cost he couldn't afford lightly. And the Karsites hated Heralds with a passion, even more so since Vanyel. *They call him the Butcher in White. No wonder, he's killed enough of them.*

The cool polished wood of his desk felt good against his forehead. *Gods, I'm tired of treating people like numbers.* Shavri helped him bear it – helped him find a space to feel it, sometimes, and then put his feelings away – she was the only reason he still felt human at all, but it wasn't ever enough. *I'm never enough.*

#

Vanyel knew his shock had to be echoing up his tenuous link to Shallan. *:Are you sure?:* he sent.

She was contacting him at long range – he was on the western edge, halfway to Bakerston. He ought to keep their conversation short, to spare her the reaction-headache, but he had so many questions.

*:We're sure. There was definitely a coup:* There was surprise in her mindvoice as well. *:We knew there was unrest in the priesthood, but I didn't expect it to go this far:*

*Me neither, he thought. :What does it mean for the war?:*

*:Unfortunately, nothing good. This extremist splinter that's taken the reins is even more vehemently against Heralds and, well, everything Valdemar stands for:*

*Damn. :At least they'll be disorganized for a bit?:*

*:There is that. And they're carrying out some purges, executing anyone who isn't a fervent enough believer in Vkandis Sunlord's might. Hopefully they'll take out some of their most experienced commanders for us, give us an edge:*

*At a terrible cost. He winced. I don't wish public execution even on my worst enemies.*

*But there was that bright side to it. :Thanks for the warning:*

*:You're welcome. Be careful: She dropped the connection.*

He sighed and rubbed his forehead; it was long-range even for him. “Fandes? What do you think?”

He was clinging to her back, hunched over, trying to keep as much of his body under his cloak as he could. Yet again, when spring hit everything west of the Terilee had been drenched in torrential rains. He'd spent as much time rescuing farmers and livestock from floods as he had fighting, lately. Including Karsite farmers, which – well, they were terrified of him. He'd overheard what they called him under their breath. *The Butcher in White*. It was certainly accurate.

Still, taking the time to help them, even if he couldn't afford it and got no gratitude, made him feel better. Made him feel a little more human. *Like I'm something other than a weapon of mass destruction*. Like there might, someday, be more to his life than setting fire to things.

*:It will end: Yfandes sent, along with a wave of love. :I promise. As to what I think about the coup – well, I'm not surprised. We think Karse started the war in the first place for*

*political reasons – that they were facing some internal unrest, and wanted an outside enemy to stabilize that:*

“That works?” he said dubiously.

*:In the short term. In the long term – well, I’m sure their government wasn’t very popular after the second autumn they didn’t have enough hands to bring the crops in. And given that most of their combat mages are in the priesthood, the religious hierarchy might well have more popular support by now:*

“Oh.” He was too tired to mull over it now.

A branch crackled, and he sent a fireball flying at it before his brain caught up with his hands. “Damn it, Yfandes, I just crisped another squirrel. I’m turning into a killing machine.”

*:Don’t be maudlin. You’re jumpy, but it’s very understandable:*

“I’m hair-triggered.” He didn’t like to sleep in camps anymore; even there, he couldn’t fully relax, and after the third time he’d woken to soldiers talking outside and just barely pulled an attack when he realized the voices were speaking Valdemaran, he didn’t trust himself.

*:Your reflexes are what’s keeping you alive out here:*

He knew she was right. Exhausted as he was, he was acting on instinct most of the time. He never had time or energy to think, to plan past the next five minutes. *Leareth would be ashamed of me.* An incongruous thought, that startled a humourless laugh out of him. Gods, Leareth could probably guess exactly how he was feeling, no matter how hard he tried to control his face in the few conversations they’d had lately. He was always so horrifically perceptive.

*:Eat something, Van. You know you get irritable when you haven’t eaten:*

“Not hungry.” But he reached back and dug in the saddlebags anyway, pulling out a slab of hard cheese wrapped in oilcloth. He gnawed at it. It tasted like dirt.

*:Drink some water too:*

“Stop mother-henning me, ‘Fandes.” But he did unhook his waterskin from his belt and take a sip. The water was gritty and slightly acrid. It wouldn’t make him sick – he knew a spell to sterilize even the filthiest water – but it still wasn’t very appealing to put in his mouth.

The Web pinged at him, and he leaned into the blue-and-silver that was always there in the back of his mind. *:What?:* he asked it.

The answer wasn’t like Mindspeech at all, though it did remind him of something that he couldn’t quite remember. *:Look here:*

He aimed his Farsight at the area pointed out. *:Look:* he sent to Yfandes, sharing the image with her. A small group of less than twenty Karsite bowmen must have just crossed the Border, somewhere a hundred miles away. They looked very nonthreatening, wet and bedraggled under their oilskins. *Don’t even know if you could fire a bow in this weather.*

He reached into the Web, fed in a tendril of node-power, and flung up a mage-barrier in front of them. The new Web made casting at a distance more energy-efficient, but it still strained him. He had so little reserves left these days.

The soldiers leapt back, alarmed, but he saw one man’s mouth moving, presumably shouting orders, and they gathered themselves, two pairs setting out in either direction – presumably to explore the width of the mage-barrier.

He tried to dissuade them with a few levinbolts and fireballs, aimed just in front of them, but they didn’t turn back until he struck their presumed commander, flattening him into a scorched heap on the ground. The rest took off running back towards the Border.

Slipping back into his body, he realized he had dropped the hunk of cheese in the mud. “Damn,” he said dully. He didn’t have much food left – had to resupply, but that meant being around people, who he might throw into a wall if they startled him.

*:You should make camp:* Yfandes sent.

He noticed that the light was fading. “Guess I should.” He didn’t feel very enthusiastic about it. Didn’t feel enthusiastic about anything, these days. The future seemed interminable, grey and empty and hopeless–

He caught onto the thread of thought. *Not reality*, he reminded himself.

Yfandes sent a wave of reassurance. *:I’m worried about you, love. Maybe you should see Melody again:*

“I’d rather not.” Dealing with her was exhausting, and the second block was still holding up – he barely thought about ‘Lendel, lately.

It was everything else that was getting to him.

#

Mardic knelt on their bed, turning items over in his hands before setting them out in rows in front of them. *Even blind I pack more tidily than Donni.*

He sensed her approach behind him even as he heard her footsteps, soft on the rug. Her lips brushed the crown of his head, lifting a few hairs, and he felt the touch of her mind as well. *:Are you sure you want to do this, love?:*

*:I’m sure:* He had, finally, given up on his promise to himself never to Mindtouch her again, to shelter her from the bottomless emptiness that filled half his mind. *She should be enough to fill it, but she’s not.* The Mindhealer had convinced him that he was hurting Donni more by trying to shut her out. And it did help, a little, having her in his mind again. Feeling

how much she still loved him – how that hadn't faltered at all, even though he was broken.

Even though she was still a Herald and he wasn't, anymore.

*:You are a Herald:* Donni sent. *:Nothing can change that:*

She could think what she wanted, if it made her feel better.

He folded another shirt and added it to the pile, his fingers moving deftly. In the last six months, he had learned a lot of tricks. He'd laid minor enchantments on most of his possessions – low-power, but enough for his mage-sight to pick up, helping him find things. The items in his current inventory were clearly visible in his mage-sight, which he thought had actually gotten better, and his mental imagery had improved with practice as well.

*:I'm nervous:* Donni sent. *:First time we'll be outside Valdemar:*

*:You, nervous?:* he teased. It wasn't surprising, though. Donni was scared of a number of things, even if no one else would ever guess – she reacted to it with anger, defiance, or a sort of fierce playfulness.

Folding the final item, the deliberately ragged cloak he would wear as a street-beggar, he turned and reached for her. Explored the contours of her face – gods, he could still picture it perfectly in his mind's eye. Her dark flashing eyes, the sprinkle of freckles you could only see up close, the strands of white in her hair...

*:I love you:* he sent.

*:I love you too. More than anything in this world:*

*:More than Rasha?:* Gods, could he never stop goading her?

*:Yes:* He felt the burning sincerity of it; you couldn't lie with Mindspeech. *:Mardic, if I lost Rasha I could stay, for you. If I lost you, there's nothing that could keep me in this world:*

*:Van did it:*

*:Well, Van's different, okay?:*

He took her shoulders, pulled her close. *:I'm sorry, Donni. Guess I'm nervous too.*

*Shouldn't take it out on you:*

She cuddled against him for a long moment before pulling back, speaking out loud.

“Want to go over our notes again?”

“Sure.” He couldn't read anymore, of course, but he'd always had an excellent memory, and he had been training it. “Lineas. Population about fifty thousand, land area twenty-five hundred miles. Shares fifty miles of border with Valdemar, in the Exile's Road region. Closest holding is Forst Reach.” Where Vanyel had grown up, though Mardic knew he no longer thought of it as home. “Main exports are metals and textiles. Capital city Highjorune, population ten thousand. Currently under the reign of the... gods, what were they called again?”

He could hear the smirk in Donni's voice. “The Remoerdis royal family. It is a mouthful.”

“Remoerdis, right. Anyway, about sixteen years ago they were at war with Baires, to the north. Queen Elspeth brokered a peace treaty. Their King Deveran married Princess, er, Ylyna of the Mavelan royal family. She was fourteen at the time, but she was the only one they'd accept because – why again?”

“Because the Lineans hate mages.”

“Right. Baires is the kingdom with loads of mages.” Vanyel had remarked on it, once, after reading some book on their history, and speculated on whether they had Tayledras blood – he said he'd only seen a prevalence that high in the Hawkbrother Vales. “Ylyna was the only daughter who wasn't Gifted, right?”

“That's right.”

“So now they’ve got King Deveran and Queen Ylyna’s eldest son – damn it, what was his name again? No, don’t tell me. Tashir. Now he’s apparently showing signs of Gifts, and supposedly looks nothing like Deveran and a great deal like his uncle, er–” They were so many names, all of them foreign. “Vedric. So our King Deveran of Lineas is starting to think he’s a bastard, gods, thinks his Ylyna bedded her brother before their wedding. Ew.” He wrinkled his nose. “Wonder what that marriage is like. Can’t be much fun at the supper table.”

He could feel Donni’s shrug. “Apparently he doesn’t have much to do with her, now that she’s done bearing his children. Reckon lots of state marriages end up like that.”

*It’s the way the world is, but I don’t have to like it.* “Anyway. Randi can’t send a Herald-Mage officially, since they won’t have mages inside their borders, but he trusts us to keep our heads down and not expose ourselves.” It was a lot of trust. “We’ll have to pick a cover story. Can’t be refugees from Hardorn or Karse.” Hardorn was too far away to be plausible, and neither of them had the look of Karsites or could manage the accent. Though they’d picked up enough Karsite down south, mostly curse-words.

“I doubt we’ll need much of one. No one asks beggars questions.” Donni sighed. “Still. I think we should go separately. Don’t think anyone would recognize us, but we’re a bit famous.”

It seemed incredible – and yet, next to Van, they had been the strongest mage-pair on the southern border, even if individually they were nothing special. There was a song about them, some drivel about the Battle of Deerford, which Mardic had managed to avoid hearing so far. *It’s not like I ever go anywhere.*

It hurt, to think about being so far from home, and not even having Donni at his side. Without her he had nothing.

*:I'll be with you:* she sent. Out loud: “It’s not a big city. Even at opposite ends we’ll be within Mindspeech range.”

That was something.

“Rasha will have to stay outside the city limits. She’s too conspicuous, they know what Companions are.” Donni didn’t sound happy about it, but she wouldn’t complain. Not to him.

#

Savil sat heavily, accepting the proffered wine. “Thank you, Shavri.” She felt bad about intruding on the two of them during dinner, the only private time they ever had lately, but there were things she didn’t want to say in a Circle meeting.

Shavri nodded and took her seat again. The King’s suite had a dining table, big enough for six, but Randi rarely used it – they were in his study, using his desk.

Savil sipped, set down her glass, and met Randale’s eyes grimly. “Thank you for letting me in. I know how full your schedule is.” Was it worse lately? He looked a little thinner, his neatly combed hair a little duller, and there were shadows under her eyes.

He looked back at her steadily. “What is it, Savil?”

She took a deep breath. *Please, Randi, listen to me.* “I need to talk to you. About Vanyel.”

His eyebrows rose, a line of worry appearing between them. “Bad news from the Border?”

She shook her head. “No. As far as he’s telling us, everything is fine. Well. You know what I mean. Not worse.” Maybe even a little better – the recent coup had thrown the Karsite command structure into disarray.

The young King nodded again, heavily, and she could see the weight of it on him – the years of sending men and women to die fighting their neighbours. “But you’re worried.”

“Yes. I need you to pull him back here.”

He blinked at her. “What’s wrong? Is he ill again? Haven’t heard anything from the Healers.”

She shook his head. *Maybe you would have if he let himself go anywhere near civilization.* “I don’t know how he’s doing physically. Maybe he’s holding up. But we’re breaking him, emotionally. He’s never going to say anything – but I’m really worried.”

Randi stared at her. “Have you heard something I haven’t?”

*No. I just know him better.* There was absolutely no way Vanyel was anything close to okay, after this long on the Border. For all that Randi had been close friends with Van for years, there were certain things he didn’t see. *He’s always looked up to him. Practically worshipped him.* He’d first met Vanyel as an older, more experienced Herald-Mage, already something of a hero. Hadn’t been there that one autumn coming on twelve years ago, when their lives had fallen apart. Shavri would understand better – but, gods, she had so much else on her plate, no wonder she hadn’t had time to think about it.

“Kellan talked to me,” she said. “You know how the Companions have their little whisper network. Yfandes is very worried about him. Thinks he’s not making reasonable risk assessments anymore, which is how he gets when he’s exhausted. Randi, he’s been out there well over a year without any leave!” Gods, and he hadn’t been all the way home to Haven in almost two.

Randi blinked. “Didn’t I approve him for a week...?”

“Well, he spent it hauling farmers out of the river when it flooded. Figure he enjoyed the break from making things explode and murdering people, but he certainly wasn’t resting! He needs rest, real rest. Ideally months of it.”

The King shook his head. “I don’t have anyone else to send.”

She bit down an angry retort. *Take a deep breath.* “You mean you haven’t got any Herald-Mages,” she said. “We’ve got nearly twenty Heralds down there, and we could spare a few more.”

“It’s not the same…”

“Why not? Randi, we’re still using him for his Mindspeech and Farsight as much as his mage-gift. And you know the Karsites are falling back. They don’t have the numbers for concentrated attacks anymore – or the leadership for it. Or very many mages left. Van’s killed nearly all of them.”

Randi’s finger tapped the desktop. “I don’t think we can risk it.”

“We have to sooner or later. Do you know how many Herald-Mages we have left?”

His eyes drifted upwards to the ceiling, and she could almost see him counting in his head.

“Twelve,” she answered for him. “That’s how many, and that includes a few with only hedge-wizard potential. And eleven trainees, but none ready for Whites in the next year. We *can’t* keep relying on mages for this!”

He just looked at her, with an almost pleading look in his eyes. “I don’t know what you want me to do.”

She resisted a strong urge to throw her wine at his face. “Randi– Okay. Listen. I’m going to say some things, and I want you to really think about them.” She waited for him to nod. “All right. I want you to imagine it’s tomorrow morning, and we find out Vanyel was

killed – no, don't make that face at me. You're the King, you don't get to be upset until after you've solved the problem. Van's dead. What do you do?"

He stared at her for a long time, hurt and a hint of anger in his eyes, but she stared back resolutely until he nodded.

"I... I see why you're making that the question," he said slowly, "but I don't know. There's no good answer. I guess I would send Sandra, no matter what the Mindhealer says. Hells, or send her to take over that Pelagirs border-circuit, so I can send what's-her-name to the Border. I could even put Kilchas in Horn – he can't move fast, but he's been trying to learn casting at a distance through the new Web. If I move anyone else it'd mean leaving other border circuits uncovered."

She dug the nails of her free hand into her palm. *Damn it, Randi, listen to me.* "We're already leaving posts uncovered. It's just a matter of judging where we can best afford it."

Randale made a sour face. "All right. There aren't any Herald-Mage trainees ready for Whites – how about other trainees? I'd be a lot more comfortable with this if we had better Farsight and Mindspeech-relay coverage. If we could send a cohort into Whites early, put them on the safer circuits, free up some other people..."

She could almost see the wheels turning behind his eyes. *Good, now you're thinking.*

"We'd have bigger problems if we lost Van," Randi said darkly.

*You're right about that.* She pushed away the image of a desolate, frozen mountain pass. *Worry about it later.* "Well, you're lucky, because he isn't dead. Yet."

He looked back at her with a puppy's sad, hurt eyes. "You're sure he can't manage another few months?"

She bit her lip. There were things she would rather have kept unspoken, things that she hated to say out loud, but– "I'm not speaking as Van's friend, right now," she said finally.

“Honestly, if I were – I might say that we did him no favours, pulling him out of the river all these years ago.” *Do I really think that?* She wasn’t sure. She thought Vanyel had found a bit of happiness, here and there between the crises and emergencies. But it might shock Randi into really listening.

The King rocked back in his chair, wincing. She grimaced.

“I know. But I’m speaking as an advisor to the King, right now. And I’m saying you’re getting caught thinking short-term again. Herald-Mage Vanyel is the best we have, gods, better than we could reasonably have expected to have – but he’s still only a man, and he’s got limits that you’re pushing awfully hard. If you keep at it, I’m not saying we’ll lose him this year, but you’re not helping our odds. It’s come awful close a time or two.” She shook her head. “I never took you for a gambling man, Randi.” Gods, the way he was looking at her... She swallowed a hard lump of guilt and washed it down with a gulp of wine.

Randale chewed his lip. “He’s not... is he—”

She shrugged. “If you’re asking whether he’s suicidal, the answer is I don’t think so. He knows how badly we need him, and he knows he has people he loves back home. He really does try to take only reasonable risks, but we’re not giving him space to recover or think, so he’s acting on instinct. There’s a part of him that wants to die for the Kingdom, Randi, and we can’t tempt him, because we – because you need a Herald-Mage Vanyel ten years from now. Because Kings need to play the long game.” She blinked, eyes suddenly hot and stinging. “Even if it means we lose a few more innocents at the Border this year. There’s a point when that’s worth it.”

Randale stared at her, jaw slack. *He could look a little less surprised*, she thought bitterly. *I do have a brain.*

Finally, he lowered his eyes, took up his own cup, and drank until it was empty. He looked terribly young to her, at that moment. *He never asked to be King. Never wanted it.* Maybe she was being too hard on him. He'd done a pretty good job so far, considering.

It wasn't like any of them had the lives they wanted. Not Shavri, though she'd borne up to it remarkably well lately. Not Vanyel, who had never had the luxury of doing what he wanted – who might not even have an answer to the question. And not Savil herself. *I wish I could retire and spend my last few years with the Tayledras, bask my bones in some hot springs...*

“I wish...” Randale stopped.

*We could all wish for all sorts of things, couldn't we?* That Elspeth the Peacemaker had lived a few more years. That Darvi hadn't broken his neck in a stupid, pointless fall. That a certain night eleven years ago had never happened – so many things could have been different. Might as well wish for a castle made of gold.

“We'll make it through, Randi. We fall down and we pick ourselves up and keep going. Right?”

But she wasn't so sure of it, now, was she? How much more could they recover from? It hadn't been a good few years. Even if they won this war, in the end, it had already taken its toll in resources and in lives. Enough that maybe it was already too late to win the second war, the one they both knew was coming.

Every death felt like it tore out a piece of her – but that wasn't the point, was it? Every death meant one less piece for King Randale to play.

#

Shavri, propped up on one elbow under the sheets, watched Randi's shoulders rise and fall as he breathed. He looked so peaceful, asleep. *So young.* So handsome. And he was hers, and sometimes the thought of it still made her breath catch.

But he was definitely thinner. It didn't show so much when he had clothes on, and he had always been slim, but the knobs of his spine stood out a little more, his shoulder blades a little starker. He was eating plenty, she and Tantras and Sondra were all making sure of it, so it wasn't that.

She played over him with her Healing-Sight again. *No, it's still there.*

It wasn't any illness that she recognized – there was only a creeping imbalance, that she couldn't find the source of. She'd been sending him a little Healing-energy while he slept for months now, those nights that he shared a bed – he'd started to look so worn down. She hadn't thought anything was really wrong at first; of course he was worn down! He had so much to do.

But it was more than that. *This isn't normal.* She laid her hand on his shoulder and pushed with her Gift – and the subtle darkness in him receded, but it was still there. Everywhere and nowhere.

*Damn it, Randi, what's wrong with you?*

She ought to tell him. He deserved to know, if he was ill. But what could she tell him? *I have no idea what's wrong. I've never seen anything like it before.* It reminded her a little of some cancers of the blood, but even more diffuse and vague.

It was getting worse. Very gradually, and she could slow it, push it back – but not forever.

*Don't worry over nothing,* she told herself. She ought to ask one of the other senior Healers to look before she drew any conclusions.

*But what if it's not nothing? On the heels of that thought: what if he's dying?*

She pushed the thought away. She was jumping to conclusions; she had no evidence it was anywhere near that bad.

Still, it took her a long time to fall asleep.

#

*Frozen wind through a frozen pass—*

*“Herald Vanyel.”*

*“Leareth.” Vanyel carved the snow into a stool and sat. Leareth did the same, across the distance that separated them.*

(The dream hadn't been coming as often, lately – maybe pushed out by nightmares of dead children and villages burning, maybe because he was often too tired to dream at all. It felt like there would never be anything else in the world except ruins and corpses. When had he last spoken to a living human face to face?)

*“They are still worth protecting,” Leareth said, unexpectedly. “I know it can feel like there is nothing but ugliness, like there is nothing worth salvaging from a world that is so desperately broken. But there is, Herald Vanyel.”*

*Vanyel looked dully at him.*

(Why was Leareth trying to make him feel better? It was pointless, and it didn't make any sense. Wasn't it good for Leareth's goals for Vanyel's morale to be down? And why did he keep saying 'we'?)

*“How do you still believe that?” he said – bitterly, spitting out the words. “With all the people you've killed?”*

*Leareth only met his eyes, steadily, unperturbed. “I remember what I am fighting for. If I am willing to make sacrifices in the short term, it is only because that is the way I see*

*forwards, and I do not weigh it lightly.” The wind whipped at his hair. “It is hard, sometimes, when it feels as though I am the only one trying. I look at the stars, and I remember that there are so many lights in the world, who are worth saving, and we cannot save all of them – from the very beginning, it was too late to save all of them – but we can still save some. It is never too late for that.”*

*Vanyel looked at him for a long moment.*

*“Why are you doing this?” he said finally. “Why do you care how I feel about it? I’m your enemy. We’re going to try to kill each other someday.”*

*Leareth shook his head very slightly. He was silent a long moment; he seemed to be choosing his words with care.*

*“You are trying to do what is right,” he said finally. “Even when it is hard, and when the answers are not simple. You do not flinch from the truth, and you do not walk away.”*

(Tied to the world by a silver string, the same choice a million times, he might rage at it but he would never walk away... Why did it feel so much like only Leareth understood.)

*“It is rarer than you think,” the mage said. “In a world of lights, you burn brighter than most. I cannot wish to see that extinguished.”*

(Find a way to light your hearthfire, Lancir had said. Tend it. I feel like I barely have a house anymore, he thought dully. Like his whole life was falling to pieces around him, fog and cold rain slipping into everything and he didn’t feel like it would ever stop. Not reality, he reminded himself. There were still other things in the world. Worth protecting.)

## Chapter Nineteen

It was late spring, the year was 801, and he was finally going home.

*Home. I wonder if I'll even recognize it.* Nearly two years that he'd been in the field, with only the briefest pauses, and over a year of it had been entirely alone. Well, as the only Herald-Mage anyway – there were still twenty-three other Heralds stationed along the Border. A full quarter of their remaining numbers.

Kilchas and Sandra were finally back in action, and both of them had learned to cast at a distance via the Web. And Kilchas had, finally, mastered the control needed for Gating. The two of them would be stationed in Dog Inn with General Alban, still the central command post and the safest place to be. He'd passed through both the Horn and Dog Inn camps on his way up the South Trade Road, and it was remarkable how permanent both installations were looking now. The Guard had barracks instead of tents, there were real stables, and the locals were offering all manner of services. He supposed it had been three years. They were children running around in those streets who wouldn't remember a time their kingdom hadn't been at war.

The war was dragging on and on. Their orders had always been to hold Valdemaran land, and no more, and Randi had steadfastly refused to change that order. *Valdemar does not invade and conquer*, he had said. So the Guard held their positions, and the Karsites tried to nibble off bits and pieces, sometimes succeeding, presumably while they gathered their forces. Though who knew what was going on in their decision-making after the coup.

*They couldn't stop us if we wanted to press an attack.* Well, they couldn't stop him. They had next to no mages left above hedge-wizard level, at least none they were sending to the front – with the advantage of the new Web, they were almost too easy for Vanyel to kill. He could have been dictating terms to them in the ruins of Sunhame by now if Randi would let him.

*I never would have thought I'd be the one advocating a full-scale invasion.* Jonne had been right, though – it would kill fewer people in the long run, on both sides, if they could just end it. It was what Leareth would have done.

But Leareth wasn't the King of Valdemar, and neither was Vanyel, and so they sat in this endless stalemate. He'd tried to make the point to Randi in letters, and he was certainly going to take advantage of the chance to speak to him face to face again, but until then, he would obey orders.

What was it that Leareth had said to him, all those years ago? They'd been talking about some example from Seldasen's treatise, on when it might be morally acceptable, hells, even obligatory to disobey orders. *Coordination is important, yet I do not see the value in placing another's judgement above your own.* Did it make him a coward, that he was willing, even happy, to defer to Randi as the ultimate authority, even if he disagreed? But he didn't think Randi was incompetent, or unethical – he was neither. *He's my King, I made an oath to him – and I trust him.*

And he could see the value in maintaining that line set in stone, that Valdemar would never add to its territory by violence, only by direct petition from the locals. It helped them maintain trust with neighbouring kingdoms, which made war less likely in the long run. It was very tempting to make this one exception, to end a war that seemed like it might otherwise last forever – but maybe it was still wrong.

He smiled to himself. *I must be feeling better, if I've got the energy to think about theory like this.* For so long his world had narrowed to what was right in front of him. The only questions he'd asked himself was whether to kill something, eat it, burn it for firewood, or ignore it. Now, after a week sleeping inside in the warm, a week riding through the spring-green peace of Valdemaran towns and farms untouched by war, it felt like he could finally see the rest again. Felt like he was stepping out of a bank of fog into sunlight, like the world had depth and colour again.

He had, at Yfandes' insistence, stopped in Horn and pulled rank in order to see Melody on about two candelmarks' notice. She had been able to dampen his over-active reflexes a little, so that he could sleep in inns without worrying so much that he would blast some poor maid who was unlucky enough to startle him. Though she'd made him promise to see her again if he was sent back out so she could undo it. *It does keep you alive out here,* she said.

The first full night's sleep when he *wasn't* woken every half-candlemark by harmless noises had felt like the Havens. He had 'asked' the Web to leave him alone as well, except for major emergencies – any Border warnings ought to go to Kilchas or Sandra now – so that had stopped disturbing his sleep as well.

*It's just my nightmares that wake me now.* He still wasn't dreaming about 'Lendel, and he had decided against asking Melody to take out the block – he was used to it now and it still

seemed to be helping. He didn't feel ready to face those feelings again, not when he still felt so unbalanced. But she had refused to block any of his memories of the war itself.

*Nightmares are important*, she had said. *I know it's no fun, but it's how our minds take what we've seen and learn to live with it.* Which sounded like something Lancir would say, and had been particularly irritating. Damned Mindhealers. He didn't want to learn to live with how many people he had killed.

He yawned. The weather had been good for his whole journey – sunny, with only the occasional shower of rain. The air was just on the cool side of pleasant, and he was cozy under his ragged cloak. Enough that, without any nearby danger to keep him alert, he kept falling asleep in the saddle.

*:I don't mind:* Yfandes sent, her mindvoice amused. *:I like it when you're relaxed. I tend to be pretty in tune with you, so–:*

“So I should go ahead and take a nap?” He freed a hand to rub his eyes. “Can't understand why I'm so tired. Must've slept twelve candlemarks last night.” They had made a very late start, because even in the lumpy bed at the last inn, he hadn't woken until noon.

*:And how many months were you sleeping four or five a night? You've got a lot of catching up to do. Sleep, food, baths...:*

“Oh gods, the baths.” He took one at every single inn. A long one. Sometimes at night and again in the morning. And didn't feel at all guilty about using their hot water. *I've damn well earned this one thing.*

*:You're a hedonist:*

“Is that supposed to be a bad thing?” His eyelids were definitely drooping now. “Besides, which of us was shamelessly begging the stableboy for apple-tarts last night? They aren't even good for you...”

He woke to the sun setting, right in his eyes. The temperature had dropped, and a little fog had drifted in, glowing in the slanting golden light.

He stretched, groaning – gods, he was stiff. “‘Fandes?’” He reached to unhook his waterskin.

*:Look around, love. We’re nearly home:*

She was right. *Gods, I almost didn’t recognize it.* The walls of the city rose up ahead of him, casting long shadows across fields of lush young crops. And there was more traffic on the road, carriages ahead and behind, a family on foot with a donkey trailing them. So far no one seemed to have recognized him. Well, he had the hood of his cloak pulled up, hiding his hair, and the cloak itself was hardly white anymore.

He yawned again. “I’m ready to fall into bed.” They had been stopping early most nights, because they were in no rush; Tantras had specifically said to take his time.

*:I know. Almost there:*

They rode through the outer gates just as the sun touched the horizon. *It’s like something out of a painting,* he thought. Sometimes, tramping around the woods in the rain and snow, stumbling over half-decomposed corpses, he had wondered if he would ever find things beautiful again.

*Jonne could do it, even in the middle of everything.* It still sent a pang through his chest, remembering that one conversation – years later, it was still clear in his memory, like a butterfly preserved in amber. *Van, when you find something good in this damned awful world, something beautiful and perfect, you make it last as long as you can, you know?*

Two carriages passing in the night. Sometimes he tried to pretend that Jonne was still out there somewhere, alive – leading his people with a smile, seeing the poetry in blowing leaves and sky reflected from puddles.

*:He knew the risk: Yfandes reminded him. :It was the life he chose:*

“I know.” And he had done an awful lot of good. Even salvaged a few lives from his disastrous final battle. Vanyel only felt an echo of guilt, now.

*You use guilt to make it easier to bear, Melody had said – which felt like it couldn't possibly be true, but she made a convincing argument. To feel guilt is to say that you could have stopped it. Sometimes it's worse to know you live in the world where the worst can happen and there's nothing you could have done. To admit that you're only human and you can't save everyone. Sometimes it feels easier to take it all on yourself.*

Maybe she was right. Though it seemed like what Leareth had done, at least the way he claimed it, was to take on everything, all the brokenness and pointless suffering that no one man could ever fix. To face it with defiance.

But even he didn't let failure haunt him, did he? Didn't see any point in feeling guilt once he had learned from his mistakes. Perhaps that was the only way he could bear it, century after century. *I don't think that I could.*

Yet Leareth could still grieve, even for a man who might have died a thousand years ago. *I wonder who Urtho was?* He'd never found a reference to the name in any book, and Moondance hadn't recognized it either.

The streets of Haven were quiet. He watched the first stars appear as they approached the inner gates to the Palace. *I wonder if Leareth is watching them too, wherever he is.*

Strange, the sort of kinship he felt with the man lately. Like Leareth might understand him better than anyone else.

The guard at the gate bowed deeply to him. “Herald Vanyel. Welcome home.”

#

Savil sat in her quarters, curled in her overstuffed armchair, staring blankly at the tables of numbers in her hands. The sun had only set a few candlemarks ago, but she could barely keep her eyes open.

*Why do people expect me to have opinions on everything*, she thought irritably. Keiran had been in her position for over fifteen years; she knew a lot more about it than Savil did! *I haven't the least idea how many bales of hay is reasonable to last a guard-post a month.*

She closed her eyes, just a moment, resting her head in her hands.

*:Savil?:*

She twitched upright. *:Van? You're back?:*

*:Just arrived:* Overtones of fatigue, and there was a deeper bleakness underneath. At least he wasn't shielding her out as tightly as he had the last time he'd been in Haven. *:Can I come over?:*

*:Of course, ke'chara:* She'd had no idea when to expect him, and she'd been anticipating it for days. She set the papers on the side table and waited.

And then she heard his footsteps in the hallway, heavy, tired, felt his presence drawing closer. The door was unlocked, and he opened it, came in. Closed it behind him. He just there for a moment, like he wasn't sure where to go next.

There was more white in his hair. Almost as much as there was black, now. It made him look older, though his face hadn't changed much. A slight figure in a belted Tayledras robe, hollow cheeks and shadowed eyes, but he didn't look as bad as she'd feared. He moved a little stiffly, like he was hurting. The aura of his mage-power brushed hers.

She stood up, wincing. *Damned hips.* “Come here,” she said.

He came to her, and she wrapped her arounds him, squeezing tightly. *I never want to let you go.* She hadn't realized it until now, but a part of her hadn't been sure she would ever see him again. *You nearly died out there, so many times.* It felt like a gift.

She reached for his minds and he dropped his shields, letting her pull him into close rapport. So she could say all of the things that she didn't have words for. Pride and relief, sorrow and regret – all the times she had missed him desperately, all the times she'd wished more than anything that she could take his place.

*:I missed you too, aunt:* A waft of surprised joy. As though he had forgotten what it was like to be held by someone. Maybe he had.

She released him and sat. He looked at the second chair, then lowered himself to sit at her feet instead, resting his head on her knee. She stroked his hair.

*:I'm home:* Almost disbelieving. Like he wasn't sure it could be real.

*:You're home:*

#

“Thank you, sweet.” Shavri passed Jisa the last plate, and her daughter carried it to the end of the small table and set it out. She nudged the silverware more perfectly into place beside it, then beamed up at her mother.

They were in her quarters in the Healers' Wing. She had always preferred to eat there, rather than in the too-large King's suite. *I never feel like I belong there.* She thought Randi liked it better as well. For however short a time, they could pretend nothing had changed.

Shavri felt Randi coming even before she heard his footsteps in the hall; she could always recognize his gait.

Jisa jumped up and down and ran to the door. “Papa!” She pulled it open. “Papa! I set the table!” She flung herself at him.

Randi raised his eyebrows. “She felt me coming again?” He hefted her into his arms.  
“You’re getting too big for this, pet.”

“Felt you in my head!” Jisa said, and giggled. “Look! I set the table.”

*:She wants you to say she did a good job: Shavri sent, smirking. :She’s very excited about helping me with chores this week:*

“I do see. Very fancy, it looks lovely. What’s the occasion?”

“Uncle Van is coming!” Jisa’s face was glowing as her father set her back down. “He came home safe!”

“Oh?” He glanced at Shavri.

“I invited him.” She switched to Mindspeech. *:Figured we could ask him to look at these new Gifts our daughter seems to be showing: At barely six years old, too.*

*:That’s a good idea:* There was fatigue in the overtones of Randi’s mindvoice. He looked mostly fine – she doubted anyone who didn’t see him every day would notice anything – but to her eye, there were a dozen worrying changes. Hair a little duller, cheeks a little hollower, deeper shadows under his eyes.

*And I can discreetly ask Van to look at him too,* she thought. Randi saw the Healers regularly, for preventative care, and Gemma had seen the same thing she had – something not quite right, impossible to see what. Confirmation that she wasn’t just imagining things. Neither of them had told him yet – no point giving him something else to worry about, when they still knew so little.

It was getting worse. Randi had complained of dizzy spells and weakness, which he attributed to stress and skipping meals. She knew it was more than that. *Damn it, Randi, you’re ill, and I don’t know what’s wrong.*

Jisa, who had been poking at one of the flowerpots on the windowsill, started jumping up and down again. “UncleVanUncleVanUncleVan!” She ran to the door and yanked it open. Shavri smiled, surprised; she had felt him too, but only a few moments later. *Whatever Gift she has, it’s strong.*

Vanyel stood in the doorway, blinking. “Hello, Jisa. How did you–” His breath escaped with a quiet *oof* as she rammed into his midsection, and he laughed and picked her up, swinging her above his head. “I can’t believe how big you are!” His mind brushed Shavri’s. *:I’m amazed she remembers me:*

Jisa had been just four the last time she saw Vanyel. *:She talks about you all the time:* Shavri sent. *:And she hears other people talk about you plenty. You are quite famous around here:*

“All blue and swirly!” Jisa said happily.

“Sorry, what?” He looked at Shavri, an eyebrow raised. “That sounds like–”

“She can See your aura,” Shavri confirmed. It ‘looked’ the same to her Othersight.

“She’s been feeling people coming for a few months now.”

“Very interesting.” Jisa was clamouring to be let down now, and Vanyel lowered her to the ground. Shavri took the opportunity to step in and hug him. Letting go before she wanted to. She kept wanting to reassure herself that he was solid; it felt impossible that he could finally be home for real.

“Jisa, impling, stay there a minute. I have presents.” He was carrying a canvas messenger bag, which he swung down from his shoulder.

“Presents!” Jisa looked ready to burst.

“Just give me a moment. I have some for your mama and papa too.”

“Thoughtful of you,” Shavri said. “You look nice.” He was wearing one of his Tayledras outfits.

“Haven’t got any uniforms left that aren’t ruined. And I’ve been waiting two years to wear something other than white.” The deep sapphire blue did suit him much better. “You look very well yourself.” *:Where did all that muscle on your arms come from?:*

Was it that obvious? The thought pleased her. *:I’ve been training with Kayla, actually. Well, one of her apprentices. Figured I should learn to defend myself:* After years, she thought she was starting to make some real progress, and Kayla had finally let her move on from wooden practice daggers to real blades. She was certainly fitter than she had ever been in her life. Which had a few other advantages – her reserves of Healing-energy tended to be deeper these days, and it made it a lot easier to keep up with an energetic six-year-old.

*:That’s a good idea:* A hint of surprise, but not much. “Here you go, Jisa.” He gave her a wrapped package. “And can you give this one to you mama, and this one to your papa?”

Shavri accepted the cloth-wrapped cube from her daughter’s hands. “Thank you, sweet. Ooh, I wonder what it is... Van! Where did you find this?” It was a little box, beautifully made from several different colours of wood and divided cleverly into compartments. It would be perfect for storing dried herbs to transport easily.

“People give me things. Usually I haven’t got any use for them.”

Jisa threw the cloth wrapping to the floor and hugged the floppy white shape. “He’s so soft! I’m going to call him Morty,” she announced.

Shavri blinked at the stuffed doll-like shape. “What is that supposed to be?”

Vanyel shook his head. “I assume it’s meant to be a Companion, but made by someone who can’t possibly have ever seen a horse before.” Now that she looked, Shavri

could see that the head was horse-like, fine ribbons of white flannel formed a sort of mane, and large blue buttons had been sewn in the place of eyes.

“Van, this is perfect!” Randi was holding up a large brooch, a simple design, but set with what Shavri was quite sure were precious stones. “Where did you find it?”

“Gem merchant gave it to me. After I helped him out of a tight spot on his way back from Hardorn. Too fancy for me. Thought you might like it.”

“Well, I do.” Randi, beaming, set it down and hugged Vanyel. “And it’s very, very good to have you home.”

“I’m glad to be back.” Vanyel took a step back. “Would you like me to have a look at Jisa?”

Shavri knew what he meant. “If you don’t mind. We haven’t had a chance to have her assessed yet. Jisa, come here. Uncle Van is going to look at something. It’ll make your head feel funny, but it won’t hurt.”

Jisa came over, eyes wide and trusting, and Vanyel laid one hand on top of her brown curls and closed his eyes, his expression slipping into blankness.

A long time later, he took his hand away. “Interesting,” he said.

“What?” Shavri said.

“What?” Jisa added eagerly. “Uncle Van, what?”

“Well, Jisa, you definitely have Gifts. Congratulations.” He turned his eyes to Shavri. “She’s going to be a very strong Empath, projective and receptive. A strong Mindspeaker, though that’s only starting to activate. And I’m not sure, since it isn’t one of mine, but I suspect she’ll be a Mindhealer as well.”

It was a combination of Gifts that made a lot of sense, Shavri thought. Though she hadn’t expected it. Did she carry the Mindhealing Gift in potential? Van certainly didn’t, or it

would have been ripped open along with all of his other potential Gifts. *Gods, that would have been interesting.*

“She has the mage-gift in potential, a double dose of it,” Vanyel went on, “but no sign that it’s going to activate. Unless she gets ripped open like I did, which I really do not recommend, she won’t be a mage.”

*Gods, I hope not,* Shavri thought. Not that she could see how it could happen – Vanyel’s circumstances had been so weird and specific. The relief was like setting down a heavy weight. *I didn’t realize I was so afraid she would be mage-gifted.*

Jisa cuddled against her leg, and Shavri stroked her hair. “What should we do about training her?”

“Hmm. She’s fortunate in that her Gifts are awakening the way they’re supposed to – gradually, and receptive first. It shouldn’t present many problems, and once she’s a little older you ought to be able to teach her yourself, at least when it comes to Mindspeech and shielding. For now...” He hesitated for a moment. “If it’s all right with you, I can go in and show her, the way the Tayledras taught me. It’s not a method we usually use in Valdemar, but she’s so young, it’ll be a lot easier than walking her through it verbally. And I can do it safely.”

She trusted him. “Of course. When?”

“When is supper arriving? It shouldn’t take long.”

By the time the food she had ordered for them arrived, ten minutes later, Vanyel had already sat down with Jisa in his lap and, he said, showed her the basics of how to center and ground and shield. She had picked it up instantly; Shavri was a little jealous. *It wasn’t that easy for me.* She remembered six months of confusion, even wondering if she was losing her mind,

and she had already had a number of unhelpful habits when she arrived in Haven and Gemma started trying to teach her to shield.

They sat around her small table, and Jisa peppered Vanyel with questions – Shavri had to keep reminding her not to talk with her mouth full. Randi watched fondly, mostly staying silent, occasionally directing an aside to her in Mindspeech, a few times pulling Vanyel in as well. It was awfully useful, for having conversations that weren't appropriate for children. Though it sounded like soon enough, Jisa might be able to listen in if they weren't careful about directional shielding. She ought to start getting in the habit now.

Jisa shovelled down another mouthful of greens; Shavri bit back the urge to tell her to take smaller bites, it wasn't really important and she was having fun. "Uncle Van, did you fight any dragons?"

He looked blankly at her. "What?"

"Beri read me a story about a war and the evil people had dragons!"

Shavri felt his mind brush hers again. *:Remind me who Beri is?:*

*:Her governess:*

*:Right:* Vanyel swallowed his own mouthful and smiled at Jisa. "There weren't any dragons. And the Karsites aren't evil."

"But Papa said they tried to kill you!"

He sighed. "Sometimes, yes. But, you know, most of them are just soldiers. Fighting for the country they were born in. They're not really different from us."

Jisa stared at him, fork halfway to her mouth, like the thought had never occurred to her. Which it probably hadn't. "Papa?" she said. "Are they like us?"

Randi ran a hand through his hair. "Well, you could say..."

*:Shavri: Vanyel reached for her mind, along a private connection. :I can tell something's bothering her. What is it?:*

So he had noticed. He had gotten so perceptive, she thought. She tried to keep her features composed, showing no hint of what she felt on her face. *:It's Randi. I think he's ill. Did you notice anything?:*

*:I saw it as soon as I came in the door:*

Her heart sank. *:What does it look like to you?:*

*:I'm afraid I have no idea. I'm not a Healer, Shavri. All I can see is there's something out of balance:*

*:That's all I can see too. No source:* She forced herself to smile. *:Let's talk more about it later:* Right now, it was time to focus on her daughter. On this one, brief candlemark they had to just be a normal family again.

#

“So that’s the state of things,” Tantras finished. “No real change, but at least we’ve had confirmation, and we have people we trust on the scene.”

Vanyel sat back in his chair, trying not to yawn. He’d been back a week now, and it had still taken incredible effort to haul himself out of bed for this meeting. No wonder – he had still been sleeping until noon when he had no other commitments.

Tantras had just finished filling him and the rest of the Senior Circle in on the situation in Lineas, and something about it made him uncomfortable. He didn’t think it was just that he was upset at having missed Mardic and Donni, either. *Though, gods, I wish I'd had a chance to see them.* It felt unfair. Two years without leave, and as soon as he was home, they were somewhere else!

The room felt very empty. Savil was skipping this meeting. She had a bad cold and Kellan had insisted she stay in bed. Vanyel had gotten the impression that her stamina was worse, lately; she couldn't work through minor illnesses anymore without risking their turning into major illnesses. Randi had a competing engagement, and Tantras would fill him in on the highlights later. There was just himself, the King's Own, Jaysen, Keiran, and Katha. No one had replaced Deedre after her death, and Kilchas, Sandra, and Shallan were all still down south.

*It feels like a lifetime ago since I sat in this room.* Had he changed that much? Everything about the Palace seemed different, somehow, in a way he had no words for. He knew the difference had to be in himself. A lot of things felt different. Tantras had Mindtouched him and invited him back to his room a few days ago, like nothing had changed – and Vanyel wasn't sure why, but he hadn't felt like it. Even though it had been a long time, gods...but it didn't feel right. Tantras hadn't pushed, or brought it up again, though Vanyel had sensed his confusion and hurt.

“All we can do is keep an eye on it,” Keiran said. “Still no official response from Baires?”

“No. Unofficially, this Vedric Mavelan isn't *denying* it, which is interesting. If someone was spreading around that I'd fathered a child on my own sister, I'd be shouting to the rooftops that I hadn't done any such thing!”

A thoughtful silence.

Vanyel leaned forwards. “If their King Deveran does disown his eldest, could that be a pretext for war?”

Blank looks.

“I don't see what...” Tantras trailed off.

He tried to figure out how to put the thought into words. It seemed so obvious. “We’ve heard from Mardic and Donni that the area is full of unused node-energy. Which isn’t surprising, if they don’t allow any mages there to use it! And the Baires people are all mages. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d really like to invade for that reason – but they know Valdemar would frown on that, given that Elspeth basically forced the last peace treaty down their throats, so maybe they want an excuse. To make it look like they’re in the right.”

The looks turned thoughtful.

“I could see that,” Keiran said slowly. “Though I don’t know that we are in a position to stop them. The last time, Elspeth had the implicit threat of ‘and if you don’t stop killing each other, I’ll march our troops in and damned well stop you.’ We can’t spare any troops.”

“Well, do they know that?”

“Hopefully not, given that our numbers and deployments are classified.” Keiran scribbled a note. “Good thought, Vanyel. We’ll pass it on to Herald Lores, so he has context.”

“Moving on.” Tantras looked at his notes for a moment. “Deployments. Keiran?”

She had been scribbling something again; she glanced up. “We’re hoping to bring this up in the Council meeting tomorrow. In short, I would like to see about pulling Major Lissa Ashkevron off the Border for a few months. She’s been down there over three years without leave, since before the start of the war, and her efficiency reports are still good but I’m sure she could use a break. Now’s a good time, given how low the Karsites are on resources. We have a lot of experienced people ready for promotions; we can slot someone in and they’ll have time to find their feet.”

No one glanced at Vanyel. *Do people forget she’s my sister?* Maybe; it wasn’t like he ever spoke of his family. He wasn’t sure how many of the Heralds even knew his surname.

*Gods, I don't know most of theirs either.* For so many of them, the Heraldic Circle was more a family than their mothers and fathers.

“I agree,” Tantras said. “Speaking of the Council meeting, I’m assuming Savil won’t be up for it. We’ll need someone to stand in for her.” He glanced over. “Vanyel?”

“What? Oh.” He sighed. “You want me to abuse my position as a national hero and intimidate them.”

Keiran giggled, hiding it behind her hand.

“Fine. I’ve never been to a Council meeting before, so I really hope you’re intending to tell me what to say.”

“I can prompt you with Mindspeech if you need it, but I’m sure you’ll do fine. You’re pretty comfortable with public speaking and I know you can think on your feet. Jaysen, updates on the treasury?”

Vanyel fought the urge to rub his eyes. *A Council meeting. That means I have to drag myself out of bed first thing again, doesn't it?* He didn’t understand why he was still sleeping so much. *Gods, and I'm hungry again.* Now that he was back at the Palace, surrounded by easy access to delicious meals, his body seemed to have decided to gain back the weight he had lost all at once. He felt like he must be eating ten times a day.

*:Your stomach still isn't used to large meals: Yfandes reminded him. :And you know node-energy suppresses your appetite. So, yes, now that you're not using it all the time, your body has noticed that it isn't the weight it's supposed to be:*

*:Just as long as I stop before I end up spherical:*

Mental laughter. *:I don't think there's any danger of that:*

“...in the north,” Jaysen was saying. Vanyel blinked. *Damn it, woolgathering again.* Everyone was looking at him.

Tantras rescued him. *:We're talking about road repairs. North Trade Road is a mess again, it's been five years and the last few winters were rough:*

“Right. I could do some of it at a distance, through the Web.” He had done quite a lot of that for the troops at the Border. *:Tran, I should go north at some point. Need to Farssee the pass:* He had tried with the Web, to see if it could help boost his Farsight, but he still couldn't Reach far enough.

*:Right:* Tantras laid his arms across the table. “You can get it done faster and easier in person, though, right?” He glanced around. “I vote we send Vanyel to get that over with, and clear up any issues around there at the same time.”

Nods all round. “Maybe once Savil is back on her feet,” Jaysen allowed.

“Then we'll plan on sending Van in a week or two,” Tantras said. “Shouldn't take too long, right? Moving on. Katha, reports?”

*He's gotten quite efficient at meetings.* Vanyel remembered how nervous Tran had looked in the early days. Remembered how nervous he had felt, in those few first meetings he had attended with the Senior Circle. Like a boy dressed in his father's clothes, pretending to be an adult and hoping no one noticed. *We've all done some growing up, haven't we?*

#

“So?” Vanyel said, looking at Randi steadily across his desk. “What's this about?” It wasn't rare for him to have a drink with the King in the evenings, but this time had been a formal meeting request.

“I wasn't sure how to bring this up.” Randi fidgeted with the rim of his wine-glass. “This isn't the first time I've received a letter from your father asking when we'll give you family leave, but the last one was quite strongly worded.”

*What?* Vanyel stared blankly at him. *My father sends letters to the King of Valdemar demanding I get leave?* It was a little embarrassing, and it made no sense. He had vaguely known he was entitled to a month of family leave every two years, if he wished, but he'd only thought about using it to go to k'Treva. And it had never seemed like a good time.

"You haven't requested leave in ten years, except for a week here and there," Randi said. "I wanted to make sure that you knew you could, and I would happily grant it."

Vanyel took a sip of wine to hide his confusion. "Randi," he said finally. "That's not why—" *Gods, how do I say this?* No good way. "I haven't requested family leave because I don't exactly get along with my family," he said finally.

"Really?" Randi's eyebrows rose a little. "Your father's letters about you are quite complimentary."

*His letters to me have been downright rude sometimes.* Not that he thought Withen intended it; he could just be very tactless. "I'm sure," he said dryly. Had he never spoken to Randi about this? He must have talked to Shavri – had Randi never thought to ask her? Maybe it wouldn't have occurred to him. Not when he had been close with his own father.

"Van, I..." Randi rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry, did I offend you?"

Vanyel shook his head, trying not to laugh. "No! It's not that." Ten years ago, he might have fled the room to go cry somewhere if anyone brought up that he should visit Forst Reach. Even five years ago it would have rattled him. Now, it was almost a little funny. "It's just...well, he disapproves of certain parts of my life."

Randi just looked blankly at him.

Did he really have no idea? Vanyel sighed. "He doesn't like that I'm *shay'a'chern*."

"Oh." Randi's eyes widened. "I didn't think... I'm sorry, Van."

“Don’t be.” He shook his head. Took another sip of wine, trying to think. “Gods, maybe I should visit. Meet some of my little nieces and nephews. It would make my mother very happy. And I’m a war hero now and all, so maybe my father will refrain from making snide comments about my proclivities.” Maybe they could have a civil conversation, as two adults. Withen might even say, out loud, that he was proud of him. His throat tightened. *Gods, I want that. Even after everything.* Why did it still matter so much to him?

*:Because they are your parents: Yfandes sent. :Of course it means something to you. It's easy for parents to pull the strings that make one dance...after all, they are the ones who tied those strings in the first place:*

He had heard the quote before. His eyes burned. *Damn it, I don't want their strings on me. Don't want to care.* But it seemed he did.

Randi cleared his throat. “You know, Savil is overdue for family leave. She never takes it either. I don’t know if she would be interested – but if you wanted to go, and if you thought it’d be easier to have her there...”

“What, you’d give us both leave at the same time?” That sounded like a recipe for disaster. “What if something happens in Haven and you need us?”

A shrug. “Then something happens, and Savil Gates back or you ride in as fast as you can. Van, it’s never going to be a better time. That’s one of the things Darvi told me.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “That it’s always going to feel like there’s too much going on, like tomorrow will be a better time, and it never, ever is. We don’t get to live after the work is done – we have to live while we’re doing it, or otherwise we never will.”

An echo of Jonne’s voice. *You’ve got to find moments of joy when you can, you know? Grab them and don’t let them go.* He smiled, despite the pang in his chest. Visiting the place

where he had grown up – it felt wrong to call it home – didn't exactly sound joyful, but was it something he wanted to keep putting off until it was too late? *I haven't got forever.*

He'd gone north to Farsee the pass, and it had still been as empty and desolate as ever. Still. Whatever was going to happen – whatever he ended up doing, in the end – he had ten years. Maybe less, probably not much more. Gods, he was tired of measuring out his life like this, but maybe it did make it easier to see his priorities.

"I'd like to go," he heard himself say. "I'll ask Savil about it. Certainly don't want to push her." It would be easier, with her there. "And Lissa's going to be on leave?" She had always gotten along with their parents better; it wouldn't take much to talk her into visiting Forst Reach.

"Any day now. We're lucky we have the time for her to give the next person a full handoff."

He wondered how Lissa felt about handing over the command she had held for three years. Knowing her, probably relieved. Her recent letters to him, after he left the front, had sounded a little wistful.

Taking leave would give him a chance to really rebuild his reserves, too. Even here in Haven, he was doing a *lot* of magic, crammed in between meetings and teaching the new trainees. He didn't remember it being as heavy a load before – but there were only a few Herald-Mages based in Haven now, and they were quite behind on routine projects. He never wanted to say no, not when he could make people's lives so much easier in an afternoon's work. And they weren't bothering to hide the full strength of his power anymore. No point, after what he'd done out on the front.

*I should add the vrondi to the Web before I go*, he reminded himself. He had been putting it off, waiting until Savil felt better, then waiting until Shavri could free up an evening.

She was still worried about Randi. Vanyel thought she was overreacting – whatever it was, it wasn't affecting him much, even if she said it was getting worse. He hadn't noticed any change in the time he'd been in Haven. Then again, Shavri's Healing-Sight was much better trained.

*Don't borrow trouble*, he reminded himself.

#

“Damn it!” Lissa snarled, pacing back and forth across Vanyel's room. “They promised me *leave!*”

Sitting on his bed, surrounded by folded items of clothing, Vanyel hid a smirk. “It's got to be a picnic compared to what you were just doing.”

“Still!” She looked ready to spit tacks. “It's not leave!”

Lissa had, finally, arrived in Haven a few days ago, months later than promised. Summer was already drawing to a gentle close. Savil had laughed and agreed to visit Forst Reach with him, saying she could badly use a holiday. Lissa had expressed her intent to go as well – and then, a day ago, they had received an official message from Herald Lores, and a backchannel one from Mardic and Donni. King Deveran of Lineas had officially disowned his ‘bastard’ eldest son in favour of his younger brother, the King of Baires had officially expressed Great Displeasure, and there were diplomatic notes flying back and forth. So far, no arrows or spears, but it hadn't taken much of a pretext the last time the two tiny kingdoms had gone to war with each other.

Randi wanted troops nearer at hand, and he had decided that the Border could spare two platoons out of Lissa's original company. Which he had assigned to bivouac at Forst Reach, since it was significantly closer than Deercreek and had a direct and well-maintained road to Highjorune. And had placed under Lissa's command, since 'she would be there anyway.'

Lissa was livid. Vanyel thought she would calm down in about half a candlemark, and probably be happy about the situation; it would be a good excuse for her to have something else to do every time their family got on her nerves. *I wish I had that excuse.*

He wondered what Withen was thinking of all this. He barely remembered the last war – it had happened when he was only about six, and had never spilled anywhere close to Forst Reach. Lissa had been very excited, he remembered, and tiny Meke as well, and he had thought they were both insane.

Lissa stomped to his chair and flung herself down. "I'm a major and they're giving me two platoons! It's an embarrassment, that's what it is!"

He hid a snicker. "Didn't you tell me you missed it?" *I don't even know everyone's name who's supposedly under my command*, she had complained to him.

"I was drunk! Anything I say when I'm drunk doesn't count!"

"Really? Savil always says, there's truth at the bottom of every bottle."

She glared at him. "You think it's *funny!*"

"No. I most definitely don't. I think it's offensive and a disgrace, and I think you're going to be smug as a cat in cream when you're out there camping with your best people and I'm stuck in a guest room listening to Meke drunkenly regale me with tales of how many rabbits he shot on the last hunt!"

Lissa held the glare a moment longer, and then started laughing. "Damn it, Van."

“Come on, let’s get ready.”

“I’m ready! You’re the one taking all day choosing what colours to represent in your wardrobe.”

He looked at the folded silks and velvets laid out around him. “Liss, do you know how many opportunities I’ve had in the last ten years to wear anything but white? Anyway, you’re distracting me. Why don’t you go harangue Savil about her packing?”

She groaned. “At this rate we’re not going to make a start before midafternoon.”

#

The Guardsman’s name was Jareth, and he was not quite nineteen years old. He had been in the Guard for all of nine months, joining as soon as he came of age – his parents wouldn’t let him go sooner, though the Guard took recruits at sixteen. A lieutenant for six months now, though his platoon only consisted of eighteen, rattling around in a post intended for three times that number. At a year he would have enough experience to go down to the front, and he was counting down the days.

In the meantime, they kept an eye on the East Trade Road border-crossing with Hardorn. Which, mainly, meant turning away an endless stream of refugees, even this far north. And trying to prevent them from crossing on their own in the dead of night, which was impossible, because it was fifty miles to the Armour Hills post and they weren’t staffed much better. They’d had a Herald until eight months ago, but the man had gone south, so now they weren’t even on the Mindspeech-relay.

Still, he tried his best to be crisp and professional, even if no one higher up was watching.

It was midway through one of the first really hot summer days, and there was quite a large party coming up the road. They didn’t look like refugees, for all that they were a little

bedraggled; they had pack-mules with them, and the young woman in front rode a very handsome chestnut mare.

Prescott stopped them at the signpost, as he watched from his stool inside their dusty little hut. “You wish to cross into Valdemar? Please state your business.”

The young woman dismounted gracefully. She was quite pretty, dark hair and eyes and a stubborn chin. *She looks foreign*, he thought. The cut of her clothing was unfamiliar, and though it was dusty and travel-worn, it looked like it had once been fine.

“To your commanding officer I wish to speak,” she said in a strong Karsite accent.

*Well, that is not what I expected to happen today.* He froze for a second, his heart jumping – but they clearly weren’t a military party. There were about twenty people with her, mostly women, two of them carrying children.

Prescott stared blankly at her; he wasn’t the brightest young man. Jareth had already slipped from the stool. He sidled up to Prescott’s shoulder. “I’ve got this,” he murmured. “Please go find Mari.” She had been out here the longest of any of them, nearly two years, and she was older and had a level head. And was female.

Prescott nodded and trudged off.

Jareth faced the woman. Up close she was older than he’d first thought, maybe twenty-five. There was a flat, weary look in her eyes; he recognized it, from Guards who had been on the front for a long time.

He took a deep breath. “My name is Lieutenant Jareth,” he said, in Karsite – he had been practicing. “What are you doing here, and how can I help you?”

A surprised, quick smile darted across her lips and was gone. She drew herself up, and spoke in Karsite as well. “My name is Karis. I am the last surviving heir to the throne of Karse, which has been usurped by our priesthood. I know that you do not have authority to

speaking for your King Randale, but I would like you to send a message to him. To tell him that I remember our meeting, three-and-some years ago. That I would like this foolish war to have been over years ago, but since this was not the case, I would like to speak to him of alliance, and of whether Valdemar might help me to take my country back.”

\* \* \*