

Dreamdrifter
Book Two of the Sylvan Cycle series

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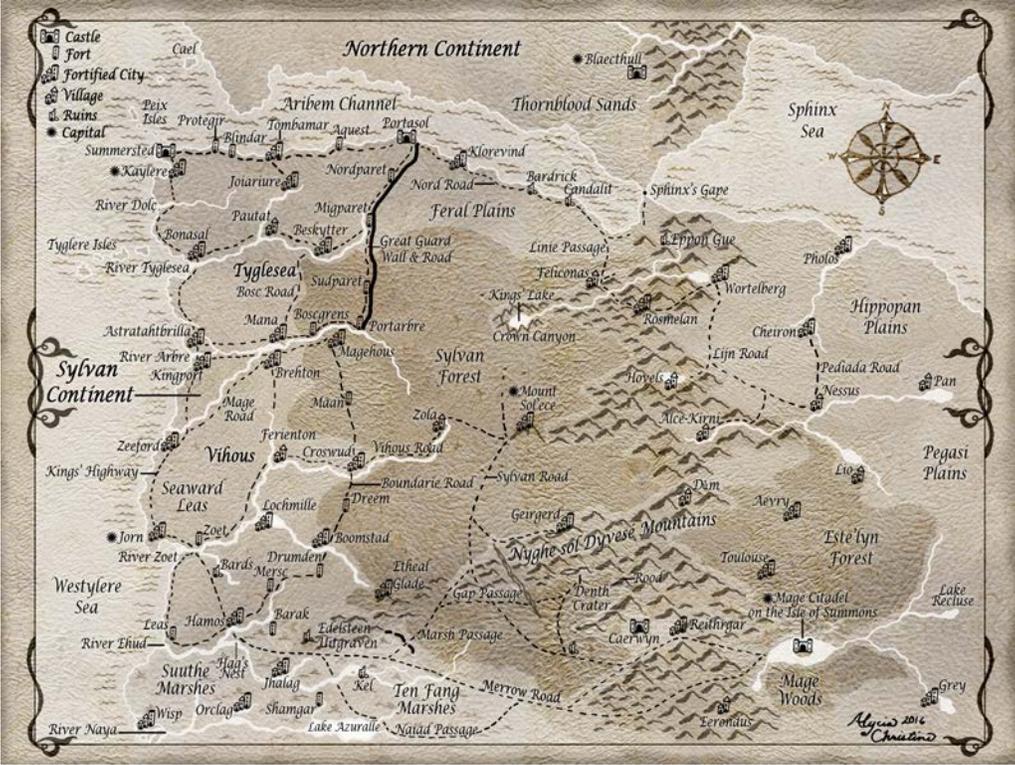
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Map of the Sylvan Continent,
End of the Third Age



Prologue

My Lord Daeryn, I am sorry to keep you waiting,” King Kaylor’s personal envoy said, in what he hoped was an even tone of voice as they greeted each other with a bow. He was struck by how much of Marga’s visage was reflected in this handsome male’s appearance.

“With all due respect, Your Excellency, I had expected to meet with His Majesty this evening, not you,” Daeryn said.

The ghoulish Curqak suppressed the tremor of fear that coursed through him at hearing something so close to Caleb’s voice after all these years. Instead the envoy affected an urbane smile—tight-lipped to hide his pointed, yellow teeth—and gestured for his guest to take a seat in a nearby chair. “Of course, my apologies, Good Sir, but I’m afraid no one sees King Kaylor without speaking with me first, as is the age-old custom of the Tyglesean Royal Court. Now, you did state that the matter in question was urgent, so shall we come to it at last?”

Daeryn narrowed his eyes, but sat nonetheless. As Curqak sat down opposite his guest, he felt sudden sweat bead up through the heavy makeup cloaking his ashen face and black-tipped ears. Would Daeryn be able to sense the decrepit state of his body underneath all the finery, just as Daeryn’s mother had? If Daeryn discerned him to be a deadwalker...but no, the male was now busying himself with repositioning a chair cushion and surely couldn’t smell the charnel scent masked by Curqak’s heavy perfume...

“Where is my mother?” Daeryn asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“My mother Marga disappeared over a year ago. She was last seen in this kingdom, so where...precisely...is she?”

Daeryn leaned close into Curqak’s painted face and, in doing so, revealed that he too wore makeup to cover his pallid features, and had styled his long black hair to cover the black tips of his pointed ears. Could the rumors possibly be true? Was there more of the vampires’ lineage than either the elves or humans in this hybrid that should have never been able to be conceived?

Curqak gulped hard, but did not break gaze with Daeryn’s penetrating blue eyes. “She did of course come here to speak with the king and queen, My Sir, but it has been more than eleven months since she left our borders.”

“Going where?”

“The guards told me she and her entourage rode northeast. I presumed she would return home to your family once her task here was complete.”

“Why did she come here?”

Curqak feigned shock and dismay. “Well, of course to discuss ongoing negotiations between the Ring of Sorcerers and the king.”

Daeryn sat back heavily in his chair, rubbing the faint stubble on his chin with a gloved hand and frowning.

“I’m sorry I can’t be of more help, Master Daeryn,” Curqak said consolingly. “But that is all I know.”

They sat in silence as a servant placed a silver tray laden with mulled wine, mead, bread, cheese, and fruit on the table nearest them and then left the palace chamber. Curqak lazily watched her shut the large door and then turned to survey the food. Normally he made a good show of eating and drinking with guests, purging himself in privacy soon afterward. Today, however, he doubted such a show of normalcy was necessary. After all, if the rumors were true,

then Daeryn likely consumed nothing but blood just as Curqak did and therefore would not touch this proffered fare.

Daeryn surprised him by walking to the table and pouring wine for himself and his host. “Forgive me, Excellency, but when did you say my mother left the country?”

“Oh, about ten or eleven months ago.”

“And she was traveling which direction at the time?” Daeryn said as he turned back toward Curqak. He handed the envoy a silver goblet even as he drank from his own.

After a sip, Curqak frowned down at the liquid; it was more acrid than usual, but it gave him a nice warm tingle inside his body. He smiled and took another swig. Of course he would have to rid his stomach of it soon, but the discomfort of retching later seemed a fair trade for the comforting feeling he was enjoying just now. *I certainly must speak with the sommelier about procuring more of this particular vintage*, he thought.

Daeryn cleared his throat. “Your Excellency?”

“Hmm?”

“You said that my mother traveled southeast out of the country?”

Curqak nodded after another greedy gulp.

“You lie.”

Curqak froze mid-swallow and stared at Daeryn over the rim of his cup. The hybrid had taken off his gloves and his green cloak and kicked them out of his way as he seized the emissary by his embroidered doublet. Curqak’s goblet clattered to the limestone tile floor as Daeryn yanked him off of his feet. The envoy heard fabric tear and watched as two huge, pale dragon-like wings emerged from the hybrid’s back. Three flaps of those membrane pinions thrust the two of them high into the air and out of the open balcony doors. Curqak shrieked as they flew beyond Castle Summersted’s ramparts and on over the rolling sea.

“Scream if you wish, but none can rescue your worthless hide here, deadwalker.” Daeryn’s eyes were like smoldering embers. His lips parted to reveal a pair of growing white fangs as he clenched the trembling ghoul in one hand and kindled a fireforger’s yellow flame with the other.

“Please, please! Spare me, I beg of you!” Curqak shouted as the wind roared passed his black-tipped ears.

“Why should I?” Daeryn shouted back as he pumped his wings, pushing them still higher into the sky.

The ghoul could feel his face begin to warm. The makeup was the only reason that the delicate skin of his cheeks and ears had not yet blistered in the dreadful sunlight. “I will tell you anything you want to know!”

“Oh, that you certainly will. I have already seen to that by drugging the wine.”

“I will do anything you ask of me short of betraying my own master, which I will not do.”

“Then name yourself!”

“I am called Curqak both by my former master Calais and by my current master.”

“You were once my father’s servant? Before he was Redeemed?”

“Yes. I was given to your father as a gift by my current master, so that he could learn how to perfect the vampire’s bite of servitude. I became his first bitten and most loyal valet until our souls’ tie was broken by his Redemption.”

“Name your current master, ghoul.”

“The Víchí High Elder Luther.”

“And what assignment did Luther give to you?”

“First, to hunt down and bring to him the twelve Keystones of legend; second, to Turn or kill all suspected fulfillers of Third Age Prophecy.”

“And how did you get past the enchantments protecting the Sylvan Continent from entry?”

Curqak moaned as he realized they had flown past the shore and out over the waves of the accursed sea. He retched in spite of himself. “A Tyglosean traitor smuggled me here in the bowels of his ship. It was the worst torture I have yet experienced.”

“‘Yet’ being the operative word, ghoul.” Daeryn snarled. “After the tales I’ve heard of your achievements during the Second War of Ages, you deserve that torture and much more.” They were descending now, swooping toward a tiny island a mere league beyond the shore’s jagged gray cliffs. They landed smoothly amid the dunes and then Daeryn hauled a now trembling and whimpering Curqak to the edge of the sea. Despite the power of the incoming waves, Daeryn stood firm as he held his victim over the water. Curqak winced as he felt the salty spray on his flailing legs.

“Listen to me carefully, Curqak. You will tell me everything I want to know or I will burn your face with the weakest fireforger’s flame while setting your legs in the churning sea. Do you understand?”

Curqak gulped.

“Good,” Daeryn almost purred. “I found the ashes and bodies of Mother’s escorts and of deadwalkers not three leagues from Castle Caerwyn, but Marga’s remains were not among them. So what have you done with my mother?”

“She was taken to Luther’s stronghold on the Northern Continent for questioning.”

“Blaecthull? Why?”

Curqak grimaced. “She is the keeper of the Keystones, but she would not tell me where she had hidden them. Luther has better ways of loosening her tongue than I.”

“And he would risk the presence of a fireforger that powerful in his own fortress? He must be insane! She could lay waste to the entire keep and every deadwalker in it with ease!”

Curqak nodded. “Marga certainly tried. Fortunately, there is a water cave there, which is strong enough to subdue her. After all, she is not like you and has only fireforging magic at her beck and call.”

“And so she is Luther’s captive.” Anguish crept into Daeryn’s gaze then. “What will it take to free her?”

Curqak felt a glimmer of triumph deep within his foggy mind. Was it possible that he might ensnare this male, just as he had trapped his mother? “Master Luther will likely want a trade: either the twelve Keystones in place of Marga or another captive of equal importance.”

“Do you know the whereabouts of the Keystones?”

Curqak shook his head, his eyes squinted shut with the pain of the searing sun and the swirling sea. “I discovered one—the Firesprite’s Sapphire, which Marga had brought to the priesthood here to protect; she did not trust other members of the General Council of Mages. Before I could attain it, Queen Manasa’s youngest brat ran off with the jewel and I cannot find her!”

Daeryn frowned. “So it must be a trade of beings then.”

“Likely, but I’m uncertain who Master Luther would consider worthy of exchange.”

Daeryn pursed his lips over shrinking fangs as he extinguished the flame in his clawed left hand and pulled the dangling Curqak away from the water with his right. When the hybrid released the ghoul, the deadwalker fell trembling to his knees in the dry sand. Before Curqak could think to flee, however, Daeryn shoved him onto his back and pinned him flat under his

own heavier bulk. Daeryn forced the ghoul's mouth open and dripped an amber liquid from one of his claws down the back of the deadwalker's raw throat.

Heat shot through Curqak's body and every muscle felt invigorated with warmth. He smiled as he felt his inert heart begin to beat a strong, steady rhythm. How long had it been since he had truly felt warm or alive? When had he died? It must have been hundreds of winters ago, but now the ghoul could barely remember it. The full-powered serum made his mind fuzzy and his body limp, but he no longer cared as he reveled in this newfound comfort.

"Ask me anything, Master Daeryn," he whispered.

Daeryn's answering smile was cold. "Tell me *exactly* how my father successfully Turned you."

Chapter I Shade Shifting

Felan!”

It was not a yell so much as a scream that brought the huge human male barreling half-naked into the opulent bedchamber. The full moon’s eerie rays illuminated the room through its stained-glass windows, casting everything within it in a blood-tinged hue, including the screaming human now backing away from the source of her fear.

The lioness snarled at the one called Felan in warning just before a pale-skinned male and a green-skinned dryad ran into the room after him. The two nearly trod on Felan’s heels when he halted just beyond the servant door.

“Katja?” Felan faltered as he gaped at the lioness.

The lioness’s emerald eyes met the intruder’s troubled gaze, challenging him to come closer and risk the wrath of her claws as she fought to free herself from the jumbled tunic and loincloth now restraining her. Katja yowled in frustration as she twisted and turned.

“Felan, Dayalan, do something!” Lauraisha said as she pulled on her waist-length auburn hair in agitation. The chemise-garbed human edged toward the group. “Katja’s gone mad!”

Felan just continued to stare. “I didn’t think it possible for her even to become a lioness—not yet, at least! She has never skinshifted into erdeling form so fully before. Until her mind gains control over her new bestial instincts, she’s very dangerous.”

“Really? We hadn’t noticed,” exclaimed Zahra. The dryad’s jade-hued lips curled with her sarcasm even as her fingers wrapped more firmly around her sunsilver sickle.

“I suggest we make a slow, steady retreat,” Dayalan murmured, nudging the two females protectively behind him as he raised his sunsilver staff into a defensive position.

Katja had begun to tear at the cumbersome clothing entrapping her transformed body, her curved claws and fangs shredding both linen and leather with uncanny ease. Malevolent eyes turned back toward the odd cluster of beings slowly retreating through the servants’ door as she kicked off the last offending rag. Tail thumping the floor in warning, she stalked the intruders.

She smelled their foul stench all around this strange den. How dare they invade her territory! The lioness focused on the pale elf with long black head-fur. Instinct demanded that she deal with the one called Dayalan first. The breeze from the room’s open window blowing the Erdeken pack’s scents more strongly toward her keen nose. Katja stopped in sudden confusion, testing the new aromas. Horse blood and wolf fur as well as vegetation tickled her awareness. The scents were familiar, almost comforting, but strange to associate with the beings standing before her.

“Lauraisha, now might be a good time to use that uncanny talent of yours,” said Felan. He was larger than the other male and smelled more of wolves than of humans.

How odd, the lioness thought.

“I tried!” Lauraisha whimpered.

Dayalan gripped his blood-scented staff harder even as he and the others retreated through the door. “Try again.”

Katja’s maw curled in a silent snarl at Dayalan’s challenge and then relaxed slightly in confusion as emotions not her own brushed the edge of her awareness. Thoughts of kinship and affection floated through her thoughts in contrast to her own raw rage and frustration. The

skinshifted lioness's mind dredged up a new well of memories more complex and intense than her bestial instincts could dominate.

Katja stared at Lauraisha and cocked her head, remembering the Tyglesean Princess smiling as she offered the skinshifter a fish, and then showing her the curious contraption of string and stick that she had used to catch it. She turned her gaze toward Zahra, and remembered her red hair looking almost aflame with the setting sun's rays as she strode toward Katja in the royal linen garb of her odd feminine race. Of the tallest human saturated with wolf scents, she remembered another full moon's night when Felan had comforted her after she had skinshifted beside an artificial water spring...a fountain, it was called. But the half-human who reeked of horse blood only brought forth memories of vile red eyes and crimson-streaked fangs. Flashes assaulted her mind of Dayalan's face contorted in gleeful lust as he drank his fill of blood from a horse. The lioness crouched in sudden hate and fear, her guttural growl forming a single snarled word: "Víchí!"

She roared and launched herself at the vampire fiend before he could close the door against her.

"Katja! No!"

Princess Lauraisha flung herself in front of Dayalan, a hand raised against the lioness. A blast of scarlet flame burst from her delicate fingertips, searing the lioness's golden fur. Katja felt the terrible heat even as her claws sliced skin.

"Lauraisha!" the Víchí and dryad screamed in unison.

"I'm bleeding..." the human fireforger murmured. She stared in dumb fascination at her tattered arm and chest before crumbling to the floor.

Squinting in agony, Katja roared as Dayalan knelt over Lauraisha's still body. He snarled at the werecat, his blue eyes now glowing scarlet as he watched her. Both Felan and Princess Zahra flanked him with their weapons ready so that Katja could find no opening through which to attack again.

The skinshifter roared at them in rage, her voice nearly rattling the teeth in their maws. Then she finally found words. "Turncoats!"

"Who's the traitor, Katja!" Felan, the skinshifter mage, shouted. "Look at what you've done to her!"

Katja focused on the blood-streaked human near Felan's bare feet. Cold recognition doused the lioness's ire. She had often considered this human princess to be her dearest friend and sister—when her thoughts were coherent.

Lauraisha, she thought. No!

She watched with sudden fear as Dayalan stripped his gloves off to reveal black claws. A strange mix of expressions washed across his pallid face as he knelt to apply pressure to the now unconscious girl's wounds—anger, fear, and a terrible hunger. His talon-like hands began to tremble as he held them against Lauraisha's slashed chest.

"Zahra..."

The dryad princess glanced at the half-breed enigma questioningly.

"Bring bandages, rags, anything so she won't bleed to death."

The dryad blanched a paler green than usual and sprinted into the neighboring bedchamber. She returned moments later with linen bed sheets, a satchel of herbs, and a dagger. As she knelt beside Dayalan to examine the damage, the rug underneath Lauraisha turned from pale green to a sickening maroon.

"There's no organ damage, just semi-deep gashes..." Zahra whispered.

Together she and Dayalan shredded the cloth and bound the princess's chest and left arm while Felan stood watch over a now mewling Katja. From somewhere in the dark recesses of the lioness's mind, a baleful voice as deep as Dayalan's began laughing.

How brave are you now, little changeling? Now that I have taught you true fear?

Katja stared, startled, at Dayalan, but he had not spoken. She looked at her victim and swallowed hard. The lioness backed away from the carnage. She was suddenly chilled even though the skin of her shoulder still felt afire. "What done?" Katja asked in broken Shryde.

"What indeed, Katja!" snapped Dayalan.

The lioness scooped up her own torn clothes with her maw and laid them at Felan's bare feet.

"Me...skinshift wounds close?"

"After you went to the trouble of opening them in the first place? No, absolutely not!" Felan snapped after a moment's work to comprehend her. "I'll heal her—if you can control your wretched instincts long enough for me to turn my back on you."

Katja flinched at his harsh rebuke.

"I'll watch her, Felan," Dayalan said while Zahra mixed an herb poultice to use in soaking the human's bandages. "Come quickly!"

The males exchanged places and the skinshifter mage laid his large hands on the female. After a last baleful look at Katja, Felan closed his eyes and gained an expression of profound concentration. His hands seemed to almost seep between the flesh and bone of Lauraisha's sternum. A curious scent of spicy warmth pervaded the room.

Katja perked her rounded ears and prayed silently for the Creator's aid. Her erdeling instincts still screamed at her to defend her territory, but she maintained her low crouch under Dayalan's wary eye.

A curious blue light glowed beneath Felan's palms, and suddenly Damya erupted from the amulet between his pressed fingers. Without a word, the firesprite also laid her tiny hands in healing upon Lauraisha's ravaged chest and arm. Together they closed the gashes, lacing the female's small body with skinshifting and fireforging magic.

The Mage Citadel's bell tolled once as they finished their work. Zahra unwound the seasoned bandages and added fresh poultice to the angry red scabs. Although the healing seemed to have succeeded, Lauraisha still did not wake.

"She has lost too much blood," the little blue firesprite whispered, gently smoothing the female's hair out of her ashen face. "Best to get her to the Healing Ward now that you can safely move her."

"Will she live?" Katja asked and suddenly felt four sets of scornful eyes upon her.

Damya surveyed Katja with a cold glare as Felan began to move the human princess. "She will need time to fully heal, and time is a luxury we do not have. Her body must remake the blood that she lost tonight thanks to you. That is no easy task. She may yet come down with sickness before this is finished. At the very least, we will have to once again postpone the upcoming mission to Tyglesea until she heals, and thus risk even more lives in the process."

Katja mewled. "I am sorry, so sorry."

"Zahra, call the guards!" Dayalan's flames flared. "Tell them to get this changeling out of my sight or I will finish the scorching that Lauraisha began!"

The whimpering lioness pushed past Zahra as she opened the bedchamber door to yell for aid and dashed down the granite corridor—evading guardians and mage pupils alike as Daeryn's triumphant laughter echoed through her thoughts.

* * *

Katja Escari stared across the cold waters of the moonlit lake and wished with all her being that she could cry. Her worthless lioness body allowed no tears to be shed, however, so she simply lay in the cold mud, voicing her misery with soft, shuddering moans. For the past two hours, she had watched the Citadel's guardian squads hunt for her from her hiding place under a shelf of rock near the lakeshore. The stench of rotting vegetation had masked her scent while her golden-furred body was easily blended among the yellowed stalks of the pond reeds. Occasionally she heard the guardians' nearby whispers and considered surrendering herself, but feared to communicate with anyone while under Daeryn's influence. Even now, she could feel the faint echoes of his laughter in the corner of her mind.

"Katja?"

She screeched when his deep voice penetrated her thoughts again—this time not mentally but audibly.

"I'm sorry. I did not wish to frighten you."

The tone was too kind to be Daeryn's. Katja released a sigh of relief mixed with grief as Dayalan cautiously approached her hiding place.

"Is Lauraisha...?"

"The harmhealers think she'll live."

"Are you here to imprison me then?" she asked as he stopped several body-lengths away, peering at her warily through the plants as she lay before him.

"You despise me," she said.

"I—"

"Don't try to deny it. I know you do! How could you not after what I've done?" Her rounded ears drooped further in defeat.

Dayalan hesitated, and then crawled to sit beside her—his black boots sliding in the stinking, gray muck. "Actually, I came to beg your forgiveness."

The lioness shifted and looked up at him in surprise. His countenance was both sincere and somber. "For what? Do you think what I did is somehow your fault?"

Dayalan shook his head. "No, I suppose not, although my presence tonight certainly worsened the situation."

Katja snorted at the hybrid. "I would have mauled Lauraisha whether you were present or not. You, at the least, distracted me long enough for her to try to reason with me, for all the good that did. And you were able to protect her from further harm."

Dayalan shifted uneasily. "I offer my apologies not for my actions, but for my attitude. I treated you abysmally tonight when I, of all beings, should be able to empathize with your lapse of sanity."

"I deserve no empathy." Katja laid her head back on her paws. "My behavior nearly cost my dearest friend her life!"

"I did not say that I condoned your loss of control, Katja, only that I understand it."

Katja peered at him in sudden curiosity. "How did you find me?"

Dayalan tapped the sunsilver spearhead hanging from his neck with his black-gloved right hand. Katja squinted down at her own spearhead. Despite being caked in mud, the broken spearhead's center mirror shard still clearly reflected her bestial face within its scarlet depths.

"Yours has been whispering to mine ever since you fled the Citadel," he added.

Katja felt her shard pull toward Dayalan's, sliding the spearhead point through the muck. She closed her eyes and let out a breath between clenched fangs. "I heard Daeryn's laughter in my mind after I attacked Lauraisha."

Dayalan's body stiffened at the mention of his twin brother's name. "Did Verdagon come to you, then?"

The lioness shook her head.

Dayalan was silent, but his brow was creased with worry. "I thought you were cured of Daeryn's influence."

"So did I. Apparently, our bond flows much deeper than I had imagined." She shuddered.

"More than anything else, his presence would help explain your behavior tonight. Does he still manipulate your thoughts?"

Katja shook her head. "He's gone...for now."

"You must explain this to the dragon, Katja. Surely Verdagon will know how to mend this."

"Maybe." Katja sighed and looked away.

They sat in silence until Dayalan finally spoke again. "Regardless of anything else, Lauraisha is alive and that is what matters."

The catch in Dayalan's voice made her glance sidelong at his haggard face. Unshed tears stood in the corners of his azure eyes. Surprised at his sudden display of emotion, the lioness quickly averted her gaze. She resumed her study of the cold lake to give Dayalan some privacy as he wept. They sat quietly together for a long while before Katja finally gathered enough resolve to speak on the issue weighing down her mood.

"You do know that Lauraisha is very fond of you, don't you?" she asked.

Dayalan's sniff was barely perceptible. "I admire her as well. She's quite a courageous female...highly intelligent, kind, a skilled warrior..."

"I know your sentiment for her runs deeper than simple admiration, Dayalan." Katja's green eyes stared unblinking at the male's now guarded façade.

"Of course I deeply value her friendship, Katja. She has stood loyal to me, as have you, during some of my worst moods. A rare number of beings are fearless enough—or foolish enough—to show such loyalty to a blood-drinker like me."

"We do so because we know your true worth, Dayalan, even if others do not...even if you do not."

"My true worth..." The hybrid gazed at her a moment. "You consider me worth your loyalty even after the way you reacted to me tonight? When you finally recognized my face, your expression was the same look of fear and hatred that you had given me the moment we met at Caerwyn Castle. You thought me a vampire then; you saw me tonight as the same."

"That wasn't me, Dayalan. How could it be after I nearly killed...?"

"That was my basic point earlier, Katja," the fireforger hybrid said gently. "You were no more in your right mind than I am when I thirst..."

He cleared his throat then and rubbed a trembling hand over his pale brow.

She stared at him. "Are you well?"

He shook his head. "I must visit Tyron tonight."

The skinshifter lioness watched him a moment. His admission told her more than she wanted to know. The horse Tyron was Dayalan's bloodmate—the erdeling beast from whom he gained his main sustenance. When Daeryn had killed the wolf Bren, Tyron was the only beast who could survive Dayalan's need for nourishment. The memory of that first feeding still made Katja

shudder. The fact that Dayalan needed to visit the horse tonight told her that his seeing Lauraisha's bloody condition had affected the hybrid more deeply than he cared to admit.

"I saw the way you looked at Lauraisha tonight, Dayalan—as if you might lose everything if she..." She shook herself out of her sudden melancholy and persevered to her point. "You love her, don't you?" She asked as she watched him with narrowed eyes.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

Dayalan abruptly stood. "Katja, I hardly think this is the time for an attempt at matchmaking."

Katja's tail thumped the ground hard in warning, but Dayalan had already turned his back to her and began to stride away.

"Ah, so you do care for her very deeply, then," she called after his retreating form. "Perhaps far more than you think you should."

Dayalan stopped and whirled to face her, his look venomous. "If you inform anyone of this—"

"Don't threaten me, Dayalan," she snarled while bounding to his side. "Her actions tonight—as foolish as they were—no doubt proved her love for you. I had once feared that my dearest friend's soul might be torn by unreturned love. However, I see now that will not be the case."

"No, instead her soul will be tarnished by something far worse," he whispered, almost to himself. Dayalan shook his head and said, "Her feelings for me are but the whims of a youth and will soon pass to a more fitting suitor."

Katja shook her head. "You are wrong, Dayalan," she said gently. "Lauraisha's affinity for you will do nothing if not grow. She may be young, but she has an old soul. She has seen you in her dreams since before she knew me. We both saw you battle your brother through the Ott vre Caerwyn mirror. She saw your true nobility then and she understands you better than any other being—including yourself."

"I know the dreams you speak of; Lauraisha showed them to me when we first met. It makes no difference." His tone was flat. "Lauraisha has seen barely sixteen winters whilst this winter is my thirty-sixth. If I chose to love a female, I would choose someone closer to my own age. Even so, I can never allow myself to be so vulnerable with another—that is far too dangerous a temptation. I should have thought that you, of all beings, would understand this."

Katja watched his hardened gaze in sadness. "I understand it, but I don't agree with it. You are not your brother."

Dayalan's eyes flashed scarlet as he turned and extended his dragon-like wings from beneath his wool cloak. "Besides a single arm scar, how can you even tell the pair of us apart?" He growled and launched himself into the night sky.

Katja sat watching his fleeing figure until Dayalan was no more than the merest dark speck among the low winter clouds. Once again she wished she could cry.

"You, there! Halt!" Katja spun in surprise at the centaur's voice. Her conversation with Dayalan had caused her to momentarily forget that the Citadel guardians were hunting her. The centaur stopped a safe distance away with his fighting staff leveled at her tawny chest.

Katja stared at the male and blinked in sudden recognition. It was rare to see her sparring partner in his guardian uniform. "Garret?"

"Katja Escari, you are commanded to attend an audience with the High Pyrekin, Dragon Prince Verdagon. You must return to the Citadel with me at once."

Katja's ears twitched in annoyance. "Calm down, Garret. I am my sane self once again and I'm not going to fight an arrest, especially when you're the one making it."

Garret looked visibly relieved, but still stood his ground. She walked slowly toward him and then sat on her haunches in the least threatening posture she could hold while in the form of a lioness. "You do realize that Verdagon isn't a prince."

Garret grimaced. "Sorry. Verdagon doesn't seem to prefer titles, so it was the best one I could think up at the moment."

Katja cocked her head. "I guess a Pyrekin could be considered regal even if he doesn't hold the title. May I make myself somewhat presentable before you take me to him?"

The centaur nodded his head once in consent. Katja sighed, pushed herself into the lake, and rinsed the stinking silt out of her fur. After the water had washed away the worst of the filth, Katja quickly shook herself free of moisture and hurried back to Garret. As the cold air whipped around her, the skinshifter was quite certain she would never be warm again.

The centaur led her along the beach toward the Mage Citadel's tallest tower where the hidden entrance to the lower dwarf-mined cavern existed. Garret and Katja searched out the cave's staircase and then wordlessly descended into its craggy depths.

The winding labyrinth eventually opened into an antechamber adjacent to the ancient Hatching Cavern. The chamber was large enough to accommodate hundreds of eggs hardening on its volcanic-heated sands. Katja's eyes focused on the various carvings of each egg-bearing Sylvan race: accipions, griffins, harpies, hippogriffs, lamia, sercaps, and the much-maligned girtab. The early part of the Second Age had seen almost every female from all the land-walking Sylvan races hatch their young in the safety of the Isle of Summons. Now, however, the Hatching Cavern stood empty, with the exception of Verdagon. He was the first dragon to be hatched in the cavern in a millennium.

How long had it been since a Sylvan or Pyrekin had been hatched on these grounds? Four centuries? Five? The werecat's thoughts wandered to Aria and the rest of the Forgotten Races holed up behind the protective ramparts of Caerwyn Castle under the protection of Dayalan and Daeryn's father Caleb. Would the girtab ever be able to lay her egg-bound young here in solace? Would King Canuche ever see his all-but-extinct griffin race return to their former splendor? Katja fervently hoped such would be the case, but only the Creator knew these answers.

"Katja, come!"

The dragon's booming voice rocked the lioness out of her reverie. She broke into a run—bounding ahead of Garret across the warm black dunes until she pushed past the crackling magic barrier of the Ring Spells, past the observation stands, and onto the Hatching Chamber's main grounds. She stopped when she saw the green-scaled dragon in all his iridescent majesty and bowed low, touching her head to her outstretched front paws. Verdagon had almost tripled in size since his hatching barely a moon-cycle before and would very soon be large enough to bear the weight of his chosen steward—her.

"What troubles you, Katja?"

For a moment she said nothing as she saw the elf Vraelth appear around Verdagon's bulk and bow to her. He was holding a scrub brush. She returned the bow and then looked at him, puzzled.

"My herald was kind enough to relieve some of my more terrible itches this evening," Verdagon said in answer to Katja's unspoken question.

If Katja had had the ability to blush in her present lioness form, she would have done so. Keeping the growing dragon's hide free of sloughed-off skin and scales was a steward's job, not a herald's.

"I am so sorry, Verdagon. I have failed."

She meant the phrase as all-encompassing, and indicated such to the dragon through their mental link. The dragon, however, gave her as gentle of a smile as he could around his long white fangs.

"Nonsense, Steward, you couldn't very well take care of all my itching in your current form. After all, you have no thumbs with which to grip the brush!" Dragon's booming laughter made the jagged cave roof shudder.

Vraelth meanwhile set the brush down and stepped from the Pyrekin's side. "I believe I should take my leave, My Lord."

"As should I, my lord," Garret said. "If my services are no longer needed, that is."

The dragon dipped his angular head toward the elf once in agreement. "Go see to Lauraisha's well-being, please. Katja and I have much to discuss. And, Garret, your services are always needed, but at present they are not required. I hear your stomach grumbling, so go find something for yourself in the kitchens."

"Thank you, My Lord." Garret said smiling. The centaur bowed deeply and then trotted up the main steps leading out of the Hatching Cavern.

Once Garret was gone, Vraelth bowed. "Thank you for our time together, My Sir."

Verdagon smiled again and touched the hard tip of his snout to Vraelth's outstretched fingers in an affectionate farewell. The dragon watched as his chosen elf herald followed the centaur across the grounds and did not turn to gaze at his steward until the charmchanter mage and Citadel guardian had disappeared up the steep interior stairs.

"I chose well. He is an excellent herald and will prove an asset to our fellowship."

Katja bowed her head and waited.

"Katja, how badly did Lauraisha burn you?"

Katja felt sick. "I suppose Damya conveyed to you what happened tonight, My Sir?"

"She did." Verdagon's answering expression was grim. "We must see to those wounds soon. First, however, I need to examine your mind again. I must delve deeper than I have before and it will likely cause you some pain."

Katja nodded glumly. "I deserve it, My Sir."

Verdagon shook his reptilian head, concern flashing in his eyes. "No, I'm fairly certain you do not. This is meant for your protection, not your punishment. Come and sit quietly before me, close your eyes, and breathe deep breaths. My work will go faster if you can calm your thoughts."

The lioness obeyed. The dragon bent close to her until his snout almost touched her forehead. White fire arced between Katja's forehead and Verdagon's nose as the dragon's consciousness brushed the skinshifter's awareness. Neither the light nor the blue-white fire actually harmed her, but they did hurt. Instead of fighting the piercing pain, the skinshifter tried to allow the pain to find a concentrated point in the front of her mind. As the pain culminated, she ground her fangs together and drew the light into the core of her mental awareness, creating a sort of doorway through which Verdagon could enter.

The tendrils of his thoughts wove into the familiar places at the center of her awareness, and then wound their way outward from there, seeking to reveal all that was hidden. Katja felt the darkest edges of her existence lit by the being's fire and felt sudden shame at the memories and

thoughts lurking there. Mistakes and wrongs and revolting ideas shrank away from the Pyrekin's purity, and yet were held captive to his power. A sudden desire overwhelmed Katja to purge the spiritual dross thus illuminated within her, and yet Katja knew she was powerless to do so alone. Despair gripped her as she watched her most recent atrocity against Lauraisha once again unfold before Verdagon's mental eye, and she began to mewl.

She was suddenly aware of another presence linked to her mind—a ruined crimson darkness in contrast to Verdagon's white light. Daeryn's darkness. It grew faint as Verdagon neared it—diminishing to a single thread. Yet it would not completely recede, no matter how the dragon fought it. Instead, a chilling laughter echoed in her thoughts.

“Verdagon, what is happening to me?” A paralyzing fear traveled through her body and she felt a simultaneous shudder run its course through Verdagon.

Verdagon's countenance was grave. “This is troubling indeed. Your wraithwalker training must be intensified immediately. Otherwise you cannot hope to protect yourself or others from the evil that has beset you.”

Katja huddled close to the ground as she fought to control the tremors now coursing through her. “What do you mean?”

The dragon growled low and then asked, “Katja, would you show me what you remember of the night that you fought Daeryn?”

Katja recalled her memory of the night of the full moon when Daeryn's attacked the packmates' camp. She shuddered as she remembered him slaughtering the white wolf Bren, before he had almost killed Felan and herself...

*

“No! I will not go to Luther!” Katja had screamed.

She struggled wildly, trying to break Daeryn's grasp as they flew high over the forest. She would rather fall to her death than be Turned and forced to serve evil like her brother Kayten.

The vampire snarled and wrapped his arms even tighter around his prey. “Then perhaps you would do well to bond with me instead.”

Katja snarled her defiance and then shrieked as Daeryn's fangs pierced her throat. Incomprehensible pain penetrated her senses as his Taint pervaded her body and then invaded her brain through the blood feeding it. The screams of her packmates echoed distantly in her ears until a cold darkness expelled all external awareness. She felt her soul writhe in protest as a new voice spoke inside the depths of her mind.

Bond with me, Katja.

The voice compelled her obedience and yet a part of her soul felt something innately wrong with its entreaties.

Turn, Katja, Turn... Bond with me and Turn...

The voice was seductive—his words so tempting, like honey on the lips of a lover. The cold darkness deepened and she felt her soul sink with unfathomable weight. In the depths of that darkness, an unquenchable thirst she had never known was unleashed and raw power ravaged her being. She was changing, awakening, and hungering for more...

“Katja, come back to me!”

Felan? A vision flashed before her of Felan still in the form of a full wolf lying in a bloody heap at the base of a tree. The vision changed to show Dayalan as he shattered the Ott vre Caerwyn bearing Daeryn's laughing face with his sunsilver staff.

Katja, break his hold! Break Daeryn's hold over you!

Dayalan's deep voice resonated through her mind, but then hideous laughter drowned it out. Daeryn's triumphant pleasure echoed in her mind. He was changing her not into a zombie soul slave or a nemean soul servant, but into the very thing she loathed most—a vampire like himself.

Yes, Katja. Feed me more. More! Let me drain you dry...

Katja tried to push back Daeryn's voice, to fight the cold hunger raging within her, but she was too overwhelmed to prevent the change now consuming her. And the darkest part of her soul craved more. In desperation she cried out to the heavens, "Creator, I love you! I cannot save myself! Save me!"

Daeryn's cold laughter continued to ring in her mind, but a sudden warmth seeped back into her bones. The darkness weighing down her soul began to waver and then it cracked as a soothing blue-white light—Verdagon's fire—blazed against its barrier. As the hunger died, situational awareness flooded back into her mind. The darkness finally shattered—dispersed by the light. She felt Daeryn's claws still clutching her tightly, but discovered that his fangs no longer pierced her neck. She tentatively opened her eyes and found herself hovering just above the treetops. Her captor was trembling and she heard his mental voice suddenly scream as their souls' connection broke. Daeryn's grip loosened and Katja instinctively knew her moment had come.

She writhed against his grip with all her strength and plunged the sunsilver-and-mirror-shard spearhead into the chest wound made by Zahra's earlier arrow. Daeryn convulsed and instinctively flew backward—breaking off the spear tip in the process. When he did so, Katja wrenched the remainder of her spear point out of his jerkin. Then she had fallen toward the safety of the trees below her...

*

"Thank you, Katja."

The trembling skinshifter pushed her mind away from the abominable memory and gazed at the dragon once more. "Why did you make me relive that?"

"Your memory clarifies a few things that mine cannot. I was still bound inside the egg when I helped you escape Daeryn's bite, so I had no knowledge of the spearhead breaking off in Daeryn's chest; I only knew about Daeryn's attempt to Turn you into a deadwalker vampire like himself."

"How is the spearhead significant?"

"The spearhead was forged long ago from one of my predecessors' sunsilver hoards. Dragons are some of the few Pyrekin who take on a fully physical form when we enter the Erde Realm, and so our bones have long been used as a catalyst to intensify magic. The same, of course, can be said of sunsilver and of bloodstones. My belief is that when you stabbed Dayalan's brother with your sunsilver-and-mirror-shard spearhead, you did so before I had managed to completely sever the ties between the two of you. With some help from your innate wraithwalking magic, I was able to keep Daeryn from Turning you. However, you must have inadvertently intensified the aftereffects of his bonding spell when you stabbed him. The mirror shard created an unusual mental link between you—a lasting tendril of the Blood Bond that Daeryn was trying to establish. This would explain why I, in all my power, can only temporarily cleanse the dark link between your minds, but I cannot destroy it."

"You can't?"

Verdagon shook his head.

"But vampires, like all deadwalkers, cannot withstand a Pyrekin's fire any more than they can endure a fireforger mage's flames."

Verdagon nodded. "It's true that fire destroys all of Luther's spawn...all but one."

Katja swallowed hard. "Caleb."

The dragon nodded again. "The vampire once known as Calais was not destroyed by the fireforger Marga's flame. He was transformed by it—Redeemed, as the legends say. It's possible that Daeryn has somehow kept his father's miraculous tolerance to fire even though he has now turned into a full vampire. If that is the case, then nothing I know can destroy him and we are all in grave peril."

"What do we do then?" she said in utter panic.

The dragon frowned and scratched a dry spot on his cheek. "*You* are to continue training, of course...just as I have already said. You will decrease your skinshifting studies in favor of training more as a wraithwalker mage."

"But I nearly killed Lauraisha tonight because of my lack of skinshifting skill!"

The Pyrekin snorted. "No, you wounded her tonight because Daeryn was experimenting with the bestial part of your brain. Now that he has successfully discovered a way to manipulate your instincts, I'm certain he will attempt it again. This poses a far worse threat than a simple case of skinshifting madness.

"If left unhindered, Daeryn could continue to plant suggestions in your mind during each new skinshift and then eventually make himself a strong enough presence to dominate all of your thoughts. You would become slave to his every whim with no independent identity or will of your own."

"I'd be a zombie?"

"Essentially, yes. However, we will not allow that to happen—that I promise you. As long as you are bonded with me as my steward, I can help you fight Daeryn's domination. And there are others who may be able to help us as well." Verdagon put a huge talon on her shoulder. His gentle touch helped Katja cease her shivering. "I will contact the Ring of Sorcerers immediately. Doubtless they already know of tonight's events, but I need to inform them of Daeryn's destructive influence so that Joce'lynn, especially, may take the proper precautions."

"What must I do now then, My Sir?"

Sorrow tinged his smile. "You need healing, rest, and forgiveness. While I cannot aid you in the last, I can certainly help you with the former two."

Katja felt a surge of pleasant warmth spread from the dragon's talon into her aching shoulder. Then she sank into the soft sand beneath her paws as he curled his huge body protectively around her. Her last conscious feeling was her surprise that Verdagon's reptilian hide felt so soft against her tawny fur.

Chapter II

Wraith Fire

Katja awoke from a dreamless sleep and frowned. The world around her was green—scaly green. She awkwardly pushed herself into a sitting position and realized that Verdagon’s bulk still enveloped her body. The skinshifter squirmed free from between the snoring dragon’s forearm and chest only to find herself fending off the emerald expanse of a wing as he rolled to one side. With a slight screech, she dropped to the sand below him and scrambled away from Verdagon’s bone-crushing weight as he shifted positions.

“Jierira, that went well,” she growled sarcastically. Meanwhile, the dragon settled on his side and began to snore all the louder.

She checked her body for injuries and, after finding none, was shocked to discover that she was her normal werecat self once again. She must have skinshifted back to her true form in her sleep. With a sigh of relief, she stood upright on her back paws and double-checked the areas where Lauraisha had scorched her shoulder. Thanks to Verdagon’s attention and her own skinshifting abilities, Katja’s skin and muscle had fully mended; however, several bare patches mottled her usually thick golden fur where the worst burns had occurred. She was also naked. Katja flushed in embarrassment and quickly searched the cavern. The cave was empty of both beings and garments. This would never do. She needed at least a loincloth and more preferably a full robe to cover her current shame, but she found neither.

She looked around again and spied Verdagon’s broken eggshell near the edge of the sands closest to the thermal vent that heated the cave. She sprinted over to it and ducked inside the cracked casing, hoping to find something useful. There was nothing but long-dried membrane and shell fragments. She sighed in disappointment.

“Finding anything interesting in there?” Verdagon was watching her in bemusement.

She yelped and hid herself in the shell’s shadow. “No, My Sir. Now that I am a werecat once again, I need proper clothes and there aren’t any in this cave.”

He chuckled. “Stay hidden a moment more and I’ll see to that.”

The dragon lifted his head and gave a stone-shaking bugle. Soon a plum-skinned elf came bounding down the nearest set of steps and bowed low as soon as his boots touched the sands.

Verdagon cocked his head at the elf. “Oeled, I thought that you would be helping Neha’lyn with Princess Lauraisha’s care.”

The Aevry Clan elf nodded. “I was, My Lord, but he sent me to you with a formal inquiry.”

“Which is?”

“He humbly requests a vial of tears from you to help aid in Her Highness’s healing.”

The dragon sighed, and then shed his pearlescent tears into the messenger’s proffered container. “Warn Neha’lyn that He will need to extract the salt from my tears and use that directly on his patients for this to be any help at all. Dragons’ tears are far less effective healers without phoenix tears to catalyze their strength, and such elixirs are meant to treat Tainted wounds, not natural injuries.”

The harmhealer mage nodded and bowed his thanks.

“In the meantime, I require clothes for my steward. Would you please bring me proper garments befitting Katja’s rank?”

“Yes, My Sir.”

Once Oeled had returned with a tan mage robe, a dark orange skinshifter rank sash, and a burgundy wraithwalker sash, he told Verdagon, “Mistress Joce’lynn wishes to see your steward as soon as she is presentable.”

“Of course, please inform her that Katja and I will meet her in the courtyard nearest her study tower.”

* * *

Joce’lynn’s study was located at the top of the second tallest tower in the Citadel on the Isle of Summons above nearly five hundred rather steep steps. Fortunately, Katja was not required to climb those stairs today, but staring up at the tower gave the werecat a new appreciation of why the Sorceress was so fit and healthy despite having seen over 300 winters in her lifetime.

As the werecat and dragon waited in the misty courtyard below Joce’lynn’s tower, the morning bell tolled ten times throughout the Citadel. On the ninth peal, the tower’s ground-level door banged open and Joce’lynn burst forth—shouting even before Katja finished her bow of greeting toward the elder.

“Katja Kevrosa Escari, what in the bloody fangs happened last night? Magistrate Aver’lyn and half of the Ring are demanding that I place you in irons this instant!”

Katja instinctively crouched into a defensive stance as Joce’lynn berated her. Never had she seen the Ring of Sorcerers member so irate.

“I believe I am better able to answer that question, Mistress Joce’lynn,” Verdagon said, coming to the stunned werecat’s rescue.

“With all due respect, My Lord Verdagon, you weren’t even there—”

“No, I wasn’t. But I am one of the few beings besides the currently infirm Lauraisha who can delve deep within Katja’s thoughts—an act that I performed last night as soon as Garret brought her to me. I saw everything from her point of view and I have much to discuss with you.”

The human wraithwalker gestured to a nearby cluster of carved benches near the courtyard’s west wall away from the icy wind. “Fine, then, let us discuss it!”

Joce’lynn and Katja sat on opposite benches while Verdagon crouched beside them. Even prone, the dragon had to hunch his angular head to be eye-level with the females. He spread his wings to shield the three from the winter drizzle and any prying eyes before saying, “My Madam, I understand you to be a student of prophesy as proficient as the dryad Queen Mother.”

Katja frowned at him as Joce’lynn nodded. “Zahlathra and I often correspond about our individual findings. I sorely miss her advice, especially now that the war with the Asheken deadwalkers has cut off most of the communication between us.”

“What can you remember from the Sylvan Prophecies about the Third Great Darkness?” the dragon asked.

Joce’lynn began to recite: “Then there will come a day when a forger will Fall to the Tainted Thirst of the First Turned. This Fallen Forger will betray the Sphinx and open wide her Gape to the First Turned and his allies. Together they will march against all those living and spread their Taint over the face of the world. In the midst of this Third Great Darkness, the Seer, the Arbitrator, the Sower, the Guardian, the Pariah, the Discerner, and the Renewed shall unite in common purpose. They shall search the whole of the world to bring together the scattered Keystones. When the Keystones unlock the Gateway, the final battle for freedom will begin.”

Verdagon nodded as she finished. “A good translation, although I should note that “the final battle” can also be translated as “the greatest battle.””

Joce'lynn took a breath. "Zahlathra believes that her daughter Zahra is the Sower. Is she correct?"

"She is indeed."

"But wouldn't that also mean that Lauraisha is the Seer and Katja is the—"

"Discerner," Verdagon finished. "Yes, it would."

"I admit that when I first met her and realized that she too was a wraithwalker, I had hoped as much, but how can Katja be the prophesied Discerner after she tried to kill Lauraisha? Murder is one of the worst acts of betrayal. Wraithwalkers must be truthful and pure of soul. How can any Sylvans hope to trust Katja if she is a mere breath away from becoming a Fallen necromancer like Luther?"

"Joce'lynn, Katja is pure of soul. The madness that drove her to attack Lauraisha was not within her soul but without."

Joce'lynn shook her head. "I don't understand."

Verdagon described how Daeryn's mental manipulation had caused Katja to lash out at her packmates. He explained Daeryn's and Katja's continued mental bond and his own powerlessness to permanently destroy it.

Joce'lynn nibbled her lip, her expression troubled. "What of the scarlet shard imbedded in the broken spearhead? What is its role in all of this?"

Katja looked down at her three sunsilver spearheads and picked up the one with the broken tip. "The mirror shards were once part of the Ott vre Caerwyn. Caleb gave them to me after I inadvertently mended his shattered mirror."

Joce'lynn sucked in a breath. "That means that the shards hanging around your neck and the necks of your companions are pieces of vampires' *bloodstones*! What was Caleb thinking?"

"Actually, Dama was responsible for distributing the mirror's shards to the packmates. Despite its dangerous origin, Joce'lynn, the Ott vre Caerwyn was purified by Marga's fire long ago. In and of themselves, these shards pose no threat to Katja or to her allies," the dragon reassured her. "In fact, they've proven invaluable as a means of communication in times of trouble."

"Until now. Now this bloodstone shard has given Daeryn a way into Katja's mind and a path to her soul. That is beyond dangerous."

Verdagon nodded his angular head. "Yes, it is. If Daeryn can find a way to corrupt the shard, he could turn the shard into a bloodstone once again. If that happens, it will strengthen his and Katja's bond even more—eventually trapping and enslaving her soul to his will."

Joce'lynn shook her head. "This is grim news indeed. Will increasing her wraithwalker training be enough to reverse the damage he has already done?"

"I doubt it, My Madam. Even with you shepherding her night and day, Katja will have to battle him through her worst instincts during every full moon until the spear-and-mirror shard is removed from the vampire's possession."

"What shall we do in the meantime then? Lock her away?"

Katja's furry ears drooped in deep sadness as she held out her paws to be bound. "I don't wish to lose my freedom, but I could not bear it if another to be harmed because of me."

The expression that stole across Joce'lynn's face was one matching Katja's sorrow. Gently the human wraithwalker mage pushed the werecat's paws down. "A pure soul indeed. Would training with Dayalan help her?"

The dragon nodded. "I believe so. Mind you, nothing at this point would mean a cure, but Dayalan knows how his brother thinks. They share the same bloodlust, which Daeryn will try to

instill in Katja and which Dayalan is very adept at thwarting. It would be a good therapy at least.”

“If Dayalan is willing,” Katja murmured.

“Oh, he will be willing, Katja,” Verdagon said soothingly. “Do not worry; I will discuss it with him.”

Joce’lynn rubbed her forehead. “Very well, then. What do we do in the meantime?”

Verdagon frowned. “Let Lauraisha heal. When she is strong enough, I can teach her how to facilitate a mental bond between Katja and Dayalan. Until then, I will need to oversee Katja’s and Dayalan’s training—together and separate. I should be able to establish and protect a working mental bond between them to help speed the training process.”

“Good,” Joce’lynn said. “I’ll see to it that they keep their current teaching schedule, but meet on the Hatching Sands as well as the Ring Room. The spells in the caverns should be more than sufficient to contain any wayward magic. Plus it will better if you train Dayalan anyway, since he is quickly outpacing any fireforger sent to instruct him.”

Verdagon gave the Ring member a knowing smile. “Agreed.”

* * *

As expected, Dayalan’s attitude was less than amiable during his and Katja’s principle instruction session under Verdagon.

“Verdagon, I am not pleased by this arrangement—at all. We are taking an enormous risk having you build a mental bond between Katja and me. If Daeryn realizes what we’re doing before we’ve had enough time to shield the bond, he could ensnare us both.”

“I am aware of that, Dayalan,” the dragon replied. “Would you rather leave Katja undefended against your brother?”

“Fangs, no!”

“Then please stand facing each other,” Verdagon said, “and let us begin.”

When Dayalan and Katja did as instructed, Verdagon bent close enough to touch each of their brows with the tip of his snout. The shock of connection nearly flung Katja off of her back paws. Only the dragon’s wing against her back kept her upright. She could feel her blood pulse in her ears and saw its powerful color wash over her vision until the world around her looked devoid of color and shape.

Verdagon? her mind whispered in the blackness.

I am here.

Dayalan?

Yes, I’m here, Katja.

Good, but where is here?

Images smote her mind. Katja looked around and saw skeletal trees loom above her—their stark white trunks stabbing the murky sky. Where was the Citadel cavern? The Hatching Sands and carved dwarven runes were nowhere to be found. All she saw instead was the inverted decay of the world as if she were under Curqak’s and his allied revenant’s influence once again. She looked down and screeched in surprise as she saw the blood-red river rushing beneath her perch. She was sitting on the same fallen tree that Curqak had trapped her on when she had fled her village!

Dayalan and Verdagon appeared beside her, just as ashen as the rest of this uncanny realm. Their presence was at once reassuring and unsettling to her. They neither moved nor talked, but she felt their thoughts within her mind as powerfully as her own awareness.

Katja, what do you see? Verdagon prompted her.

Trees. Dead trees. It looks like the riverbank where Curqak trapped me just days after he and his fellow deadwalkers slaughtered my clan. Can't you see it?

We cannot.

Katja looked at her companions and yowled in consternation. Their eyes were milky with blindness. *What is wrong with you!*

My brother does not wish us to help you. He isn't strong enough yet to break or block our bond, but he can still thwart our connection to your visions, Dayalan replied, his voice reflecting a forced calm.

How is he able to block you?

He has the aid of other deadwalkers, Katja. Do not worry, though, Verdagon replied. *We are blind, but we are by no means helpless. Describe to us what you see.*

She did.

Can you think of a reason why Daeryn would want you to remember this place?

Before she could reply, Katja's vision changed to show her slaughtered kinsmen as she and Kayten burned their bodies and buried their ashes in the Feliconas village's amphitheater. She screamed as each of their faces paraded before her mind's eye, taunting her with their silence.

Stay with us, Katja, Dayalan's thought cut through the terrible torrent.

Curqak's grinning face assaulted her next. "Your brother is dead..." he whispered.

Then the ghoul's cracked voice changed into her own. "No. No! You were dead!" Katja screamed as she stared at a nemean deadwalker bound with chains in the keep of Caerwyn Castle. "They could not have Turned you! You were already dead!"

Kayten's voice cackled as the Turned werecat watched her. "Join us, Katja. Join me and share in true freedom..."

"You are not my brother!" she screeched, but the face shifted again into one of incredible beauty, like the alabaster visage of an elf noble with broad shoulders and sleek, black hair swept back from his oval face and pointed ears. The male's eyes were as pale blue as sea ice, but then they changed to bloody crimson as he watched her.

Come to me, Katja, he whispered through her mind. They were now in the clearing of a frost-bitten forest with moonlight illuminating the small space between them. It was the same clearing where Dayalan's brother had attacked and had almost Turned her. It was the same night that the wolf Bren had died trying to save her.

Daeryn, she whispered.

And now I have you, Katja, the vampire hissed through fully exposed fangs as he walked toward her.

What do you want of me?

Your blood loyalty, of course.

Katja felt her hackles rise in spite of her effort to keep calm. She felt Dayalan's anger through their connected minds and unleashed it against her fear. *How dare you use me to attack Lauraisha!*

Oh, no, my little changeling, I'm afraid you did that yourself, the male replied, emphasizing the name used for a Turned skinshifter mage with a smug purr in his voice.

Katja could feel the power of his magic swirl around her like a dangerous undercurrent—far more like a shade's murky grasp than a shadowshaper's nebulous touch. As a full vampire and a corrupted mage, Daeryn was the most dangerous kind of deadwalker. She shuddered under the sheer weight of his power. *Don't ever call me that!*

Why not, changeling? The title suits you. They were back among the corpse-white trees near the riverbank and Dayalan's and Verdagon's images were gone.

I am not a deadwalker mage! she screamed.

Daeryn's half-smile was that of a pure predator. *Are you so certain of that? I've known ghouls far less prone to destruction.*

Katja snorted. *Your ally, Curqak, doesn't fit that description.*

The fanged smile faltered. *He did what he was commanded, certainly, but the killing of your kin would not have been necessary if you had come to us willingly.*

That is a lie worse than a grim's tale, she spat. *I was never given that opportunity...*

You were, Katja. You were given the choice the day your parents died in that unfortunate rockslide. You chose to flee the shadow instead of embrace it and you have been fleeing for your miserable life ever since. Haven't you?

Unbidden, she saw a vision of her parents' graves, and then saw the boulders that had killed them crashing toward her.

Stop it! she screamed through clenched fangs, and tried to shut her eyes against the vision.

You condemn your companions to suffering and death every time you resist my calling, Katja. Why make them suffer more? Do you delight in their torture?

Silence, villain!

The boulders evaporated and the moonlit walls of a bedchamber took their place. Katja whimpered as she saw Lauraisha lying bloody and broken on the rug in front of her.

Who is the real villain, Katja? I merely wanted the world rid of Dayalan's infectious presence and you decided that Lauraisha was in our way. I give full tribute to you for your ruthlessness, but it was unwarranted. I would have preferred that she live, so that I could add her to our ranks...

She felt the crimson tendril of Daeryn's mind wrap tighter around her own like a serpent squeezing its prey. Her vision changed again as the shade's mind overwhelmed hers. Daeryn now held her in his arms as they stood together on the riverbank under the corpselike trees, his drake-like wings extended to shield both of them from the chill wind whistling through the dead forest. She could almost feel Daeryn's yellow fangs pressing once more against the scared skin of her neck as he pressed her trembling body against his.

Bond with me...

No!

Daeryn made a flicking gesture and Katja watched in horror as her scarred right paw flexed and unsheathed her claws of its own accord. *Did you forget the potency of my mind's sway over yours? Bond with me or become the instrument of your packmates' destruction.*

Never!

As had happened once before, Katja's rage boiled up inside of her soul at the deadwalker's threat to her loved ones and then found its release through her voice. What issued from her maw, however, was not only a wraithwalker's illusion-shattering roar, but also Dayalan's purging fire. Katja felt the fireforger's flames burn throughout her being and then released the fire straight at Daeryn's horrified face. The vision of Daeryn evaporated as the flames engulfed him. The corpse trees melted into the vision of a castle courtyard with stone archways that overlooked the rolling sea. Daeryn lay writhing in pain on the sandy stones. Then that vision also dissolved and Katja's awareness was suddenly thrown back into the solidness of reality.

She stared at the monolith pillars surrounding the Hatching Cavern. Then she collapsed panting against Verdagon's quivering flank. She thrust her paws into the sand, savoring the gritty

texture beneath her pads. Daeryn was gone and so were his twisted visions! She couldn't feel even the slightest tendril of his presence in her mind.

Dayalan sank to his knees beside her. She stared at him in wonder as the two caught their breath. "Did I really just...burn Daeryn...with your mage fire?"

Dayalan raised a brow at Verdagon. The dragon shook his head and smiled. "It may have appeared that way, but no. What you did was use the spiritual essence of Dayalan's fire to sear and cleanse the mental connection between you and Daeryn."

"Does that mean that I'm free of him?"

"For the moment. The core problem of the two shards' link still remains, but I'm hopeful that your mind was cleansed well enough that it will require Daeryn a vast amount of time and effort to rebuild the bond. It's still possible for him to contact your mind, but he should have little sway over you for a little while."

"How much time?"

"Two moon-cycles, maybe three. I'm not certain."

Dayalan shook his head and growled. "I will kill him for this."

The dragon gazed at the fireforger male a long moment before he replied. "While I understand your sentiment, Dayalan, killing out of hatred makes you no better than him."

"But Katja and Lauraisha. Why should they suffer his evil? He should be punished for his crimes—"

"And he will be, Dayalan, but not out of revenge. After all, what sets you apart from your brother?"

Dayalan crossed his arms and did not reply.

"A single drop of a being's blood, Dayalan," Verdagon said more gently. "The choice to drink or to abstain from the blood of beings is all that separates you from damnation alongside the Abomination, Luther, your brother, and the rest of the deadwalkers. Vengeance brings you ever closer to the wrong side of that choice because hatred drives it. Love is your responsibility; vengeance is the Creator's. Is it not bad enough that your brother walks as one enslaved to death now? That he will be tortured for eternity beyond the shores of Edgewater when his body is destroyed? Do not try to carry the Creator's burdens; they are too vast for you."

Dayalan sighed and absently rubbed the place on his forehead where Verdagon had touched it. Katja watched him mutely, wondering if Verdagon's message was meant more for her ears than for Dayalan's. She had wrestled with her anger and hatred toward the ghoul Curqak for his massacre of her family and her clan for several moon-cycles now. While she knew that it had been the Víchí Elder Luther who had ordered their slaughter, Curqak was the one who oversaw the village's destruction. And now she hated Daeryn just as much for Turning her own brother Kayten into a nemean deadwalker, nearly killing Felan, murdering Bren, manipulating her, and his part in what had happened to Lauraisha. As much as she respected Verdagon, she could not and would not put aside her hatred for these two insidious monsters!

In answer to her unspoken vow, Verdagon added, "Hatred is a slow poison—killing the heart one thought at a time. If given free reign, hatred will quell every emotion save rage and bitterness—leaving a being bereft of all love, joy, or hope. Such a being is a deadwalker in mind, even if not in body. Thus it is the one who murders, not the one who is murdered, who suffers the cruelest death."

Katja swallowed hard at the warning. "So how does a being fight against hatred?"

The dragon shrugged. "You must choose to love that which you think you should hate."

Katja growled. "So you would have us admire a monster?"

“Did I say admire or even trust? No. I said love. Beings can love and forgive one another without trusting each other. Love is life; love is of the Creator. Hatred is of the Abomination and he gives only death. I would not see either of you so easily ensnared.”

Dayalan cleared his throat. “What you demand, Verdagon, is no easy task.”

The Pyrekin nodded. “The simplest tasks often aren’t easy, but will the two of you do this for me anyway?”

Dayalan and Katja both looked at each other a moment and then bowed toward the dragon. “We will try,” said Dayalan.

“Good.”

Katja frowned. “What happens now?”

“Dayalan and I need to work together on a few fireforger techniques before we part ways. As for you, Katja, I believe a lesson in forgiveness would do well to round out your lessons for today. I suggest you visit Lauraisha in the Healing Ward since I know you cannot understand my teaching about hatred without first learning about forgiveness.”

Katja looked at him in helplessness. “What could I even say to her?”

The Pyrekin’s smile toward her was gentle. “The truth. She knows you well enough to know when you speak truth and when you lie. She will likely listen to you even if the others are not yet ready to hear your apologies.”

The dragon lifted his head in the direction of the main stairwell and gave a quick bellow. An elf descended the stairs in response.

“Lauraisha should be awake now. Have Vraelth take you to her. Off you go.”

The werecat bowed and slowly ascended the stairs, dreading the meeting to come.

* * *

“How dare you come near her after the harm you’ve caused! Get out!” Zahra’s screams thundered down the corridors of the Healing Ward.

Neither Vraelth’s presence nor Katja’s normalized appearance seemed to reassure the dryad that Lauraisha was in no danger. The green-skinned female guarded the human princess’s sickroom with her fighting sickles unsheathed—daring the golden-furred werecat to test her resolve.

“Quiet your voice or you’ll wake the sick!” Katja hissed.

“I don’t care how loud I am. You have no right to see her, changeling!”

Katja’s rounded, tuft-tipped ears flattened against her head at the insult. “You go too far, dryad. I am no deadwalker traitor and I *never* will be!”

Creator willing, she thought.

“You are already marred by a vampire! Look no further than the scars on your neck for the proof of that.”

As the dryad princess spoke, Katja’s paw involuntarily moved to cover the fang marks where Daeryn had bitten her on the night of Bren’s death. Before the werecat could ask if Zahra knew that Daeryn had manipulated her or think of a way to defend herself, a new voice added itself to the fray.

“Will the two of you cease this infernal squabble at once? I have a Healing Ward to run and I can’t do so when your shouting is upsetting my patients!”

Master Neha’lyn, came sprinting down the hall, the harmhealer elf’s usually calm face flushed deep purple with his anger. “Will someone explain to me what lunacy has taken hold of you? Zahra, I can hear your voice behind my warded office door!”

Katja looked startled at the exasperated elf and quickly looked away, smirking. Even under the serious circumstances, Katja couldn't help herself. The utter ridiculousness of Neha'lyn's frazzled appearance caused her maw to quirk with a smile. She glanced at Zahra and the dryad's look of utter astonishment caused her last bit of self-control to slip. Beside her, Vraelth's mouth working furiously to stifle a chuckle of his own as the werecat burst out laughing.

Neha'lyn cleared his throat as the packmates fought and failed to keep their composure. "I am waiting."

"Sorry, My Sir," Zahra finally murmured. "Katja wants to speak privately with Princess Lauraisha. Given the fact that Katja was the one responsible for Lauraisha being in the Healing Ward in the first place, I told the changeling that I'll see the sun go black before I ever give her access to Lauraisha in such a weakened state."

Neha'lyn looked at Katja, Zahra, and Vraelth in solemn silence before reaching into his tan robe's front pocket. He pulled out a square of parchment and unfolded it to reveal Joice'lynn's handwriting. "As it happens, I know about your present situation, Katja. Joice'lynn has instructed most of the mage masters concerning your odd predicament. Tell me, did you and Dayalan meet with Verdagon this morning?"

"Yes, My Sir, we did."

Neha'lyn nodded and reached into his pocket once more. He pulled out a curious looking flat stone the size of his fist. It was as smooth as a stone from a riverbed and had a hole worn through its center. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"This is a Discerning Stone. Joice'lynn, Si'lyn, and Mori'lyn made it for me a long time ago before Mori'lyn Fell to Peha'lyn's evil. It shows the truth in a being's countenance. As you can imagine, it is quite useful when I deal with patients." He sighed then. "I'm just sorry I didn't think to use it on Peha'lyn when he returned from his journeys abroad."

The harmhealer held the stone up to his eye and peered through at Katja through its hole.

"Was your training session with Dayalan and Verdagon successful?"

Katja nodded as Zahra glared at her. "It was."

"Are you feeling any strange numbness in your limbs or chest?"

"No."

"Are your thoughts based on rational resolve or on bestial instinct right now?"

"Rational."

"Are you sure?"

Katja nodded her head vigorously. "Yes."

"Do you hold any thoughts right now of harm to yourself or toward any other?"

"Just to Daeryn." The werecat growled.

"Understandable, but even that sentiment can be dangerous to you."

The werecat nodded. "So Verdagon told me."

Neha'lyn nodded and put a gentle hand on her furry shoulder. "I see that you have told me the truth and that, for now, you pose no threat to Lauraisha. However, I am deeply sorry for the burden that Daeryn has placed on you as it means that confrontations like this will happen often to you until his influence is finally purged."

Katja swallowed and nodded while Zahra looked at the two of them in baffled silence. "May I see her then?"

Neha'lyn sighed. "Yes, I suppose so. As a precaution, though, I want Vraelth outside the room while you are with her."

He looked over at the elf. “Listen to them carefully. If you hear anything unusual or alarming, distance Katja from others immediately and call for me.”

Vraelth nodded.

“Thank you, My Sir.” Katja bowed to him and turned expectantly toward Zahra, who was still blocking Lauraisha’s door.

The dryad’s jaw tightened, but she moved to one side nonetheless.

As Katja pushed the heavy wooden door open, she caught Zahra’s whispered promise to Neha’lyn that she would also remain at guard just in case the worst should happen. Katja’s ears drooped a little as Vraelth shut the door behind her.

Chapter III

Of Grief and Forgiveness

The air that rushed to her nose was slightly warmer than the corridor air had been. Pungent herbs seasoned each breath enough to make Katja sneeze.

“Oh, good. I’m glad it’s not just me. I’ve been doing that all morning.”

Katja turned to find Lauraisha sitting up in bed, wrinkling her nose.

“Lauraisha! You’re awake!”

The Tyglesean princess grimaced. “How could I sleep with all the yelling outside my door?”

Katja winced and sneezed again. “Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Zahra should learn to steady her voice when she gets angry and Neha’lyn should curb his use of aromatherapy.” Lauraisha gestured to the hundred or so plants hanging from the exposed rafters above them.

“No, I mean I’m sorry for putting you here in the first place.” Katja felt tears well up in her eyes as she moved to kneel before Lauraisha’s bedside. “I have no notion of how you could forgive me, but I hope that someday—”

Lauraisha groaned and held up her scarred left hand in protest. “Of course, I forgive you! You and I both know that the real reason I have these wounds is because you were not yourself last night. I saw the drives of a beast in you, not the thoughts of a being.” She shuddered. “I felt deadwalker evil tinging your thoughts as well.”

Katja blinked. “Have you conversed with Verdagon then?”

Lauraisha frowned. “No, why?”

Katja quickly explained the dragon’s discovery of her mental link with Daeryn and then shared her memory of the morning’s expulsion session with Verdagon and Dayalan.

Lauraisha shuddered as the experience faded. “So Verdagon and Dayalan helped you expel Daeryn, but Verdagon cannot completely destroy your mental bond?”

The werecat shook her head. “Apparently, the spearhead that I stabbed Daeryn with has kept a small part of the bonding spell that Daeryn cast on me during his Turning Bite intact. As long as Daeryn has that shard, he can manipulate me.”

Lauraisha was alert. “Are you in danger now?”

The skinshifter shook her head. “Verdagon thinks that they’ve bought me three safe skinshifts—at most. It gives me time to continue my wraithwalker training and strengthen my mind against Daeryn’s attacks before he tries to possess me again.”

“What happens then?”

“If I can’t resist him...” Katja paused and let out a shaky breath. “If I can’t resist him, Daeryn’s claim over my thoughts will grow stronger with each skinshift. I’ll become even more bestial than before until I’m utterly ruled by him.”

“Then no amount of training will be enough,” Lauraisha said. “We need another solution.”

“There is none!”

Lauraisha shook her head. “There is one: hunt down Daeryn and take back the shard.”

Katja stared at her. “I will call Neha’lyn immediately! You must be running a high fever.”

“Oh, relax. I’m fine—well, I’ll be healthy soon enough. Anyway, since Daeryn’s possession of the mirror’s shard is the reason the two of you are mentally bonded, the obvious solution to the problem is for us to take back the shard!”

“The shard in his shoulder is laced with my blood and my magic, so it will respond to no one besides me—not even Verdagon. The only way to remove such a magic-linked artifact is for me to physically fight Daeryn! Since I was the one who stabbed him with it in the first place, I must be the one who has to pull it back out!”

“Agreed.”

“You are just as insane as the dragon.”

Lauraisha cocked a brow. “Am I? Well, let’s consider for a moment that not even a Pyrekin dragon can break the link between the two of you. And Verdagon is the most powerful being we know! That leaves you with very few options. Whether or not you wish it, you will have to face Daeryn again, Katja, just as you will have to face Curqak again. They are both responsible for the deaths and enslavement of your clan and kin. They must answer for their evil.”

“Verdagon said that vengeance is the Creator’s burden, not ours.”

Lauraisha shrugged. “Perhaps that is true, but even if vengeance isn’t your burden, justice is. You yourself swore that you would find a way to bring justice to your clan’s murderers not three days after you burned and buried your slaughtered kin. You cannot allow other Sylvans to suffer the same evil that was done to them or to you. Not when you have the power to prevent it.”

“He’s far more powerful than me physically and magically. How can I possibly have the strength to do what is necessary?”

“Necessity breeds ingenuity,” the human said. “Besides, none of your packmates will let you face him alone.”

Katja shook her head. “There is no way I’m putting you all in mortal danger again. Even so, how could I find him? There have been no reports of his whereabouts since the night he attacked Felan and me and killed Bren.”

Lauraisha’s eyes shut against her sudden tears at the mention of the wolf’s name. “I know where Daeryn is.”

Katja stared at her. “What? How?”

She grimaced. “The last image I saw in your memory before you broke ties with Daeryn’s mind was of him fainting in the upper courtyard of Castle Summersted in Tyglesea.”

Katja stared at the Tyglesean princess. “Your former home? Are you certain?”

Lauraisha nodded. “Trust me, Katja, I know those sandstone archways. During his interrogation, the dullahan Perefaris said that a deadwalker spy had claimed Tyglesea as his territory. He had no knowledge of the spy’s identity, but what if Daeryn is actually that spy?”

Katja thought about that a moment. It seemed to make sense, but a suspicion still nagged at her. “If he is the deadwalkers’ principal spy in Tyglesea, what was he doing attacking me on the road outside of Caerwyn Castle?”

The human frowned before answering. “Perhaps he isn’t the main spy, then. Maybe he’s just well-associated with him. Regardless, we need to go to Tyglesea. We need to find out why he is in Castle Summersted at all.”

Katja hissed. “Absolutely not! The journey is too long! If you go to Tyglesea, you risk your safety by being near me during at least four full moons, and you will have to face your father again. I would never wish you such danger or pain!”

Lauraisha wiped the sweat away from her pallid face—her resolve overruling her present feebleness. “Katja, you will need my help against Daeryn. Jocie’lynn has already commanded that I train with you and Dayalan to help weave your minds together so that you can combine your talents. All that aside, though, I would still go to Tyglesea without you. If my father is allied with deadwalkers, then I have to do something. As a dreamdrifter and a fireforger, I might finally

have the power to free my country and my family from King Kaylor's despotism! Even so, I doubt that I can do this without your help. Katja, I need you with me. I doubt I can do what I must without your courage bolstering my own."

Katja stared at her dearest friend and finally sighed. "I doubt I can do what I must without you either."

Lauraisha reached out her arms in invitation and Katja obliged her gratefully. The two females hugged each other and, somehow, all the world seemed right just then.

* * *

A knock echoed on Lauraisha's healing chamber door and the hulking, black-and-gray-furred werewolf that was Felan in his usual form walked into the room. Katja's ears perked as he sat down on a nearby stool with his back paws perched on the lowest rung, his huge clawed paws balled into fists in his lap as he stared at the floor.

"Lauraisha, Katja, I need to talk with you..." He looked at the human princess with gentle worry. "If you are up to it."

With a grimace, Lauraisha sat a little straighter on her prop of pillows. "Of course, Felan. What is it?"

Felan fidgeted for a moment—crossing and uncrossing his arms and legs before he sighed. "It's Zahra. I just found her at the end of the hall sobbing."

"Is she still upset with Katja?"

"Yes, but this is something else." Felan's look of sadness was profound. "Qenethala sent word through the trees. She's dying."

"What! How?" the females said in unison.

Felan shook his head. "I only know that she was somehow ambushed on her way back through enemy lines to the Glen. She...she chose to Merge rather than allow the deadwalkers to Turn and use her against us."

Katja paw covered her maw even as hot tears stung the corners of her eyes. Qenethala was Zahra's half-sister and one of the most battle-hardened dryads that Katja had ever encountered. The only reason she would ever have chosen to Merge herself with a tree other than her birth oak was if there was no other way to escape her captors. "I was too harsh with Zahra this morning. She had a right to be angry with me—you all do, but had I known what had happened to Qenethala...I'm sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen."

"Katja, you can hardly blame yourself for Daeryn's assaults," Lauraisha broke in. Quickly she filled Felan in on Verdagon's discovery and its confirmation of her own suspicions. "I told you that Katja had gone mad. I just didn't realize its true cause until now," she concluded.

Felan's eyes met Katja's for the first time since he had entered the room. "This was Daeryn?" He gestured to Lauraisha's bandaged body.

Katja nodded.

They watched each other for an eternity before Katja murmured again, "I'm sorry."

The hulking werewolf sighed. "No, Katja, I'm the one who should apologize. I knew that you had the potential power, but I never really expected that you would make the full transformation into a lioness so soon after learning to control your regular skinshifts. If I were a better teacher, I would have prepared you for such a difficulty. I could have helped you guard against any potential madness...maybe if I had, you could have mentally held your ground against Daeryn... Maybe then you wouldn't have attacked..." The skinshifter male hung his head. "I am sorry to have failed you, both of you, so utterly."

Lauraisha shook her head. “It’s impossible for either of you to blame yourselves successfully,” she said. “Daeryn’s role in this complicates the situation tremendously. I’ll gladly accept your requests for forgiveness if it makes you feel better, but let’s lay blame at the feet of the monster actually responsible for my injury.”

Felan’s curved fangs flashed as he snarled. “I will eviscerate that vampire if it is my last act in this world.”

“You will have some competition for that opportunity,” Dayalan said as he opened the door. The hybrid’s boots pounded the stone floor like hammers as he stalked into the room. His dark green hunter’s cloak billowed out as he sat down on the last empty stool. He looked straight at Lauraisha.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, and his deep voice cracked.

Lauraisha grimaced. “Felan knows his skinshifting skills. Neha’lyn said that he was able to mend the tissue well enough before you brought me here that I’ve sustained no permanent damage. Neha’lyn believes I will recoup enough of my lost blood to be able to move freely in a week or two. I won’t be rid of all of the scars, but that is a small price to pay for cheating death.”

Dayalan nodded, his blue eyes glinting red. She watched him in silence for a moment before asking, “Are you content enough to be here? The smell of my blood on these bandages can’t be comfortable for you...”

“I visited Tyron last night, so I’m well-sated,” Dayalan said, referring to his main source of blood sustenance, which also happened to be Lauraisha’s horse. “Otherwise I would have never strayed near the Healing Ward in the first place, much less to your room.”

“Oh.”

Felan crossed his arms across his massive furred chest. “Well, packmates,” he said, breaking the tense silence. “Now what do we do?”

Lauraisha looked over Katja and pursed her lips in speculation. “Well, I had suggested to Katja that we track down Daeryn to retrieve the spear shard that has caused so much of our current crisis—”

“No.” The werecat shook her head. “I will not let you come with me on such a dangerous mission. Besides” —Katja shifted her gaze around the room— “we need to help Qenethala and Zahra first.”

“Do we even know when and where Qenethala decided to Merge?” Dayalan asked.

Felan shook his head.

Lauraisha’s deep blue eyes grew distant and glassy as she suddenly slumped against the pillows.

“Lauraisha!” the other three cried in unison.

The human held up a hand in reassurance and continued her dreamdrifting trance. After a few tense moments she spoke. “I can’t find her...or anyone for that matter. The minds of Sylvans feel...foggy beyond the shore of this island.” She frowned.

“Then it has begun,” Dayalan whispered.

“What has?”

“The deadwalker psychics have commenced their assault on the minds of Sylvan dreamdrifters just as they did in the early days of the Second War of Ages. They’ll try to disrupt any conventional methods of magical communications, including your own awareness of other beings’ minds.”

Lauraisha made a sour face. “Well, it’s working.”

“We need to inform Jocie’lynn of all of this,” the werecat said.

Dayalan bobbed his head. "She has already sent a summons for you to join her in her study, Katja. She needs to discuss your new training schedule."

Katja sighed and gave Lauraisha's hand a gentle squeeze. "You'll be well?"

The human smiled. "I will. Go, Katja. Time is all important now."

The werecat skinshifter bowed her head and turned for the door which Felan was already opening. "I think I'll go with you since I know the details of Qenethala's predicament."

Katja nodded to him and let him usher her into the hallway. Once he had closed the door, the werecat then turned to him. "How are you? As dear as Zahra is to you, knowing Qenethala's fate can't be easy to bear."

Felan sighed and rubbed his furry forehead. "Yes and no. We were close friends once, but that was long ago. Much has changed since our youth."

Katja watched him for a moment. "She scorned you once she discovered that you were a skinshifter, didn't she?"

He nodded.

"But Zahra never did?"

The werewolf shook his head. "Never. She has remained loyal to me no matter the circumstances. I can only hope to be as true of a friend to her in return."

"I see."

They walked on in silence.

"Are you still angry with me?" the werecat asked.

Felan looked down at her. "Because of Lauraisha?"

She nodded once.

The huge werewolf passed a clawed paw over his maw. "I'm frustrated and confused and afraid. In light of our conversation about Daeryn, I have no idea if I have a right to be angry with you even though I was. I was beyond enraged."

"You have that right, Felan."

He sighed and shook his head. "No, I don't. The beast that I met under the light of the full moon wasn't really you. Daeryn manipulated you, and so this wasn't your fault."

Her green eyes stared down the stone corridor without really seeing it. "I was still the one who carried out his evil. I was the werecat that Curqak wanted when he killed my parents and again when he massacred my clan. I was the one Daeryn was hunting when he killed Bren and nearly killed you." She blinked away tears and continued. "No matter what I might wish, evil constantly haunts me and destroys anyone around me. I am so weary of fighting this...and yet what else can I do but try to protect those I love?"

Felan's paw slipped onto her shoulder and he pulled her into a cautious embrace. "I know, Katja, I love you and you are worth the risk." His grip tightened on her shoulders and he nudged her away. "Yet I know I can't fully trust you until we find a way to rid you of Daeryn's influence."

Katja swallowed. His words wounded her, but she knew he spoke the truth. "I hope Joice'lynn can guide me to a solution...for all our sakes."

"So do I."

* * *

"I was about to hunt down some much needed sustenance," the human said kindly once Katja and Felan had hiked up the spiraled stairs to her study. "Would you care to join me?"

Katja sat down quickly before her wobbly knees buckled and Felan did the same. "If you could give us...a few moments to...catch our breath first...please, Your Honor."

“And what is so important that you felt you must run up the tower steps to see me?”

Felan held up his huge clawed paw in a beseeching gesture. Joce’lynn’s lips twitched in humor, presumably at the sight of the fit male’s hard panting. “I’ll wait in my study for your explanation then. Join me once you are recovered.”

Katja nodded, grateful for the reprieve. When she and the werewolf finally did begin to explain themselves to the Mage Magistrate, Joce’lynn’s relaxed mood shifted. She sat chewing her lip throughout the conversation and did not speak until long after the skinshifter mages had finished recounting their news.

“This is my fault. I was the one who sent her on this quest. When Qenethala ceased her communications over a week ago, I feared that she’d been killed or Turned...” Joce’lynn passed a hand over her age-worn face—her worry evident in every line. “This is grim indeed. Even more so as it comes right on the heels of two new deadwalker sightings. I received word from the harpies this morning that enemy scouts were seen near Reithrgar Pass and along Vihous’s eastern border. Zahlathra just sent word through the trees that her dryads cannot sustain the Glen’s First Tier’s defenses much longer. She expects a retreat to the Second Tier in two weeks unless reinforcements arrive. I have sent word to the ogres in Jhalag and at Barak Fort via sprite carriers. I can only hope that they can arrive in time.”

Katja frowned. “Wouldn’t it be simpler to have a dreamdrifter broadcast the dryads’ need for assistance to all available allies?”

Joce’lynn shook her head, dislodging a few silver ringlets from her bun. “The Asheken have several high-level shades and psychics within their ranks now. Those Turned shadowshapers and dreamdrifters are disrupting our dreamdrifters’ efforts. Only the most basic messages can be pushed through right now.”

Katja looked at Felan. “So Dayalan was right about the psychic attacks.”

Felan’s furred fist slammed against Joce’lynn’s aged oak desk. “There must be something we can do!”

Joce’lynn looked at him intently and then inclined her head. “There is. I am declaring an Inquisition.”

Katja stared at her. The only time in history that an Inquisitor had ever roamed Sylvan soil had been when the first fireforger Aribem had named himself Inquisitor, and fought against the vampire High Elder Luther himself during the First War of Ages. Such was Aribem’s power that his sacrificial death had caused a worldwide quake, one which had split apart the Northern and Sylvan Continents. It had been the only thing that saved the remaining Sylvan Order races from being Turned.

“Surely the circumstances aren’t that dire!” the werecat said.

Joce’lynn nodded. “Never have I known a fireforger to Turn into a deadwalker! It has always been impossible. Every fireforger who has ever felt a vampire’s Tainted bite has been destroyed by his own fire during his Turning, yet Daeryn wasn’t. He is a vampire and a shade. A shade who has managed to attack a wraithwalker mage on the mages’ very island of refuge. And not even a dragon can stand against him! This may be unwise of me to say to you now, but I fear him more than even Luther. I fear what Daeryn may become if his power grows. And I am not alone in my assessment. Meanwhile Luther’s deadwalkers spread across our lands, casting all of our lives into the deepest darkness. Katja, Felan, I have not seen such destruction since I was a youth!”

She balled her fists as her jaw tightened. “I will not be caught in another deadwalker noose as we were during the Eppon Gue Battle. We Sylvans became far too entangled in their snares

mere weeks ago with Peha'lyn's betrayal. We need an Inquisitor. There are too few bureaucrats left on this island to oppose me, so I will use my vote as the ranking Ring of Sorcerers' Judge and wraithwalker mage master to name an Inquisitor."

Joce'lynn's declarations shook Katja to the marrow and she saw her fear reflected in Felan's eyes as well. "But who could be powerful enough to take up Aribem's mantle?" he whispered. "Yourself? Nicho'lyn?"

Barely restrained triumph crept into the mage's face. "Dayalan."

"Dayalan?" both Katja and Felan were slack-mawed.

Joce'lynn's smile was smugness in its purest form. "Dayalan is the most powerful fireforger mage since Aribem. He is also the only being I know besides you, Katja, who can still thwart Daeryn's attacks. The two of you did so this morning, did you not?"

Katja nodded numbly. "But, My Madam, what of Dayalan's thirst? He still craves the blood of beasts just as his brother once did. If the hybrid Falls to temptation and drinks the blood of a being—"

"If he drinks the blood of a being and successfully Turns into a vampire like Daeryn, then all hope is lost. Fire and those that wield it are our last line of defense against the deadwalkers and it will mean nothing to either of them."

"You're desperate," Felan murmured.

"I'm desperate," she agreed. "That being said, I don't believe my hope is misplaced. Dayalan's experience with deadwalkers and his intimate knowledge of their history will be invaluable in the act of rooting out evil. He may hate the idea, but Dayalan is the natural choice for the title. The Inquisitor is autonomous in his authority, so he and his retainers hold political invulnerability. They can journey to any Sylvan Order kingdom, territory, or township on the Southern Continent in search of Asheken with the full authority of the Ring of Sorcerers supporting them. No laws save those governing the Ring can bind them."

Katja's ears perked. "Who would be his retainers?"

"Lauraisha and yourself as a start. The Sylvan mages desperately need to reestablish a presence in Tyglesea and discover the veracity of Perefaris's claims that the royal court plays host to a deadwalker spy. From what I know of your morning's visions, our Turned sproutsinger instructor was telling the truth. The question is how deep does the deception run? If Princess Lauraisha is named one of the Inquisitor's retainers, she'll give us a good reason to find out. I want you to go along as well, Katja. Dayalan will need your skills as a wraithwalker mage to help him in his task."

"And if I meet Daeryn while in Tyglesea?"

"Have the good sense to relieve him of the spear-shard bonding your minds before he uses it against you."

For the third time that day, Katja's maw hung open in her shock. "After all that you've just told us, you still want me to confront him?"

Joce'lynn nodded. "The three of you allied hold the best chance of winning any fight against him."

"What about me, My Madam? I want to go with them."

She shook her head. "Unfortunately, Felan, I must send you with Zahra and Vraelth on another mission."

Felan growled. "No disrespect intended, My Madam, but I don't think it's wise to split up our pack."

Joce'lynn frowned. "I understand your concerns and, of course, I'll consult Verdagon and my fellow Ring of Sorcerers members about this, but I'm sure that they'll all agree with my choice."

"Where are you sending us, if I may ask?"

"You and the others will be traveling to the Sacrificial Pines at the cratered remains of Mount Denth sol Dyvesé. I need whatever information you can glean from Qenethala before her mind is lost to her Merging tree. I cannot stress the importance of this enough."

Felan stared at her. "She's trapped in a tree in the shadow of Aribem's sacred mountain?"

Joce'lynn nodded.

Katja and Felan's ears flattened at the implied danger.

"From what you've just told us, deadwalkers have completely overrun that entire region!" Katja said.

"I know. Trust me, I would not ask you—any of you—to undertake such dangerous errands if they weren't absolutely vital to Sylvan survival. Before she Merged, Qenethala sent me a message through the trees. She knows where the Ursa Agate lies hidden and how to retrieve it. She Merged with that pine tree so that she would not have to give up the Keystone's location to our enemies."

"But you could send someone else besides Zahra to retrieve it," Katja reasoned. "Why would you ask Zahra to face her dying sister?"

"A strong sproutsinger mage like Zahra is one of the few beings who can still communicate with a Merged dryad. Besides, Qenethala trusts her." The female elder frowned. "Is it wrong for me to offer family members a chance to say farewell?"

Felan's gaze was defiant. "Does Zahra really have any choice in the matter?"

"I will not order her to do this, Felan, but I *will* strongly implore her to go."

Felan bowed his head. "Very well, then. I will go with her so long as she agrees."

Joce'lynn nodded in satisfaction. Katja, however, flattened her ears and growled. The likelihood that any of her packmates would return alive from such a task was minimal at best.

"With all due respect, Joce'lynn," she interrupted. "How wise is it to send me along with the others to Tyglesea—given my recent behavior?"

The sorceress peered at the werecat a moment and the skinshifter felt the mage master's power brush her soul. Katja forced herself to lower her own defenses as Joce'lynn examined her innermost being.

"I can feel Daeryn's darkness in you, Katja, as the barest wisp of crimson Taint anchored to your mind and soul. That is beyond dangerous for a wraithwalker mage because you walk the very edges our Erde Realm of Existence every time you delve into your abilities. If the Taint causes you to stray even a little and you could die. Even so, I also glimpse the smoldering markers where Dayalan, Verdagon, and yourself have destroyed his Tainted influence. Those markers will help guide you away from the darkness. There is hope for you yet—even if it is small."

A memory sparked in Katja's mind. The werecat shivered as she remembered her brother Kayten's pallid face after he had been Turned. Dayalan's fire had destroyed him, but not before her own loving brother had tried to murder her. She swallowed hard. "If Daeryn has his way, will I become a...a nemean like Kayten?" she asked, whispering the name for a Turned werecat.

Joce'lynn frowned. "It's possible, but I doubt that is Daeryn's intention. If left unchecked, Daeryn's corruption will certainly affect you more with each skinshift until it eventually Turns

you into a zombie or nemean. However, you would be of far better use to the deadwalkers as a full vampire.”

“Why?”

Joce’lynn frowned. “When wraithwalkers are Turned into full vampires, they become necromancers. I could be wrong, but my assumption is that Luther wants another necromancer like himself and such Fallen mages are very rare. Daeryn has already tried to Turn you into a Víchí at his master’s orders. I’ve no doubt that he’ll attempt it again.”

“What can we do to stop him?” Felan asked.

The sorceress pursed her lips in thought. “Damyá’s, Dayalan’s, and Lauraisha’s combined talents should help protect Katja once in the field. That is, of course, if Dayalan accepts the duties of Inquisitor.

“Truthfully, Felan, I would prefer you, Vraelth, and Verdagon to accompany her as well, but I cannot leave Zahra so lightly guarded on her mission and, thanks to the war, I can spare no other mages. If the dryad princess is to have any hope of success, you three must accompany her. Once you have recovered the Ursa Agate, you must reunite with the Inquisition before they journey inside Tyglesea. If Daeryn is there just as Lauraisha suspects, it will likely take all of your combined strength to destroy him.”

“How can we hope to join forces before the Inquisitor and his retainers are due at court?” the werewolf asked. “Tyglesea is across the continent from here and we must travel north before moving south and then west again, all while Dayalan’s entourage will journey almost due west from the outset.”

“Felan, you will have Verdagon with you and he can fly.”

“Yes, but can he bear all three of us at once?”

“Not now, but he’ll be large enough in two months’ time to fly short distances while carrying the three of you.”

Felan scowled, but finally nodded.

Katja, however, was still frowning. “Joce’lynn, how can Dayalan be made an Inquisitor when he has not been given the name-change due a mage master?”

Joce’lynn smiled again. “Not to worry. I will see to it that Dayalan tests for his master-level rank by the end of the week. He is ready. However, I expect the two of you to keep your confidence in this matter until the official announcement. Will you protect my secret?”

Felan and Katja bowed their consent.

“Good.” She stood up from her chair and the two skinshifters followed suit. “Now, if all of your inquiries are settled momentarily, I suggest we go find food before the servants run out of anything warm. I believe lamb is today’s meat selection.”

Meet the Author

Alycia Christine grew up near the dusty cotton fields of Lubbock, Texas, with a fearless mutt for a dog and a backyard trampoline that almost bounced her to the moon. She fell in love with fantasy and science fiction books when her father first read them to her at age ten. Her love of fiction writing blossomed during her time at Texas A&M University. Alycia's fiction has received wide praise for its unique characters and vivid storytelling. Her award-winning art photography has been featured in Times Square. When she isn't writing or shooting photos, Alycia enjoys long talks with her husband, drinking copious amounts of tea, and coaxing her skittish cat out from under the living room furniture. Find her at AlyciaChristine.com.

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