

Circle Balanced

by

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Eliash sighed and rubbed at a particularly stiff and soiled spot on her cinch. The saddle grease slicked her roughened hands, her brown skin hashed white with old scars. She smiled to herself. Surely no one in their right mind would seek the runaway Princess Luen Shenyv of Skan in the stables, cleaning her tack in preparation for the afternoon's patrol. Still, she always kept her sword near. The prospect of the searchers' return, of their trying to force her to go back, made her very careful. She snorted softly and readjusted the cinch across her knees. Why did they even want her? Skan hated magic. Enough to use torture on a small child. And now? What did they think they'd find? Definitely no pitiful, beaten girl. Eliash was a pillar of Ter's Inner Circle now, not to mention a well-blooded captain of its army. Whatever prompted this quest for her, she sincerely doubted that it was to her benefit. She thought of her father and venom burned her tongue. Maybe he wanted to finish what he'd started. Her lips tightened. He could try.

Three springs ago the searchers had come looking and been sent away emptyhanded. She had been on a mission then, hunting down the Zakaron raiders ambushing caravans along the Renet Causeway. Though the searchers had left and not been heard from again, the possibility

that they might return haunted her quiet moments. It still disturbed her that the colors the riders were described as wearing were blue and black—not the sun-brilliant yellow and fresh-blood red of her father’s court. Who else had a stake in the Princess of Skan? Did they want to ransom her to her father? Or make sure she’d not birthed any claimants the throne?

The knowledge that anyone would search for her after so many years of safe nondescription, and here in Ter, had dismayed her, and she had been tempted to flee into the western wastes where the Teren people harvested the valuable rarities that were their stock in trade.

But Eliash had remained—she was a warrior as much as anything else. And warriors had been needed to protect Ter then—especially those who could draw the ley. She didn’t fear Teren betrayal. How could they reveal what they did not know? And even if they had known, her position within the Circle made her more Teren, more theirs, than any mere ties of birth or blood.

* * *

The alarm sounded a few hours later. The mind-call came from a sentry along the foothill border. Eliash’s patrol was just beginning their patrol, heading out the southern gate, but turned instantly on her command and galloped out along the northern road. Her squad bunched their horses tightly, snorting nostrils against tightly knotting haunches, and Eliash, in the lead, reached for the ley. Its power rippled through her and she bound it about her, about the squad, and pulled them forward through its shimmering rainbow brilliance. The horses, well-seasoned in such portation, never faltered a step as they burst in full stride onto the plain of Asarant. The sentry’s call had indicated that a large company of Zakaron sun-warriors chased a group of mounted

riders across that plain, toward Ter. The Zakaron were gaining, and the fleeing riders would be killed before crossing the shallow Cormath and gaining the safety of the foothills. Eliash waved her squad into wing formation, their swords unsheathed as they raced forward, shouting their mounts to greater speed.

The riders before them faltered, thinking they were attacked, and the sun-warriors gained. The Terens would not make it in time. Without thinking, Eliash reached into the minds of the fleeing riders' wild-eyed mounts, ordering them to bolt, toward her, toward safety. As if whipped, the lathered horses leaped forward, ignoring the shouted protests of their riders. Screaming, the Zakarons beat their fanged steeds with the flats of their swords. But it was too late. Eliash's squad swept forward, past the exhausted riders, directly into the path of the furious sun-warriors. In a moment Eliash extended the ley along the wing, enveloping her warriors in its protection. The Zakarons were no match. They could not penetrate her shielding as the squad closed formation, each end of the wing coming together like a vice to crush the invaders between. In only minutes there was nothing left but torn remnants and rags of skin and fur. Closing up the formation, Eliash withdrew from the ley and trotted back to where the rescued riders waited.

They were knights, ragged, travel-worn, and clothed in blue and black.

Carefully relaxing her hands which had fisted on her reins, Eliash pulled up in front of them, her squad fanning out beside her.

"It is not safe to stop," she said. "We must cross the Cormath before we are once again in Teren country. The river is shallow and should prove little hardship for your tired mounts." It was true their horses were white with foam and their noses dangled nearly to their hooves as they panted. But they responded willingly, if not eagerly, to their riders' commands. There were twelve of them, Eliash counted. Ten of them were knights. The eleventh was a young acolyte of

the Skanian church, dressed in a ragged brown cowled robe. The twelfth was a priest of the church and wore the traditional black cowled robe, its belled sleeves lined with red and yellow. The first time they'd come to Ter there had been twenty knights and two Velonian seekers.

She did not speak again until they were across the river. Then she suggested that they dismount and rest. The garrison was some miles west and south and she feared that their horses would not make the trek, not on top of such exhaustion. Traveling the ley would be much faster and easier, but it was her experience that outlanders would not willingly travel so.

As they arrived on the opposite bank, she sent a mind-call to the garrison watch, reporting the engagement and rescue. Then she dismounted, directing her squad to set a watch and gather wood before turning to the man who appeared to be in charge of the knights.

“What brought you to such a pass?” she asked, gesturing back across the river, the azurite armband on her bare left arm glittering in the sun.

He removed his helm, the metal plates on his leather gloves clanging softly against its scarred surface. Grime lined the creases of his forehead and neck, marring only slightly the tanned planes of his face, the generous cast of his features, and the patrician thrust of his nose. He smiled ruefully, pulling off his gauntlets and running his fingers through his red burnished hair.

“We had been in Wymeth and found it imperative to return to Ter. We came by the most direct route possible. Unfortunately, it led us over the Sherezyn Mountains and through the swamps of Malm. We ran into more trouble when we came to the Laderes desert—it's been a long, dry summer and there were no supplies or guides. So we struck straight north, through Zakar, thinking we could get across the isthmus without detection.” He shook his head and

rubbed the back of his neck, and Eliash heard the grumble of his stomach beneath his tattered tabard and mail.

“I beg your pardon. Please, sit. We will soon have food and the fire will cut the chill of the wind.” She gestured toward the newly built fire. Members of her squad had begun rubbing down the horses for the exhausted riders who looked uncertainly at their leader. He glanced back at Eliash who was taking his mount’s reins from his hand.

“You are kind—”

“Eliash-yan,” she supplied, the honorific indicating her status as a pillar of the Inner Circle.

“Your kindness overwhelms us, Eliash-yan, and we are grateful. Permit me to present myself. I am Kendrigan of the house of Shalor of Velon. These others are knights of Velon, as well as a priest of Skan and his acolyte. We have long been on quest and in Ter we hope to at last end our journey.”

This last statement made Eliash start as though stung. Kendrigan had turned back to his horse and did not notice. She reached a hand out.

“You are worn, Sir Kendrigan, and a guest. Rest. I will care for your horse.” She waved away his protests and led the big gray aside, removing his saddle and rubbing him down with handfuls of grass, picked from the lush summer growth that rippled like ocean waves over the foothills. Instead of going to sit with his companions, Kendrigan followed Eliash, watching her as she stroked the sweat and dirt from the animal’s coat.

“How far from here to High Ter?” he asked.

“About five days,” she replied. “That is, with fresh horses. We can supply those for you or you may rest at the garrison for a few days until your animals are refreshed. It is only a few hours from here.”

Behind them, the priest of Skan had approached and now broke in. “We must be on our way as soon as possible. We have no time to wait. You heard the oracle of Wymeth. If we are to find Luen Shenyv, we must get to High Ter.”

The knight glanced down at the hand the priest had laid on his arm and then back up at the man's sallow face. “If indeed the Princess is in High Ter, then she has waited the months of our journey from Wymeth. There is no reason to believe that she will have gone anywhere. We need rest. We must not approach the Inner Circle of Ter as vagabonds. We must have their help and we will only have one opportunity to make a first impression.” He turned to Eliash. “I thank you for your kind offer. We would be grateful for your hospitality.”

The priest stood a moment. He stared up at the Velonian knight, struggling redfaced against his own impotence in the matter, and then spun around and stomped back to the fire. Eliash smiled a razor smile at his aggravation, delighted to see one of her father's minions cut off at the knees. There had usually been priests present for her sessions. When her father had brutalized her in the name of faith and goodness. None had interfered; all had praised her father's iron will, telling him what he did was a kindness, an act of love.

Kendrigan returned her smile, his gaze running appreciatively over her. Her lips flattened, remembering the purpose of his mission, and she turned again to his horse, briskly rubbing his legs once more before tethering him and leaving him to crop grass.

After a quick meal of trailbread and cheese, the Teren soldiers guided the ragged party back the garrison. They arrived three hours after the sun had set. The garrison had been warned

and a spread of food and wine waited for the visitors. Eliash brought up the rear as her squad followed the visitors toward the Hall. Halfway there, she paused midstride as she recalled the day's interrupted patrol. Calling to Gela, her second, she said "I think I'll take a ride and see how it goes."

"Warnick would send if there were problems."

"I know. But—" Eliash shrugged. She didn't like to leave Warnick with her duties. Gela recognized the set of her superior's face and nodded.

"I'll get the others—"

"No, I shouldn't be long."

Gela stared at her a long moment and then sighed. "As you wish. But they won't eat. You know that."

"Tell them it's an order."

"I'll tell them. They won't obey."

Eliash returned to the barns and in a few minutes was back out on the road. She reached out for the ley and felt for Warnick's squad. In a moment she found them. In another, she had left the vicinity of the stronghold and was miles away.

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"Where is your Eliash-yan?" asked Kendrigan of the garrison colonel who sat beside him, nodding his head in the direction of the empty chair further down the head table. All around the room he saw men and women from the day's patrol. They stood or sat, but none joined their

fellows in eating of the groaning tables of food, nor drank anything but water from the casks so marked.

Dyral-yan followed his gaze and his lips quirked. “She went out to check on Warnick—he took her patrol when she got the call you were coming. No trouble, but she’s like that. They won’t eat until she does.”

He saw Kendrigan’s look of surprise tinged with something like disapproval and laughed outright. “Oh, yes, I know. A soldier must eat when he can, and no room for silly sentiment. But you will convince none of them that. They have been with her three springs now, through the end of the war, and because of her, they are all still alive today. In spite of spearheading many of the attacks on Zakar. They are more loyal to her, I think, than to the Circle. They take no comfort if she does not.”

At that moment Eliash strode through the doors and was met by loud greetings from all around. A full platter of food was thrust into one hand and a foaming mug of ale in the other as she made her way to the dais where the colonel, his other captains, and the visitors sat. She ducked her head, a red stain spreading beneath the tan of her cheeks. Kendrigan stared openly. She ate quickly and neatly, rarely looking up. As he glanced again at the assembled garrison, Kendrigan saw that all had now joined in the feasting.

After the meal, the visitors were shown to their sleeping quarters, Dyral-yan apologizing for packing them together, but the garrison was never meant for entertaining guests. The Velonians protested that they were too grateful for a safe roof, soft beds and warm baths to complain of spartan conditions. Only the Skanian priest stared sourly about himself in patent disapproval.

It wasn't long until Goylen and Esterhazy were snoring. Kendrigan listened, discovering himself too keyed up to sleep. He watched out the narrow window, sipping a dry red wine, finding himself wondering about the captain who'd led their rescue. The years of search had been meager of women, and his body roused at the thought of her.

Even as though his thoughts had conjured her, she paced out of the shadows of the building. She was dressed in a voluminous blouse and trousers, and the moon gleamed off the loosened length of her cinnamon hair. She yawned and rolled her head on her neck, glancing around the compound as she stepped out across the square.

Without thinking, Kendrigan set his goblet down on the sill and exited his room. He crossed the square after her, following a path that led down to a pool where the river ran beneath the walls of the garrison. Eliash-yan had undressed and was skimming through the water, her long strokes graceful in the moonlight. He paused at the head of the trail, wondering if he dared intrude.

“Could you not sleep, Sir Kendrigan?”

Startled, he jumped and choked. He took a couple of steps down the path and then stopped as she rose out of the water, a pale shape in the black shadows. She dried herself briskly and pulled her clothes back on. In a moment she had wrapped her hair in the towel and climbed the trail to stand beside him.

“If you wish to swim . . .” she said, gesturing to the pool.

He shook his head and opened his mouth, not knowing what to say. She stood very still, staring at him in the darkness. Then with a sharp movement, she strode up the trail. He caught up with her at the corner of the stables, putting a hand on her arm.

“Please, I did not mean to offend.”

“You did not offend, Sir Kendrigan,” she said stiffly. “It is just—”

“Just?” he prompted when she did not continue.

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“Just?”

The question burned. Elish shook her head. She sensed his desire for her, and she felt the same. He was handsome, brave and well-spoken. But she was the Princess for which they searched. This was stupid at best, insane at worst. Nothing good could come of it. At a moment he could recognize her. And if he didn't? a tiny voice questioned. What if he didn't?

His hand crept up to her shoulder and rubbed at the tense muscles there. Eliash sighed and leaned into his touch, heat washing over her skin. He pulled the towel from her hair and curled the long wet strands about his fingers, pulling her gently to him.

A breath away from her lips he said, “I would not offend you, Eliash-yan. Tell me if I should return to my quarters.”

Eliash did not answer, but closed the space between them, her hands coming up to circle his waist as her lips met his. It was likely to prove disastrous in the end; she knew this, but she had wanted him since he'd pulled the helm from his head, and he touched her with a need she hadn't felt from a man in a long time. They pushed through the stable doors into its musky darkness. He spread his cloak on a mound of sweet smelling straw, and then drew her down beside him.

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Three days later the knights milled amongst their horses in the square. Their clothing had been cleaned and repaired, their helms and chain polished, and a pennant with the black lion device of Velon on a blue field floated on the wind above them. Already mounted were Selma and Keyo, both of Eliash's squad. They were to guide the visitors to High Ter.

"I would have hoped for your company on this journey," Kendrigan said to Eliash as he prepared to mount.

"I have my duties here. And I will be there when they convene the Circle."

Kendrigan started, pulling his foot from the stirrup and turned back to her. His dumbfounded look made Eliash grin. She answered the question before he voiced it.

"I am pillar of the Inner Circle of Ter. For us, your five days journey is a mere step through the ley. We would port you through, but I doubt your horses or your priest would permit it."

He stared at her a moment before shaking his head. "She had a power you know. That was why she ran from Skan. Such a thing was criminal then, a sin punishable by death."

"And it isn't now?" Eliash questioned, more sharply than wise.

"It has been fourteen turns since she fled, and the world as she knew it has changed much. Danger threatens both Velon and Skan, and our fates are tied together. The seers tell us she may be our only hope. So we have quested long. We came to Ter once before and found nothing. But the oracle of Wymeth tells us our search will end in High Ter. Though she refused to indicate whether it would be a happy end. I pray that is so, for we have long been away from home, and we know not how things fare there. I fear it may be too late."

Eliash wanted to ask more questions—so many more than she could safely ask. Instead she brushed her fingers across his arm and stepped back. Kendrigan mounted, the gray stallion ducking his head and pushing against the bit with buoyant energy. As the others roused and followed the two Teren soldiers through the gates, Kendrigan paused and leaned down to Eliash, taking her hand and kissing it.

“I will see you in High Ter.”

His words were a promise that pinked her cheeks and then he was gone, trotting after his companions on the way to discovering her, the Princess of Skan. Her stomach balled up then and a look of stone passed over her face. Five days until she had to tell the truth of herself.

#

Ter is ruled by the Circle balanced. On the high council sits three pillars of the Inner Circle, three talents of the Outer Circle, and three who rest Between with no ability to touch the ley. They each serve their lifetimes, and as one dies, another is selected from their ranks.

Following the petition of Velonians, the high council agreed to convene a full Circle. Members of the Outer Circle would mind-send the proceedings as they happened for those who could not attend. The Circle was set for the sixth day following the Velonian departure from the Jelan outpost on the Zakar border.

Eliash hadn't yet seen Kendrigan, and she was no longer sure that she wanted to. People had been gathering at the huge amphitheater of High Ter for more than three days. It was a festival atmosphere, with carts of food, cloths, jewelry, spices and a huge assortment of other necessities and luxuries set up all around. People were camped in tents and wagons, as the inns

were full to bursting. The air swirled with delightful smells of stews and roasting meats, sweet breads and pies, pickles and teas and wines. It was a bigger gathering than even the harvest faire, and Eliash marveled at the speed in which it had happened.

She had arrived with her squad only a few hours before, after helping port all off-duty squads to the city. It was near mid-day now, and the Circle would convene at sundown. She knew where the knights had been housed, and knew too that Kendrigan would be looking for her. But there was a fiery ball growing larger in her chest and the thought of seeing him, dressed in the colors of Velon—what did he expect her to do?

Eliash had been twelve turns old when she'd fled Skan, a stowaway in the belly of a trader's ship. She had been a child, desperately afraid of the power she felt growing inside of her. He had seen it though, her father, and had done what he could to uproot it. She remembered what he had done to cure her, and she shivered now in the hot sun. She would not go back to him. She knew he could not harm her now—she had realized the power that he'd fought so hard to tear from her. But she remembered his rages, the way he taunted her, how his eyes had been so hard that they might have been forged steel. She couldn't help the fear that clutched her.

Eliash's hand crept to the pommel of her sword and she clutched it. Gela moved up beside her.

“What is it, Eliash-yan?”

Eliash shook her head and dropped her hand, flexing her fingers. “Ghosts and goblins, my friend.” She twisted her lips into a semblance of a smile and looked at her second. “And since when do you call me -yan?”

Her words did not reassure Gela, but the woman accepted the change of subject and walked on beside her, offering Eliash a soft molasses drop.

Eliash scanned the crowd about them, noting here and there to the members of the squad who seemed to be wandering aimlessly through the jugglers and carts, but who remained within easy distance of their captain, rather than scattering to enjoy the festivities. She said nothing. There was nothing she could do about it except sneak away through the ley. It had long been a habit of her company that she should not go about unaccompanied. They refused to be convinced otherwise.

When sundown finally arrived, Eliash made her way with Gela into the amphitheater, taking up a place amongst the warriors who gathered at the far end, furthest from the dais where the High Council assembled. Soon the rest of her squad joined them, sifting through the throng until they stood together in a small knot. The knights with the priest of Skan and his acolyte were grouped on another dais facing the High Council. Kendrigan was scanning the crowd, whether for her or for the missing Princess she did not know. When his eyes passed over where she stood, she did not wave. Finally Eagis, the eldest member of the Council and one of those who stood Between the Circles, stood and the burbling noise of many mouths talking severed instantly.

“These knights of Velon, and this priest of Skan have come in search of the missing Princess of Skan. The oracle of Wymeth has told them that their quest will end here, in High Ter. We honor the oracle and have gathered to see what will be.”

Eagis turned to face the Velonian company. “We will hear you, Sir Kendrigan. But I must warn you that we will not seek her out for you if she does not answer your call. It is against our laws to enter the mind of another, unless under the most direst of circumstances, or under official sanction. It is unlikely that your needs will answer that requirement. Your best path lies

in the Princess herself hearing your plea. We are mind-sending to all within our borders. There is no one who will not hear. Begin.”

With that Eegis retreated back into the semicircle which was the High Council.

Kendrigan cleared his voice and gazed about the amphitheater, the moon shining nearly full from the clear night sky.

“Thank you for hearing us, people of Ter,” he said with a low bow. Then without prevarication, he jumped right into the story, relating it flatly, without any emotion. “At the age of twelve turns the Princess Luen Shenyv disappeared from the court of her father, Almadias, king of Skan. He sent men out searching for her, but they failed to find her, nor was any ransom asked. There were rumors that Almadias had put her to death when he discovered she could wield magic, and there were other rumors that she had died during one of his attempts to purge her of these forbidden powers. It is a fact that he treated her brutally. At any rate, she was gone, and has not been heard of since.

“Eight turns ago, an evil began to attack the southern continent, where Velon and Skan lie side-by-side. It is far from here, across the Fuorn Straits. A blight struck the land, and death struck the people. Dark things began to walk the roads, and where they passed, disease struck. A turn later, Almadias took ill with a wasting disease, as did much of his family. When it was over, only two sons survived. One of these, Alkane, was made king. He was a different man from his father and he broke the long enmity between Skan and Velon, asking for aid against this common blight. We could give none. But our Prince, Belledor, was eager to make an alliance. Better two against the dark, than one alone. So he went to the seers of Velon, begging them to seek an answer. Too, Alkane went among the priests of Skan and asked for divine guidance. At last

there came a ray of hope, in the name of Luen Shenyv. We must seek her, both seers and priests said. For in her rests salvation.”

Kendrigan paused for a moment. The crowd watched him in spellbound fascination. Encouraged by the rapt attention, he continued.

“For six turns we have searched, and finally we came to the oracle of Wymeth, who told us to return to Ter, for the end of our quest lay in High Ter. Now we desire to take the Princess home with us, in the hope that she will be able to put an end to the evil which rolls across our land—if it not too late.”

Kendrigan’s voice stopped abruptly, but no voices rose in answer. Finally, as the silence grew, a voice rang out from up near the lip of great earthen cup. It was a man’s voice.

“What can this girl do that you can’t?”

“We do not know. She has magic. Perhaps that will be the answer. All we know is that the seers agree that she is our only hope.”

Another voice. “What if she chooses not to come with you? What will you do then? Will you leave her in peace?”

Kendrigan stood motionless, his head raised. Finally he answered. “No, I cannot promise that.”

A rumbling growl rolled across the assembly. Kendrigan raised his hand. “I can promise that my Prince will protect her from her family. She will be free. Indeed, he has made an offer of marriage. She will become a queen of Velon, and no longer subject to Skan, if she should so wish.”

Another voice, this time from the High Council dais. “Can you speak for your Prince? Really? Marriage with a woman whom no one has seen in fourteen turns? What if she is no

longer a Princess? What if she is diseased? Or haggard with age? Or barren? What then? Can you speak for him?"

"He swore an oath!" Kendrigan exclaimed, affronted. "He is an honorable man."

"Can you really say that? How long since you've been home? What if he is no longer alive?" The questions came from all sides and Kendrigan turned back and forth, trying to answer them.

Eliash had another question, one that she could not ask herself. She owed a loyalty to these people of Ter. She was one of the Inner Circle, and they must know too, who—what—she was, what they had protected and nurtured all these years. Reaching a hand out to Gela, she sent a request into her second's mind. Gela's eyes widened, but she nodded, her eyes flickering to Eliash and then back to Kendrigan whose voice was rising as he felt himself losing the battle. Eliash stepped back into the throng behind her, and gathered the ley.

She reached for Gela, entering her mind, forging a ley-bond between them, until they were as one, then she spoke through Gela's mouth, still hiding her own identity.

"Sir Kendrigan."

The voice was loud, enhanced by ley and a shroud of silence dropped across the amphitheater, all Teren eyes looking for the speaker. She was not hard to find. She glowed with light, until the nimbus about her grew so bright that no one could any longer see who spoke. But there was not a Teren there who did not understand that a pillar spoke, and spoke through the body of a Between. The silence was dreadful.

"Sir Kendrigan, you have said you will take back to your Prince the Princess that you find. Have you thought what she might be? Perhaps not diseased, but something infinitely more frightening to your people? What if she wears a sword and the scars of battle—will your people

accept such a one as that? And what if she is more than that? You said she bore a power. What if that power has been realized, here in Ter? What if she is of the Outer Circle, with the ability to mind-call? Or what if she is a pillar of the Inner Circle, with the ability to manipulate the ley? What then? Will your Prince truly welcome her? Or will your people rise up in fear?"

All eyes turned to Sir Kendrigan.

Eliash waited for his reply, the ball in her chest making it hard to breathe. Her father dead, her country ravaged. When she'd thought of Skan at all, it has always been as a sun drenched land, ruled by the iron-fisted man that was her father. The news of his death flooded her with relief, but she ached for her people, for the land she remembered. She'd always liked Alkane. Only three turns older than she, he had tried to protect her from the worst of her father's cruelties.

Kendrigan answered slowly. "Perhaps if she is a pillar of your Inner Circle, if she is a warrior, then perhaps it would answer how she could stop the darkness which kills our land. My Prince will honor his oath; he will protect her with his life."

Eliash's response mocked him. "So you say. But it requires more than that. You have not been home in turns. As you say, things may have drastically changed. We must hear the words from the lips of your Prince. You said it yourself, Luen Shenyv has no cause to trust any of you. Her own father tried to kill her. There must be proof."

Approval ran through the crowd even as Kendrigan protested.

"We have no time! It would take months to get to Velon and bring back Belledor! We cannot wait!" The other knights had risen and were nodding vigorously with their leader.

Eagis rose once again from the dais. "That is not so, Sir Kendrigan. A pillar could take you home and return within moments. If you were willing to subject yourself to the power."

For a moment Kendrigan was still and Eliash wondered bitterly if his welcoming words for a woman of power were no more than just that. Then he nodded. In moments it was arranged, and a pillar had volunteered. Eliash still hid herself among the spectators. She had released Gela from the ley, and now her second stood at her shoulder, even as the rest of her company clustered about her. Gela knew now, and most certainly the others.

They watched as the pillar called the ley and he and Sir Kendrigan stepped through. It would take time, all knew, but a hush remained over the gathered people of Ter as they waited restlessly. Several nearby warriors stared curiously at Gela, but she merely stared back, and soon they looked away.

They waited nearly an hour, and then they were there—the pillar, Kendrigan, and another man. He was tall, taller even than Kendrigan, and his hair was the color of a raven’s wing. His face was lined and care-worn, and he carried himself with a grace that spoke of hardships faced. He strode to the dais with Kendrigan and mounted it, greeting the knights gathered there. His face showed consternation that so few remained, and then he turned to address the crowds.

“Sir Kendrigan has told me of your fears and I answer them now. My land is ravaged, though we claw to hold sway over the evil which encroaches nearer every day. Luen Shenyv’s brother, Alkane, fights hard, but with every moment, the jaws of the beast close tighter on him. We still do not know what we face, only that it is evil, and it is hungry. I pledge now, before you and my Gods, that I will honor Luen Shenyv in all ways possible. I pledge her my kingdom in marriage, I pledge her my faith. She will come to no harm because of me and mine, nor from her brother and his people. She is needed. Will she come?”

His voice rang out through the silence and Eliash heard the truth of his words. Kendrigan stood beside his prince, and she ached for what she was about to do to him. To them both. Then she spoke.

“I will come.”

Dead silence as every head swiveled, looking for the source of the declaration. Slowly a corridor opened before her and Eliash stepped down onto the floor of the amphitheater. She was not alone. Gela flanked her, and the rest of her squad followed. Kendrigan stepped forward, and she could see the astonishment on his face, followed by an emotion that she couldn't read. She stopped at the base of the dais, her midnight gaze meeting Belledor's.

“I am Eliash-yan, fourteen years of Ter, formerly called Luen Shenyv, daughter of Almadias, sister to Alkane. I am a pillar of the Inner Circle of Ter and a captain in her army. I agree to return to Skan with you, and help fight the darkness that besieges you. Of the rest—” Her lips tightened. “Of the rest, we will see.”

Belledor's dark eyes devoured her. From her cinnamon hair woven in a long braid down her back, to the sword she wore at her side, the battlescars which marked her bare arms, the soldiers at her back. She returned his stare, unflinching. Long had she been gone, and she was a no longer a terrified girl tortured within inches of death. Beside her, Gela bent forward slightly at the waist.

“We too will accompany Eliash-yan. She will not go alone.” Her voice left no room for argument, though Eliash started in surprise. Above them, the High Council nodded assent.

#

It was nearly dawn and they were about to set out for Velon. Eliash would take them through the ley in small groups—the outlander horses being too nervous to take at once. She was alone in a tent reserved for the visitors. To Belledor she'd had little to say. He did not know what to make of her, but thanked her profusely while Kendrigan stood mutely by. Belledor reassured her of her safety, but Eliash had only shaken her head. She could take care of herself better than they. It hadn't been the words of protection she'd needed to hear from his lips. It had been the truth of his need, of Skan's need. She couldn't know what was happening there and not try to help. No matter what her father had done. All the same, she was grateful that her squad had chosen to accompany her. Their loyalty stunned her and she was grateful not to be going back alone.

She waited now as the Prince and his knights paid their respects to their Ter hosts. She sighed heavily, tilting her head back and rubbing her neck.

“Luen Shenyv.” Kendrigan stood just within the tent flap, his face dark.

She stiffened. “That is no longer my name. Luen Shenyv is long dead. I am Eliash-yan.” She said it sharply.

“You knew. You knew that we—that I—searched for you. Why did you—? I have betrayed my Prince—my friend.” His voice was hard and hollow, and it chilled her.

Eliash smiled without humor and ran her tongue over her dry lips. “Do you think so? Is that the truth you understand? Then let me tell you mine.”

She rose and went to stand before him. His body was tense, shaking, as he stared down at her.

“I would not have lain with you, but my flesh was weak at a moment when my mind was not strong enough. True, I knew who you were—I knew your quest. I meant for you to walk

away from me, from Ter, never to discover Luen Shenyv at all. But then I chose to go to your bed. You say you broke your trust; you betrayed your Prince. I disagree. I do not want him, nor do I intend to marry him. Still, you were innocent in what we did, and I was not. I knew that had you realized who I was, you never would have touched me. In knowing this, in laying with you anyway, I deceived you. I unbalanced the Circle, and it is for me to set it right. Because of this, I listened to you when I did not want to, when I would gladly have ignored you and let you walk away from here emptyhanded. Instead, I heard your plea and for you, because of you, I go to help a land I have tried to forget, to help a people who bear no love for me. If we had not lain together, you would be returning home without me, without whatever hope you think I bring.”

Eliash waited for his reply, stepping back suddenly when a spasm crossed his face and the muscles along his jaws twitched as his teeth ground together. She expected him to yell, shred her ears with his anger. But he surprised her. His hand came out and clasped hers, raising her callused fingers to his cheek. She felt a dampness on his skin and her eyes widened.

Against her fingers he murmured, “it is true that you permitted my betrayal. But what is my fault, is that knowing who you are, knowing that my Prince has pledged to marry you, I still feel the way I feel—and Gods help me, I do not wish it otherwise.”

His voice was tormented and Eliash tightened her hand on his.

Gela opened the tent behind them and stuck her head in. She looked at them together and glanced away. “It is time,” was all she said before withdrawing. Eliash knew that she remained on guard outside. No one would disturb them. But it didn’t matter.

Kendrigan held Eliash’s hand in his, staring at their fingers clasped together. “It’s done,” he whispered, lowering their hands until they fell apart. He said nothing more and pushed out of the tent.

She stood a moment more, the ball in her chest winding tighter. Then she too pushed out into the dawn's gray light, Gela falling in behind her. Belledor scrutinized her from atop a bay loaned to him by the Ter, Kendrigan beside him on the gray, while the rest of the knights and her company milled about them. Eliash glanced at the eastern sky where the sun spread its fiery fingers across the horizon, and then she swung up on her horse. Looking once more around the garrison parade grounds as though to engrave it on her memory, she faced forward and reached for the ley.

* * *

Eliash stepped out onto the turret allure, her hands clenched together to keep them from shaking. The night closed about her like a warm fist and she coughed at the stench of rotting vegetation, decaying animal flesh and stagnating water. Skan and Velon were dying. Burying and burning the emaciated, diseased bodies of the growing number of dead didn't seem to do much to cut the smell or the spread of the wasting sickness.

She circled the turret, the stars and moon paradoxically bright and clear in the sulphurous night. She walked rapidly, her body coiled so tightly she thought she would scream or kill someone. The latter might do more to help her torment, she thought darkly. Her pace increased and too soon the door to the turret reappeared on her left. Should she return to the war council? What good what it do? They would most certainly continue to ignore her.

Eliash paused looked in the doorway, her face shrouded in shadow. Her brother Alkane pounded a fist on the heavy square table. He stood tall with sun-spun hair and a close-cut beard, bulky as she was not. He had grown into a strong and, under ordinary circumstances, competent

ruler. But circumstances conspired against him. His land and people were dying and he was helpless to stop it. Frustrated with his failure against the creeping darkness spreading across Skan, he resorted more and more to yelling.

To which Belledor did not respond at all well.

Belledor. He sat opposite Alkane, his face lined with exhaustion and worry and a growing fury. His raven-black hair was swept from his face and held at the nape of his neck in a silver clasp shaped like a lion. His eyes sparked with anger, though he held himself composed in his chair, long fingers tapping gently on his thigh. Eliash rubbed a callused hand over her face, pinching her lip. At Alkane's furious pounding, Belledor pushed back his chair and stood, going to the sideboard where he poured himself a glass of wine. He swigged the wine in one gulp and poured himself another. Eliash winced. Belledor was generally an ascetic man, but Alkane and the situation had pushed him to his limits.

Two priests of Skan glanced at one another and then turned their attention to the papers before them, ignoring Alkane's outburst. Parasites. Her lip curled. Supposedly serving at these sessions as advisors and councilors, the two grasping clerics lobbied only for their own personal agendas, fomenting disagreement between the two rulers with little regard to the consequences. A handful of Velonian seekers, courtiers, generals and clerks filled out the room, adding the noise and bluster.

And then there was Kendrigan.

Eliash sighed.

He remained mostly quiet, standing back and watching the proceedings with a strained countenance. If he rarely spoke to the gathering, he said even less to her, except when made absolutely necessary by protocol or a message from Belledor—her supposed husband-to-be.

They all took it for granted that she would marry him, despite her own words to the contrary.

Eliash frowned. She was not yet ready to say that returning here had been a mistake—her birth-land was in trouble and if she could help save it, then it was worthwhile. But these men tired her. Kendrigan in particular

Her eyes ran over him. Broad-shouldered and tall, he matched Belledor in height and breadth. But Kendrigan was flame where the other man was not, passionate as the other man was distant and reserved. Eliash closed her eyes, remembering their nights together in Ter, his touch like lightning on her skin, his words of love like sweet fire.

She opened her eyes. That was past now. Oh, Kendrigan still wanted her, craved her in the way she craved him. She read that in his gaunt face, in the hollow glances he darted her way when he couldn't help himself. But once he'd discovered that she was Princess Luen Shenyv, sister to Alkane and the foretold savior of both Skan and Velon, he'd run from her. As far as he was concerned, she belonged to Belledor and always had; in bedding her he'd betrayed not only his friend, but his liege. It tortured him. Because he could not stop betraying Belledor in his mind, his dreams, or his heart.

Like Belledor and Alkane, palpable rage coiled within his body. How much of that was due to her and not what was happening to Velon and Skan, Eliash couldn't help but wonder. But there was plenty of bad news to put him into a rage. Just this morning, four refugees from a village near the highlands had crawled in, bodies emaciated. The village was gone, they said. Taken by a churning torrent of shadow and ghoulish things with slotted lavender and yellow eyes, hooked claws and a touch of such cold horror that no one could survive it. Soldiers despatched had returned before they could reach the village. The shadow noose had closed more tightly on the realm, they said. They dared not cross those lands anymore, covered now in slimy

gray-white growths and crawling with blind and bloated worm-like monsters that writhed and twisted in the air, maws of sucking hunger seeking the taste of fresh blood. Of the four hundred souls in that village, only the four had made it out alive, and two of those would likely die before night's end.

Eliash had heard too many of such stories, had sat here too often in this very room listening to the bickering and wrangling over what was to be done. Never once had Alkane, Belledor or the priests looked to her for help. Nor did they let her speak. When she ventured an observation or opinion, they ignored her as though she had not even spoken. Eliash shook her head. They had searched for her, had sought her for years at the behest of their own priests and seers, of the oracle at Wymeth. And now that she was here, they kept her locked away from danger, afraid to use the one tool they had.

Kendrigan had seen her fight. She and her squad had rescued him and his company from the Zakaron as they fled across the plain of Asaranth into Ter. But it was as if, returning home, he'd lost his memory of that battle. He had begun to treat her in much the same way as Alkane and Belledor—when he was willing to notice her at all.

Eliash ground her teeth.

All they saw was a fragile woman, dainty and delicate, despite the evidence to the contrary in the scars slashing across her skin and the calluses on her hands. In front of her they tried to sugar the discussions so her frail feminine sensibilities would not be offended. She snorted. Even now in the midst of this new crisis, if they remembered her presence, they'd do it. She had refused to cater to their illusions by wearing the fancy embroidered and jewel-studded robes Alkane had had made for her. It had been a gesture of apology as much as anything else. She had refused to go to Skan. She couldn't face the place where her father had brutalized her.

He gave her the dresses as a peace-offering. She'd have preferred a good sword or armor. The dresses languished in her wardrobe and instead she wore leathers, with her sword buckled on her left hip, long-knife on her right, a cudgel fastened in the shoulder loops of her vest, greaves buckled over her shins, and gauntlets wrapped around her forearms. Her only jewelry was the azurite armband on her sleeveless left bicep which denoted her as a pillar of Ter—one who could both manipulate the ley and mind speak.

Eliash crossed her arms and returned to the night, leaning on the parapet and looking out to the mountains beyond the city. There was a wrongness, an imbalance. She could feel it on her skin, in the marrow of her bones. The balance must be restored before everyone remaining died. So she would say if they asked what ought to be done, what could be done. And she'd tell them how, though they seemed to have all but forgotten the reason for which they sought her out, the reason she'd fled her home: the power which had been her father's excuse to beat and starve her, to keep her locked up in darkness, sobbing for some small softening in his determination to exorcise the evil from her.

A sigh shook her and she put her head against the stone wall. She'd hated her father for so long. It had grown in Ter where they had welcomed her, trained her, shown her she was not evil but an essential part of the Circle. Even now she couldn't let it go, though he'd died seven turns ago. She'd visited his tomb once since her arrival, just long enough to spit on it.

Eliash straightened and clasped her hands around her belt. Enough of that. Almadias of Skan was long since gone and she had work to do. She returned to the turret room. Belledor, Alkane and a priest of Skan were caught up in a bitter exchange. Eliash barely gave them a sidelong glance.

She made her silent way to the door leading into the tower stairwell and descended, purpose speeding her steps. Exiting the tower, she motioned for the two waiting members of her squad to follow her. Not permitted in the tower, they kept vigil outside. She led them a short distance away from the guards where they would not be overheard.

“Kora, fetch Gela to me in my quarters. Feria, see that the others are ready to ride. Keep it discreet. We’ll meet at two hours after the city gates open at the gallows oak near the Tyburn,” Eliash named the inn set at the crossroads a mile north of the city walls. “Leave the city in ones and twos.”

The two men smiled understanding and saluted before disappearing into the gloom. Eliash made her way to her quarters in the castle-keep. Like the clothing Alkane had ordered for her, the apartment he’d assigned her was lavish and opulent, filled with thick rugs, silk hangings, extravagantly carved linen-fold paneling, foliated windows and ornate furniture. Crystal lamps shot flickering rainbow prisms over the room. Roses, carillions and irises from the castle greenhouse filled tall vases and scented the room with a rich odor. Eliash hated it all.

She went immediately to the desk and pulled open the top drawer, drawing forth sheets of parchment upon which she’d carefully drawn maps of Velon and Skan. Another thing Belledor, Alkane and Kendrigan hadn’t bothered to find out about her. Her memory was perfect.

She laid the maps out on a table, anchoring the edges with bric-a-brac thought to be necessary for a noble woman’s comfort. A quiet knock took her to her locked chamber door. Hearing Gela’s response to her quiet query, Eliash let her in.

“You sent for me, Eliash-yan?” Gela asked, adding the honorific indicating her Eliash’s status as a pillar of Ter to her name. Eliash smiled wryly. The dig was none too subtle. Gela was tired of doing nothing.

“Take a look at this,” she said, drawing her second-in-command to the table. “See here—this is us.” She pointed to a point on the map where she’d marked a star. “Here is Velon and our border between. We hang together on a peninsula. The only way off by land is this narrow neck here. Access by land becomes even more difficult if you look closely. There are only two passes through the mountains separating us from Baqmaral. The siege of Velon and Skan is now complete—all access, through the mountains or across the ocean, is now severed. This morning’s refugees came from here,” she indicated a point on the main road north through the mountains. “Reports indicate that that way is now closed. No one has been able to get to the ports for months. So the noose is truly about our necks.”

Gela nodded, her gray eyes narrow as she scanned the maps. “I’d say we’re running out of time. If it isn’t starvation or disease, it’ll be something else. And soon.”

“You’re right. The trap’s been sprung and all that’s left is to collect up the prey. And whoever is doing this doesn’t have the patience to wait. He’ll be wanting to finish us off quickly.”

“You know something else.” It wasn’t a question. Eliash nodded.

“Look at this.” She drew out another parchment. In faint lines she’d traced the maps of Velon and Skan. Overlaying those she had sketched other lines in red. “I’ve marked here what I know of the ley, and what I’ve discovered of it in Skan. The ley criss-crosses the whole world. It twists up and pools sometimes here and there, making little pockets of energy. They are natural wells of power which are generally short-lived as the flows of the ley change. There are only two stable wells I’ve ever heard of. One lies beneath the High Circle of Ter. There’s another in Ghent beneath the Abbey of the White. Both are well guarded to be sure that no one uses them for ill. The power of the wells can be immense and in the wrong hands—” She broke

off with a shake of her head. There were no words to describe what could be done. Just seeing what had been done to Velon and Skan without the added help of a ley well was warning enough.

“But look here—if I’m reading the ley correctly—there’s another well beneath the shared border of Skan and Velon. I’m betting that’s what this is all about.”

Gela nodded, her expression both stunned and fearful, a reflection of Eliash’s own reaction. “Someone wants to gain control of it by genocide? Killing off everyone in Skan in Velon? Who is capable of such a thing?”

Eliash gave a half shrug. “It’s all about manipulating the ley. I could do it. Any Pillar of Ter.” Gela’s look of flat disbelief made Eliash smile grimly. “I know. Who would be willing to kill two entire peoples? I don’t know, but we are going to find out. Starting right now.”

“You’ve a plan?”

“Nothing so organized. We know what the goal is, but not who’s behind it. I figure we ought to go get in his way. With the well at my back, I might be able to stave him off. But he’ll be in a hurry to get there now. Though Belledor and Alkane haven’t given me much opportunity to work, our enemy may know I’m here and may be worried about me getting there first. I would be. I’d be counting on this last attack to distract us while I raced flat out for my prize. After that, little could stand in my way.”

“What about Belledor and Alkane?”

“They don’t want to know, not from me. I’m supposed to be a princess, fragile and ornamental. They can’t see anything else. They spent all that time looking for me, then they keep me tucked away in a velvet-lined box.” Eliash shook her head with a bitter laugh. “I wasn’t that sort of princess when I was a child. Father saw to that.” Her face turned bleak with

memories. Sometimes perfect recall was a curse. She thrust the memories away, giving Gela a lopsided smile. “Truth be told, they’d probably just get in the way.”

Eliash sent Gela prepare and then set about packing her gear. She wasn’t sure she was coming back. She’d meet Gela in the barbican at dawn.

The anger which had been simmering for so long began to bubble up. Eliash wondered if it had even occurred to Alkane, Belledor or Kendrigan that she could just walk away. She could reach out for the ley and walk through it and return to Ter. Eliash took a deep calming breath. They made her so angry. Kendrigan worst of all. He made her heart hurt.

Eliash changed her battle gear into loose, bell-shaped trousers and a long tunic. They draped her body like liquid night. She climbed the ridiculous pedestal to her bed, which was too soft, and lay down. At least she’d got that damned lady’s maid to stop bothering her. Eliash had convinced the pert girl assigned to her that she’d be better off keeping out of the way. Far out of the way.

Sleep eluded her. If the lady’s maid did not disturb her, Kendrigan did. His face kept appearing on the backs of her eyelids, eyes accusing and sorrowful. More than once she felt herself reaching for him. But he was never there.

She woke in the dark. Eliash lit a lamp and looked outside. Dawn was yet two hours away. She sighed, knowing that she would not sleep again. Kendrigan had invaded her dreams, making her body tingle with his phantom touch. She gritted her teeth. She paced around the room, pouring herself a glass of wine from a decanter on the mantle. She gulped at it and then spat it back out in disgust. Sweet sherry, a woman’s drink. She tossed the glass into the fireplace and spun around.

She'd played their games long enough. Time for Alkane and Belledor to understand just what kind of weapon they'd brought back from Ter.

Still in her night clothes, she marched out the door and down the corridor. She did not have to go far. Belledor's apartments were on the same level as hers—she was, after all, his prospective wife. She pulled up short when she came around a long curve in the corridor. Belledor and Kendrigan stood in the doorway of Belledor's apartments, caught up in an intense conversation. Eliash's heart thumped and jumped into her throat. Which only fueled her anger.

She sauntered forward, midnight eyes snapping sparks.

“Good morning. Is the council over?” She asked. Kendrigan jumped and Belledor turned impatient eyes on her.

“M'lady,” he said. “It is late. You should be in bed.”

Which meant go away, we men have business to take care of and we don't need a woman underfoot.

“I was in bed. And now I'm here. I would speak with you.” She gave Kendrigan a flat look. “Alone.”

“M'lady—Luen Shenyv—this is not a very good time.”

For a moment Eliash toyed with the idea of using the ley to just take him back to her room with her. She dismissed the thought. She didn't want to warn the enemy of her abilities if he didn't already know.

“I don't think there will be a better time,” she finally said, crossing her arms.

He sighed, directing a tired, long-suffering look at Kendrigan who continued to stare at Eliash, hunger evident in the set of his jaw.

“All right. Go change out of your night clothes and I will meet you in half an hour in the

morning salon.”

Eliash couldn't help the sneer that curled her lips.

“You don't have time to talk, but you'll wait for me to change and go downstairs?” She shook her head in amazement. “Have you noticed that your land and people are dying and all access to the outer world has been cut off? You're right. You don't have much time. Maybe days, probably hours. Why don't you come with me to my quarters. I have something to show you.”

Belledor look scandalized and Kendrigan's face turned red. Eliash's grinned. Why hadn't she done this weeks and weeks ago?

“That would be inadvisable, Luen Shenyv,” Belledor said firmly as though speaking to a young child.

“I'll remind you Belledor, that my name has not been Luen Shenyv for many years. I am Eliash-yan. I will thank you to refer to me by my proper name and rank. If you are uncomfortable with those, I will settle for Captain.”

Belledor looked taken aback and wary.

“Now make up your mind. You have little time. I have something to show you. It is in my quarters. If you want to know what I know, you will accompany me there and stop wasting time.”

Eliash turned and marched away. There was silence and then she heard footsteps following after. She frowned. Kendrigan accompanied Belledor. She ushered them into her chambers. The maps were where she had left them.

Quickly she went over the same information she'd given Gela.

“I don't know what the terrain is like here, but the well at High Ter centers under an

immense waterfall which drops into a whirlpool larger than this keep. It's magnificent and deadly. The White Abbey is built on the edge of a volcanic crater. I suspect the ley well resides within. Chances are there is something equally powerful here."

Belledor nodded. "It's tough going through there. The mountains are high and difficult. Much of that land is unexplored—by Velon or Skan. There are passes through, north and south of that area, but nothing in between. You think this is our enemy's goal?" He looked at Kendrigan. "We haven't got much of an army left, but we can have them mobilized in two days."

"Two days will likely be too late. And your army, even at full strength, would not do much against the powers this man wields." Eliash faced Belledor. "Why did you bring me here?"

Belledor frowned and began talking about the prophecy.

Eliash didn't let him finish. She went to her washbasin and retrieved the half-full ewer of water.

"Hold out your hand," she said to Belledor, ignoring Kendrigan. She poured water into Belledor's outstretched hand. The water ran off his fingers onto the floor. She handed him the ewer. "Pour some into my hand."

Looking mystified and not a little irritated, Belledor tilted the ewer and water ran out. Eliash reached out for the ley. The water balled in the air, then spun itself into a spider web. Then it coalesced into a snake-shape and coiled around Belledor's wrist. She released the ley and the water lost its shape and splashed to the floor.

"Parlor tricks," Belledor muttered.

"I ask you again, why did you bring me here?"

Belledor looked at Kendrigan who was studying the maps on the table, a faint look of surprise on his face at the detail she'd recorded.

"If you don't know the answer, I do. I'm not going to wait any longer for you to come to terms with what I am. I'm going there—" She tapped the place on the map where she'd marked the ley well. "And we'd all better pray that I'm not too late. Because if your enemy gets there first, I may not be able to stop him."

Kendrigan's head shot up and he began to sputter protest. Belledor held up his hand for silence and paced over to the window. Eliash watched him, conscious of Kendrigan's furious gaze.

"Kendrigan, I would speak with my betrothed alone," Belledor said finally. Kendrigan's face turned pale and he gave a jerky nod before retreating out the door, closing it sharply behind him.

"He's my best friend. Are you going to put him out of his misery?" Belledor enquired, turning to look at Eliash. "He's desperately in love with you, you know."

"He's got a crazy notion that you and I are going to get married. I can't imagine where he got it," Eliash said sourly.

"You wouldn't make a very good queen."

"I won't make a good wife, not by your standards."

Belledor laughed. "Indeed. But Kendrigan has lax standards. I've been a fool, haven't I?"

"I think so," Eliash agreed.

"Can you defeat this enemy of ours, whoever he is?"

Eliash shrugged. "That's what I have to go find out. I'm leaving as soon as we're done

here. We'll travel the ley. It's going to be a bit tricky because I don't know the terrain. But from your description, our enemy has no advantage over us there. Question is, how much of a head start does he have?"

"What do you need from me?"

"Wish us luck."

Belledor grasped her forearm in his in a warrior's grip. "I do. For all our sakes. And when you get back, you can make an honest man of M'lord Kendrigan."

"I'll think about it," she said, not smiling.

Belledor let go of her arm and went to the door. "You give me hope," he said softly. "An hour ago I had only despair. I'll update Alkane. After you are gone." He closed the door behind him.

Eliash smiled wearily. She was beginning to like that man. She reached out to the ley and mind spoke her second in command.

Gela she called. Immediately her second responded.

Yes, Eliash-yan?

I've spoken with Belledor. We're going now. I'll meet you at the stables in a few minutes.

She felt Gela's curiosity but the other woman did not ask any questions.

It is done.

Eliash cut the mental connection. She filled her basin with water and splashed her face. She was drying her face when a soft sound brought her up short. She whirled around. Kendrigan stood with his back against the door. His face was the color of milk. He opened his mouth and then closed it.

“Is there something you want, Lord Kendrigan?” Eliash asked coolly, heart racing.

He took two rapid strides and stopped still. Eliash raised her eyebrows, but said nothing.

“Belledor said—” His voice sounded like rusty nails.

“What did he say?”

Kendrigan swayed, a battle raging within. Then he made a sound like a bear caught in a trap and lunged forward, yanking Eliash into his arms. He kissed her fiercely. She met his onslaught with equal fervor. His hands swept over her back and down to her thighs as he pressed her closer. He loosened her braid and tangled his hands in her hair. The kiss went on and on. Eliash stood on tiptoe, digging her fingers into his shoulders. At last Kendrigan pulled his lips from hers.

“He said I was a fool.”

“I could have told you that.”

“You are not to marry him?”

“He thinks I’ll make a lousy queen.”

“That’s not true!” Kendrigan straightened, face indignant.

Eliash stroked his face. “Oh, but it is. I told him I’d make a worse wife.”

He cupped her face in his palms. “Marry me.”

Eliash smiled. “Did you not hear? I will make a poor wife.”

Kendrigan bent and kissed her again, his mouth covering hers in a hot, demanding caress. He pulled himself away and brushed his lips over her cheeks and forehead.

“You’ll make a wonderful wife. For me. Marry me.”

Eliash felt herself stiffening, cold lead filling her veins. In Ter she and Kendrigan had shared passion—the same as now. But here, in Velon, they’d shared nothing, as though once

passion was off limits, she was of no further use. He'd ignored her these past months, never seeking her input on what was happening to his homeland. And now that Belledor had given him permission to love her, here he was with seeking hands and words of marriage. Anger bloomed. He did not know her. She grasped his hands in hers and pulling them away from her face as she stepped away.

“Who am I? What’s my name?”

“What?”

“What’s my name?”

She glanced out the window. Pink fingers spread across the dawn sky. “This conversation is going to have to wait until I return.”

“You can’t go. You can’t risk it.”

“This is what I came here to do,” she said. “Do you remember why you spent six turns seeking me? It’s time for me to do my part.”

His face hardened in opposition and his fingers tightened on hers. Before he could protest, Eliash freed herself and took another step back, her shoulders square, chin lifted.

“It is done. It is another point on which Belledor and I have agreed. Now go.” She pointed at the door. Red spots rose on his cheeks and his eyes blazed.

“I have put a question to you. Will you not answer?” he gritted out.

“You have my answer, if you have the wit to understand it. I ask you, do you know who I am?” She shook her head. “I think not. So go and let me be about my business.” Eliash spoke crisply. Inside she felt raw. She turned away and began to put on her battle gear. He said nothing more and few moments later, she heard the door open and shut as he left.

She forced herself to remain composed as she completed dressing. Her hair curtained her

face and she grimaced at it. With quick, deft movements, she rebraided the long mass, binding its length securely with a blue-dyed tie of woven leather. She settled her sword on her hip, fastened gauntlets and greaves with an ease of long habit. Her armband glistened blue in the lamplight. She stamped her feet into her boots and took a glance around the opulent room. Whatever happened, she was not going to come back to this. If she survived, then she'd go home to Ter. No one there had ever tried to make her different from what she was. Less than what she was.

Her squad waited her in the middle ward. Gela handed over the reins to her horse with a shrewd look. Eliash said nothing, but swung up and settled herself into her saddle. It fit her like a hand. Her legs were stiff from weeks of nothing but sitting and walking. She was going to regret that later, she thought. Her chestnut gelding tossed his head and pawed, snorting plumes of steam into the chill morning air.

"I agree," said Eliash. "Let's go. Form up!"

Grooms, stable boys, scullery maids and gardeners halted in their early morning chores to watch curiously. With a swiftness that spoke of much practice, the twenty members of her squad lined up in a vee, horse nose to human knee, with Eliash at the point. Eliash checked over both shoulders, then lifted her arm.

"Ready!"

She reached for the ley. It rushed through her like a warm river current.

"Ride!" She dropped her arm and as one, the horses leaped forward. One stride, fore hooves strike, hindquarters bunch, plant feet, lunge—gone!

They vanished, leaving behind divots of turf and the ringing echo of Eliash's voice.

#

“My god,” Belledor murmured from a balcony above the ward. He’d not returned to his apartments after his meeting with Eliash, wanting to observe their departure. “You’ve been a colossal fool,” he told himself. “To have that weapon in your hand and not to have the wit to use it.” He shook his head, fist bouncing off the stone balustrade. “A fool. Please the Gods let her be in time.”

#

The squad burst onto a gentle green slope at the foot of a craggy, snow-capped mountain. At the center of the smothering waste closing in on Velon and Skan, the area remained healthy and lush. Eliash hardly noticed. She signaled for her squad to drop to a trot, then grasped the ley again, taking them through another jump, and another—each time they went as far as Eliash could see. To the top of a ridge, across to a high meadow, down to the far shores of a deep, mountain lake, up to a summit. Each time they drew closer to the ley well. The terrain grew steeper, with rocky juts and sheer chasms. After the ninth jump, Eliash released the ley and pulled up.

They were in a long, winding box canyon beside a narrow river. The walls were steep. Clumps of purple scrub-gorse clung to the otherwise bare yellow rock. Snow mounded along the foot of the walls and in shady patches along the riverbank. Eliash swung down off her gelding and handed the reins to Gela.

“Wait here.”

“You’re not going alone. Not without us.”

Eliash gave her second a grim smile.

“There’s nothing you’ll be able to do for me. The ley well is just beyond that ridge. If our enemy brings help, I’ll need you here. If I fail, have Feria mind-call the High Circle of Ter. They should be warned. They might send help.

“I don’t like it.”

Eliash’s mouth lifted in roguish smile. “You never do. But I’m not suicidal. This is the best plan. If he gets to the well before I do, he’ll have it at his back and will be able to draw enormous power off it. Enough to swat me flat. If I get there first, it’ll be my show. Besides, the Skanian priests and Velonian seers all prophecy me as the savior. Don’t want to disappoint the buggers, do I?”

Gela clasped her arm. “Good luck then. Be careful. Don’t take stupid chances.”

“They’re only stupid if I fail.” Eliash winked, feeling a flood of excited energy pulse up in her stomach and overflow into her body, countering the exhaustion from making the jumps to bring them here. This is what she was born to do. Damn Belledor and Kendrigan for keeping her from it. She reached for the ley and stepped through, finding herself on the top of the ridge, her squad like ants below. She picked her way over the broken, rocky ground. She had to climb another small ridge and around a rocky shoulder. It brought her to an outcrop above the ley well.

She gasped, heart pounding.

She stood high on the edge of an enormous basin. It had the look of having been carved from the mountains with a biscuit-cutter. It had straight sides that dropped seventy feet to a flat floor. Steam drifted across its expanse, tangling in the branches of skeletal bushes. Eliash could see places where the ground bubbled as though it boiled, and others where the turgid clay had

dried, leaving jigsaw cracks and chunks of earth with thick, curled edges. Geysers spewed scorching water above the level of the basin in magnificent plumes. Splotches of brilliant color against the mineral-white floor showed where hot springs gurgled. The carcass of a decaying deer lay a short distance from Eliash's position. A dazzling blue stream wound across the ghostly expanse, vanishing with a roar into a cavern in the rock wall. Beneath it all Eliash could feel the pulse of the well like a rising inferno.

“So you made it first.”

Eliash jumped and spun about, hand leaping to her sword. Surprise froze her in place. Behind her stood a woman with cinnamon hair and midnight blue eyes. Older than Eliash, with lines around her mouth and eyes, she stood with arms crossed and feet apart. The sage colored cloak tied at her throat billowed in the stiff breeze. Beneath it she wore buff-colored hunting leathers patterned with beads and dye.

“You look surprised, cousin.”

“Cousin?”

“Of course. Let's see, I was your father's brother's second daughter. Born twenty years before you. I am called Veryen Madeine.”

“My uncle had no girls.”

“None of the Aldajane line has girls—at least none that they have ever known about. You were the first. We made a mistake and didn't steal you away in time.”

“Steal me a way?”

“Girls carry the power. Breeds very true in the Aldajane line—your father Almadias being the seventeenth in that line. As you have learned at your father's hand, this power is to be stamped out without mercy. Years ago, Alhorah Daania, your many times great grandmother,

had four girl children. Each had the power and because of it, their father struck off the heads of the first three. The fourth, Alhorah Daania spirited away, telling her husband that the girl was born dead. Since then, every girl in the Aldajane line has been stillborn and taken to safety to be raised in the fullness of her power. Except you.”

“Except me,” Eliash repeated, her heart pounding. The woman opposite her smiled without humor, eyes fixing Eliash like a sword’s point.

“Your mother died at your birthing. Your father was beside himself and when the midwife would have slipped away with you, he took you into his arms. Imagine his delight that his daughter lived. So he named you after your mother and you know the rest. There was nothing we could do for you while in his possession. But when you ran away, we sought you, hoping to give you sanctuary. We could not find you. And now you return, a weapon in the hands of our enemies.”

“You are responsible for what has been happening to Skan and Velon?”

“Yes. We realized years ago that the ley well was here, but none of us had the skill or knowlege to make use of it. I went to Ghent and apprenticed to a powerful sorceress. She gave me the knowledge I needed to destroy the vermin infesting Velon and Skan so that we could once again live freely. With the power of the well, no one will be able to challenge us. I will teach my sisters to use their talents and no one shall ever have the power to murder us again.”

She spoke with a fervor of anger and belief. Eliash shuddered. She remembered her father in just such a fervor, just before he hit her again and locked her in an iron cage in the dark of a tiny stone room.

“Why do you tell me all of this?”

“Because we could not save you. Because we would have you join us. You owe these

people nothing. We know how Almadias brutalized you in his effort to destroy the taint of power. I do not want to have to kill you.”

“If I say no?”

“I cannot allow you to stand in my way. I would see my family safe and free. They are your blood as well.”

Eliash thought of Gela and her squad, of her friends in Ter, of Belledor, of Alkane, of Kendrigan. She shook her head.

“I understand your desire for freedom. But you cannot murder two entire nations of people in its name.”

“They would murder us!” Veryen Madeine shouted, her hands fisting at her sides. “They force us to live like animals, hiding like mice scattering before the light. We are your blood. Why do you defend them?”

“My loyalty and honor are not tied to blood. I don’t know you, and I pity you. But I am not one of you. I chose a different path. I choose to champion Skan and Velon because of the things you’ve done, the death you’ve caused, the foul horrors you’ve let loose on the land.”

“Then I must kill you, cousin.”

“If you can.”

Veryen Madeine gathered the ley, seeking an entrance line to the well. But Eliash was faster, better schooled. She was a Pillar of the Inner Circle of Ter. She’d fought the Zakarons in a long war, and had committed more attacks and defenses than Veryen Madeine could hope to learn in her lifetime.

Eliash snatched up the power of the well. It flooded into her. She almost cried out at the searing fullness of it, her arms flinging wide, back arching. Never had she touched such force

and for a moment she thought she might burn up in it. Then she felt Veryen Madeine thrusting along the ley line. Eliash smashed at her touch, wielding the nearly boundless brute power like a club. The other woman recoiled with a shriek of agony. Taking advantage of her opponent's subsequent stupor, Eliash drew on the flow of the well and wrapped Veryen Madeine in a cocoon of power. She sealed it to herself and then let go of the ley. The power drained away slowly, rippling back at her like ocean waves.

Finally it left her all together. She found herself kneeling beside Veryen Madeine. The other woman lay as though paralyzed, not even able to blink, tears running down the sides of her face. Eliash wiped the sweat of her exertions from her forehead and sat back on the ground, arms and legs trembling with the force of the energy she'd held.

"You never had a chance against me," she told the captive woman wearily. "Your sorceress taught you well how to spoil and ruin, but she did not teach you to fight. I have been doing so since I was a child at my father's knee. It might have been different if you'd got to the well first, but I think I would still have bested you. Now I will have to take you to be judged for the destruction you've wrought. I don't doubt that you will be executed. But if you will tell me where to find my—cousins—I will see that they are safe and cared for. I will find them freedom.

"I intend to force Alkane and Belledor to turn the well and its surrounding lands over to me. I shall establish a place of learning and guardianship. Those of the power will be welcomed here. Including all of the Aldajane women. I am no scholar, but those will come. I am a warrior, however, and I will not permit this well to be misused."

Eliash released the bindings on Veryen Madeine's head so that she could speak.

"You will not allow them to be harmed? You will give them a home and freedom to walk in the world as they please?" Her words sounded as though they came from far away and

blood trickled from her mouth and down her cheeks.

“I won’t. And I will.”

Veryen Madeine closed her eyes. “Then I have won, after all.” She coughed and a pink bubble rose on her lips. “Thank you cousin.” She was silent a moment, then her eyes opened weakly. “I have mind-spoken Arnath Velyn, my sister. She will come to you in Taare,” she named the capital city of Velon where Eliash had left Belledor, Alkane and Kendrigan. “I don’t think I shall survive until my execution.” She coughed and her eyes drifted shut. Her breath beat in short gasps and then she was still. Eliash laid a hand on her forehead.

“Good journey, cousin. May the stars greet you kindly.”

She used the ley to sink Veryen Madeine’s body into the stone, leaving no mark to show where her cousin had ended her life. Too tired to bespeak Gela, she collapsed onto her back. She woke hours later in the dark. Stiffly she climbed to her feet and returned to her squad. They greeted her with hugs and thumps to her back.

“We weren’t sure you were coming back to us,” Gela said.

“A balanced circle. The ley well took as much as it gave. But the enemy is defeated.”

“Then it is over.”

“No, my friend. It is just beginning.”

#

Two days after Veryen Madeine’s defeat, they arrived where they had departed, on the grassy field of the middle ward. Too spent to even stand without aid, Eliash had ordered her squad to make camp and they remained another day and night in the canyon below the well.

She'd reported her account of her confrontation with her cousin and her hastily formed plans concerning the well. She was as surprised as ever at her squad's dogged loyalty, when in one voice, they told her they would help her build and protect her sanctuary rather than returning to Ter. Then she slept long hours, her dreams tormented with a face similar to her own, and one that was not. Her heart ached for both. For Veryen Madeine she would keep her promise. Her cousin had been right. These women were her family—more so for what she had undergone at her father's hands. They deserved more than a half-life of concealment and secrecy.

But her plans for the well and her promise to Veryen Madeine made any future with Kendrigan entirely impossible. If he could not accept her as Eliash-yan, as a warrior and wielder of power, then how could he accept her protection of the women who ravaged Skan and Velon, nearly destroying his entire people? Who nearly ripped away his home? And if Belledor and Alkane did not agree to let her carve out a small territory of her own, then there would be war. Kendrigan would never oppose his beloved Prince. He had already chosen him over her once.

A cool rain spattered down, signaling autumn's return. Eliash dismounted and handed her reins to Gela.

"Don't get too comfortable. They may run us off," she said.

Eliash entered the Keep, expecting any moment to see Belledor or Alkane. Her heart clutched. Or Kendrigan. But there was no one. Not even a maid or footman. She frowned and began to trot. She came into the great hall and pulled up short. Here were all the missing folk of the castle. Eliash couldn't have fit a piece of paper between the crush of bodies. There was silence as every head turned toward her. On the dais stood Alkane and Belledor. Between them—she could only be Arnath Velyn, Veryen Madeine's sister. The same cinnamon hair cut in a short cap, the same midnight eyes burning with fury. Kendrigan stood behind her. Two priests

of Skan and three Velonian seekers hovered to the side.

The crowd parted.

Eliash walked the gauntlet to the foot of the dais. Her eyes roved from face to face. As she'd expected, there was no welcome here.

"Brother. Belledor." She nodded to both. "Arnath Velyn?"

The other woman nodded, her eyes hard, her mouth pinched.

"I had not expected you to arrive in Taare before me," Eliash told her.

"I had not thought you would tarry so long," the other woman snapped back.

Eliash smiled. "You must have come as quite a surprise."

"The women of Aldajane always do," Arnath Velyn responded with haughty pride.

"Indeed. I am finding it so."

"Would you care to explain what is going on?" Alkane interrupted suddenly. "This woman, who claims to be the daughter of our Uncle Alwick, arrived here this morning demanding to see you. She claims your protection."

"She has it," Eliash said.

"From what?"

"From you. From all of you. She is Alwick's daughter—can you not see the resemblance?" She looked at Belledor and Alkane. "Let us go somewhere more private."

Eliash closeted herself with her brother and Belledor, leaving Kendrigan to see to Arnath Velyn's comfort. After nearly four hours of exhortations and outbursts, Eliash departed the meeting, having obtained bitter consent to her plan. Clearly, however, she was no longer welcome in either Velon or Skan.

Arnath Velyn waited for Eliash in her own plush quarters, four guards stationed outside

the door. Kendrigan was nowhere to be found. A hard lump moved into Eliash's throat. There would be no good-bye then. By the time she saw him again, he would have learned of her plans and her promise and all his love would have turned to ash and bitterness.

"Leaving, are we?" Arnath Velyn asked, her voice softening at Eliash's jolting nod.

"My sister said to trust you. Seeing your face today when you arrived, I thought she was wrong, that you would never keep your promise. Not if it meant losing them. I am sorry."

Eliash gathered up the bags she'd packed before she'd left, gathering the few personal items she'd missed. "Me too."

She wasn't prepared for the grief that assaulted her. Not just for Kendrigan, but for Belledor and Alkane. For a life she'd never had a chance to live. Her throat closed and her movements grew jerky as she tied closed the last bag.

Arnath Velyn watched her in silence. When Eliash swung her packs over her shoulder, she spoke.

"If you have nowhere in particular in mind to go, I have a bottle of strong spirits in my cottage. There is room in the barn for your people."

Eliash looked at her, grateful for the sympathy softening the other woman's eyes.

"Sounds fine. Tomorrow you can introduce me to the rest of the family. After that—"

"Time for 'after that' later," Arnath Velyn interrupted. "Now is for mourning what's lost and celebrating what's found."

"Circle balanced," Eliash murmured.

#

They left the Keep, escorted by a half-dozen guards. Once again Eliash's squad awaited her in the middle ward.

"I have no horse," Arnath Velyn said, seeing the mounted warriors.

"Yes you do."

Kendrigan led two horses from the stables. His gray, the one he'd been riding when Eliash had first seen him, and a leggy bay mare. He handed the reins of the mare to Arnath Velyn.

"What are you doing?" Eliash asked softly, unable to move, pinned in place by the intensity of his blue gaze.

"I am going with you. If you will have me." He watched her carefully.

"Didn't you speak with Belledor?"

"I did."

"Then—he wants you to accompany us? To be a liaison?"

"No."

That was all. Eliash broke his gaze and for the first time noticed that he did not wear Belledor's black and indigo colors. Instead he was dressed much as she was.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

He stepped forward, closing the gap between them. He bent so that his lips brushed her ear. "I am following my heart, Eliash-yan, if you will let me."

Her head jerked up and she stared at him.

"I was going to get very drunk," she said, frowning. "And forget about you."

Kendrigan looked startled and then chuckled. "Doesn't work. Trust me, I've been giving it a good solid try for awhile now."

“Then . . . I guess I’m stuck with you.”

“Are you?”

“Am I?” she asked him, her expression serious. “This means losing everything here—lands, property and title. Your friends and family will not soon forgive you. They will see this as treason and betrayal. You could stay and lose nothing.”

Kendrigan took her hand and held it against his cheek. “You asked me before if I knew who you were. I didn’t want to know. If I saw you truly, I would have to make choices I didn’t want to make. Choices I wasn’t ready to make. Then. But in those dark hours while you were gone, I faced torments beyond all imagining. The worst of it was, I could have been at your side as I should have been, as I always will be from now on. But I walked away from you. If you had died, I would have lost everything. If I stay here now, I lose everything.”

“What about Belledor? He’s your Prince. You love him.”

“Quit putting up roadblocks.” Kendrigan dropped her hand and straightened, looking down at her. “I have made my decision. Make yours. Do you want me or not?”

Eliash closed her eyes, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“More than I can say.”

Kendrigan’s arms came around her and he pulled her tightly to him. Cheers erupted from the avidly engrossed squad.

“Could you have not said so sooner?” he muttered against her lips before preventing her answer with a long kiss.

The End