

# Prologue

*Those who defy the sacrosanct justice of the Wheel will find themselves crushed beneath its relentless rim, their spirits condemned to wander in eternal oblivion.*

*Wisdom of Viero*

Tapestries fluttered as Helewys strode down the corridors of Marion Palace. Her cupbearer, Sigeric, trotted in her wake. Courtiers bowed, eyes cutting sideways as she passed them. Helewys forced herself to slow down, to smile and wave, to set them at ease.

The events of the past season had left the denizens of Lumiaron on edge and Brice's actions had done little to calm the mood.

Though he wore the Emperor's face, Brice behaved nothing like her uncle. And the court had taken notice. Helewys did what she could, but with a rebellion brewing in the center of the Empire, kind smiles could only go so far.

If only Brice paid a little more attention to politics and a little less to magic... But then, he'd not be the man she loved. Helewys sighed and kept her smile plastered in place.

Sigeric's boyish feet tangled with the edge of her skirt and he stumbled toward her, still uncertain in his duties. Helewys stepped sideways, brushing against a passing courtier. Hunger flared in her belly. His elämää extended beyond his skin, rich in power. She sucked in her cheeks, forcing the need down.

The courtier muttered apologies, his face growing pale.

"No offense taken." She swept her skirts over one arm, resisting the urge to glare at Sigeric. "Enjoy your day, my lord."

Helewys kept her gracious smile in place as the man fled her presence, still stuttering.

"Sorry, Your Highness," Sigeric said, his eyes glued to his feet.

The boy's life kept his mother inline. And that kept him alive. Frightening him more would cause more mistakes. Helewys dug deep and found a calm voice. "Apology accepted. Now follow."

She discarded the forced friendliness as a pair of Dragon Guard swung wide the doors to the inner palace. Here, there were no random courtiers or stray artists. The business of the Empire was conducted beyond these doors.

Her business now—though she wielded power through Brice. A momentary irritation gritted her teeth. Once again, he would not attend the meeting of the ambassadors' council.

Helewys took a deep breath, pushing aside the flash of anger directed at her lover. Across her chest, the sable and purpure sash of the Imperial Heir hung heavy, the dragon heraldry of House Babineaux picked out in golden threads and layered with gems. She tangled her fingers in her tassels as she approached the council chamber.

Two more guards sprang with alacrity and flung open the doors.

A mahogany table dominated the center of the space, an empty throne at its head. The ducal ambassadors waited at that table, standing behind their chairs. Helewys paused in the doorway, her gaze sweeping away from them.

Polished marble sheathed the walls, interrupted by embroidered tapestries. Each wall hanging illustrated an event from the Empire's rich history. Her irritation at Brice and the empty throne turned to amusement as her gaze roved over the depiction of a battle against the trollkarls.

How the tables had turned!

Alongside her own, Brice's blood-borne power lay at the heart of the Empire now, though his knowledge of sang sorcellerie far outstripped her own.

For now.

She set the flicker of amusement aside. The helms of the dragon guard threw odd shadows on the walls, the stubby wings on their helmets reminiscent of the Babineaux heraldry. A chandelier wrought of gold and crystal hung overhead, casting a soft glow on the waiting ambassadors.

Sigeric's mother, Katerin Babineaux, stood on the right hand of the gilt-edged throne that commanded the head of the table. Her brown curls were swept into a half-coronet atop her head, and she stared at her hands with fixed intent, only the corners of her eyes flicking toward Helewys. To her right stood Rowin du Pont, ambassador of Petiser, his bald pate shining in the light. Across from Katerin, Marquise Althea clutched the crossbar of her redwood chair, a half-crown coiffure holding back her ash-blond hair.

Three ambassadors' chairs stood empty, a stark reminder of the rebellious duchies. Helewys' heels clacked on the stone floor as she swept past the hearth and the intricately carved sideboard where an array of decanters held refreshments for the meeting. A gaggle of servants and pages stood to attention against the far wall, ready to cater to nobles' needs.

Helewys sat on the high-backed throne, settling among the purpure silk cushions as Sigeric took his place behind her. At that signal, the ambassadors also sat, and the pages came unstuck from the walls. They poured wine and cider, crystal goblets ringing like the soft notes of a glockenspiel. The air filled with the heady scent of grapes and apples.

Sigeric poured wine for Helewys, placing it beside his mistress. Katerin's gaze flickered over him and then away.

Helewys curled her fingers around the crystal stem of her goblet and smiled at her cupbearer, saccharine sweet. Alund's rebellion had tempted the family to turn on her. But she held their children.

She tapped the table to bring the meeting to order. "My lords and ladies, I've called this meeting to discuss the matter of the rebels in our lands. On the orders of my uncle, we wish you to start the press in your lands to supplement your armies and prepare for war."

Rowin cleared his throat. "No offense, Highness, but I'd like to hear such news from the Emperor himself."

Helewys glided her fingers down the edge of her sash to find the tassels. She lifted them clear of the hook, gules and sable threads twisting around each other. They pooled as she placed them on the table, like blood spilled in shadows. "No offense? Are you calling me a liar?"

"N-No, of course not." A drop of sweat pearlyed on his bald head. "But it is the place of the Emperor—"

"My uncle is much concerned with the actions of my wayward cousin. Alund has caused our dusang spirit harm and my uncle needs to focus on mending that hurt." Helewys leaned back in the throne. "He has therefore asked me to attend to the military side of this rebellion."

Rowin looked away, cowed for the moment. Relief fluttered through Helewys. At least the wheel-trodden fool knew when he was overmatched. Threatening a tassel duel was a blunt instrument, but the men of Petiser needed such bluntness at times.

Althea gave Rowin a cat-with-cream smile, her blue eyes glittering. "Of course, Highness. And where would you like us to stage our forces?"

She would be a dangerous opponent. If she ever let go of her hatred for Rowin. Balancing them provided Helewys with a near constant headache.

"Both of you, gather at your capitols for now." She kept her voice as neutral as possible. Best not to give Althea more than she had already gained from Rowin's foolish challenge. Helewys turned to Katerin. "Command the imperial forces to prepare for departure. We will consolidate our armies to the south of Etendulat and attack across the Vemique River."

All three ambassadors sat up straight at that, exchanging nervous glances. Katerin voiced their fears. "Highness, the largest part of the rebel forces are encamped by Etienne Lake. Is it wise to leave the capital undefended?"

"The rebels will never take Lumeaux, not with the defenses available to the Imperial Line." Helewys waved a dismissive hand, her mind on the ritual Brice had shown her to create a shield around the capitol. Not that she could tell the ambassadors about that. At least, not yet. "We cannot fight them at Lake Etienne, we'd be attacking Raffi's forces head-on in an entrenched position. I have been assured that this is the height of foolishness." She hooked her tassels back onto her sash. "Fear not,

we shall discuss strategy in depth, but first, let us turn to taxes and logistics." Waving for one of the clerks to bring the stack of reports, she settled in for a long meeting.



The lantern in Helewys' hand bobbed as she stalked down the long stone corridor to the Babineaux dusang cave. Once, this path had held the musty smell of moss. But since the Festival of Berries, Brice had all but taken up residence in the cave and now the salty tang of blood permeated the place.

Her family would have a collective heart attack if they knew the power Brice brought to bear here. But they were fools, bound by traditions long past their prime.

In time, she would remake the Empire to accept the power of sang sorcellerie. There would be peace and prosperity—for those who served.

As Helewys rounded the last corner, blue light washed over her. The strolam jars, supplied by the Order of Viero, lit up the dim interior of the cave. Brice, his familiar features disguised by those of her uncle, labored over the placement of runes in concentric circles.

A dead body dangled over the side of an altar, a fresh red wound gaping in its throat. Blood flowed down metallic runnels to fill the runes of the spell.

Brice looked up as Helewys entered, watery eyes lightening with pleasure. "Ah, my love. Come, I want your opinion here."

She picked her way through the strolam jars. "Did it occur to you I needed you at the meeting today?"

His brows knitted together in a frown. "Why?"

Helewys gritted her teeth. He'd always been obsessed with magic, but since gaining full access to the cave, it consumed all his focus. "We have to keep the Empire together long enough for you to reach the Blood Gate. You took my uncle's face. You have to attend some of the meetings!"

"Well, I could hardly give you his face." He shot her an irritated glare. "We couldn't just pretend you had died."

"Obviously. But we need the duchies to stick with us." Helewys put her hands on her hips. "And we're about to plunge the Empire into war. The Emperor needs to declare that war."

"I have complete confidence in you." He waved a hand, his gaze sliding back to the runes. "Come, let me show you this spell. I think you'll like it."

With a sigh, Helewys allowed herself to be seduced by the magic and his rich, mellifluous voice and let go of her anger. After all, it was her Empire, even if he wore the purpure. She should be the one the ambassadors obeyed. And once Brice gained

the Blood Gate, they could stamp out the rebellion and remake the Empire into a prosperous and peaceful land once more.

# Chapter One

*What then of sowah? The Holy Masorax led the Good Wife Lielt across the dunes of the Cidan Mashada. In the Arm of the Gods, the Honeybee guided her through rocky crags and fed her from his mouth.*

*In the highest peak, she found a cave and there the Two-Tailed Lion tested her. When she proved worthy, the Gods graced her with knowledge and revealed the sacred colors. They gifted her with the first sowah charms wrought entirely from diamond—red, yellow, and blue.*

*Desert Legends*

Naira scrunched bare feet into golden sand at the edge of the waterline. The damp grains oozed over her toes, evoking memories of digging for mussels on the shore of the Cidan Mashada. The waves sucked backward, the wriggling marks quickly erased. There was a lesson about time there, especially for someone marked by prophecy.

She dismissed the thought and turned her attention away from the gentle waves of the Bay of Karna to the three men behind her. Her right-hand husband, Darisia, squinted at the horizon. The pale northern sun of this continent sparkled in the glass beads of sowah charms dangling from his wrist. He wore a yellow scarf draped over his corkscrew curls, throwing shadows across his bronze face.

Naira's heart constricted in her chest. The scarf yearned back to his cabolad—the robes worn by a priest of the Right-Hand God. His actual vestments lay somewhere in a Vieron prison, along with the metal flower that had sent them on this quest. Darisia's flesh had healed, but his soul still carried scars from the time plundered by their enemies.

Her left-hand husband, Tahil, spread canvas for them all to sit on. White teeth flashed in his night-dark face as he smiled at her. His bare chest harkened back to their homeland as well, though he wore red pants rather than the loincloth of a left-hand priest.

The old man, Mikel, stood on the corner of the tarp as it flapped in the breeze. He had discarded the black robe of a monk of Viero, adopting instead the tight pants they called hose and a loose yellow tunic. Gray hair riffled like sea foam above his pale visage, blue eyes flickering in Naira's direction every now and again.

The weight of his expectations bore down on her. For him, she represented the culmination of a prophecy that guided a secret order of priests in the Empire of Lumiaron.

Naira smiled at him, but uncertainty trembled through her. She knew the burden of leadership well, but she'd never been cast as the prophesied hero. This quest had

started as a search for the Goddess. Instead, they had found a hidden priesthood and a land at war with itself.

She sat on the canvas blanket and ran her fingers over her sowah charms. Her touch lingered on the Breath of the Goddess, and she prayed for wisdom, lips moving in silent entreaty. She met Mikel's blue gaze. "Tell us about this hidden priesthood."

"Holiness—"

Naira held up her hand. "No. I am not Balancer of anything. In this Empire of yours, titles matter and we should only use them in the right place. Good Wife will do."

The corners of Mikel's mouth twitched. "Good Wife then. We work among the people as best we can, disguising our worship as the veneration of animal spirits. Viero leaves such practices alone as long they do not extend beyond a local region."

"But you were a monk of Viero. A high ranking one at that." Tahil's basso voice rumbled deeper than the sea. "Is that common for the priests?"

"No, Good Husband." Mikel leaned back on his arms. "I was born to the faithful and called by the Right-Hand God while still in boyhood. At sixteen, our priest asked if I would undertake to be a spy on behalf of the Hidden Council. Little did I know then what such a thing entailed. But young men are often rash, and I was no exception. It sounded far more exciting than living out my life ministering to a sleepy northern village."

Naira bored her finger into the sand. She didn't want to suspect Mikel, but he had lived more of his life as a monk of Viero than as a priest of the Right-Hand God. Could they trust him in full? He had sent word to others of the Hidden Faith. They would have to move with caution until they had truly confirmed his tales.

She met his blue gaze. "A whole village worships the Gods?"

"Yes, Good Wife, in Laroche." Mikel drew two narrow lines in the sand. "The north can only be reached through the town of Talvis and the only Vieroan temple in Laroche is there." His eyes drifted up the beach to the camp where soldiers in azure tabards cooked their supper. "The Laroche dukes have always bottled up Viero at Talvis, so that the Rullara people could worship their spirits in peace. For the Hidden Three, it is a blessing. As long as we stay below the sight of the sash, this place is a haven for us."

"The Hidden Three." Naira rubbed over her sowah charms, her flesh suddenly cool. "Is that how you define the relationships of the Gods?"

Mikel ducked his head. "We call the Gods the Three and our faith is hidden, so yes."

Naira frowned at her fingernails. "And how do you define their relationship to each other?" Thoughts of heresy danced in her mind. The Gods were a Threesome. It was why her marriage was holy.

"We don't." Mikel's throat-boll slid up and down as he swallowed. "One of the tenants of faith is that we do not define the relationship of the Gods, that is for the Scales of the Desert to know." He bowed. "We await your word on it."

Blowing out a relieved sigh, Naira met her husbands' gazes.

Tahil spoke. "Then the Gods are a Threesome. But how did you make headway in Viero?"

Mikel's gaze drifted out over the ocean. "There are factions among the monks, and I found it easy to make friends on the moderate side. Eventually, my influence grew sufficient that the previous Wheel's Champion had little choice in elevating me. However, once the sacrist monks elected Wischard to the highest office, my influence waned radically despite my rank." Mikel spread his hands with a grimace. "He is from a hardline faction, and I could not find it in me to mimic the ideology they demanded."

Darisia drew a bee in the sand, wings touching the edge of the canvas. "We will want to know more of these factions, I think. But I have a different question. Why do you wear no sowah charms?"

Mikel rubbed over his wrists. "For secrecy. Some of the priests wear sowah charms, mostly wrought of copper. The worshipers wear colored bracelets, red, yellow, and blue woven together. All of us have charms that represent the Gods and their spirits, but we keep them hidden."

Naira raised her eyebrows. Divine power would burn flesh if channeled through metal.

Tahil voiced her concern. "How do you bring the power of the Gods to bear with copper?"

Mikel's white eyebrows drew a puzzled line. "The power of the Gods?"

Naira and her husbands exchanged wide-eyed glances. Darisia found his voice first. "You do not use the power of the Gods?"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Another time." Naira held up her hand.

Before she could say more, Mikel scrambled to his feet. Drawn by his abrupt action, Naira and her husbands rose, turning to face Duchess Claire de la Roche.

A bare day ago, they had met the woman as a blood-soaked mage in the forest. Now she wore elegant sky-blue skirts swirling below a loose white shirt with tight cuffs. A purple sash cut across her body, a giant serpent writhing on the shoulder.

The elaborate embroidery put Naira in mind of formal heraldry, and surely that was what this item represented.

At Claire's waist lay a second badge, a white snowflake on a deep blue field. Two tassels tangled on her hip, one as red as her hair, the other an azure hue that almost got lost against her skirt.

"Your Grace." Mikel bowed deeply, ending the elegant obeisance on one knee.

"Broth—" Her lips drew to a tight grimace. "Mikel. You are dismissed."

The ease of authority did not surprise Naira. Her brief interaction with this woman had revealed a leader who held power in her own hands—with all the loneliness implied in that life.

Mikel left with a few backward glances, but Naira kept her eyes focused on the red-headed woman. This duchess ruled the northern duchy of Laroche, apparently the home of many of the followers of the Gods. For their sake, Naira had to ensure a friendly relationship at least.

“Your Grace.” She bowed as she would have done to a ranking priest but stopped short of kneeling. Respect to the authority, yes, but going so far as subservience would set an awkward precedence. Her husbands followed her lead.

“Good Wife and Husbands,” Claire said, her voice a pleasant mezzo soprano on the ear.

She would sing the prayers beautifully if she converted. Naira dismissed the errant thought. “Your Grace.” She let the honorific hang there, giving the tall woman a verbal invitation.

“I would like to ask some questions about your doctrine.”

“Of course. Shall we sit?”

Claire sat on the edge of the blanket, tucking her skirts under her legs. Naira settled down facing the duchess with Tahil on her left and Darisia on her right. “What would you like to know?”

“Do you believe a person’s life is shaped by anything before their birth?”

Tahil folded his hands in his lap. “That is a deep question. The answer seems simple but leads to more questions. Every soul strives to gain the knowledge to pass beyond the Wheel and through the hub to rejoin the Threesome Divinity. The Gods know this, and They lay a path for each of us to walk.”

Darisia picked up the lesson as their left-hand husband paused. “This road should teach the soul lessons that are required to leave behind this place.” He patted the beach sand. “However, it is just a suggested path. A soul may travel the Wheel many times and some cycles that person will make choices that lead it down paths not laid out by the Gods.” He spread his hands. “Such is the nature of men.”

Red-gold eyebrows knotted over green eyes as Claire considered the three of them. “Is there anything a person can do to remove themselves from the Wheel?”

Naira sat up straight, rearing back from the words. “What? No, this is not possible.”

“Never?”

“No. Who would claim such a thing?”

“Viero.” Claire’s gaze lifted away from Naira’s and tracked the waves instead. “The teachings say that there are acts grave enough to remove the spirit from the Wheel. In this case, they claim the Wheel will tread the spirit to dust beneath the iron-shod rim.”

The words had the rhythm of a litany. Had she learned them as a child?

"It is a false teaching," Tahil said, his voice flat and hard. "A soul could visit horror upon the world and yet the Wheel will wash away all of it. Murder, blasphemy, heresy, all vanish once the soul returns to the Wheel and they are born fresh to try again. To claim otherwise is to tell an absurd lie. The Gods made the universe. What trespass could a man commit that would cause such beings to shun him?"

"Hmm." Claire looked up at the blue sky and back down at Naira. "What about animal spirits? How do you feel about people praying to those?"

Naira traced over Darisia's bee, weighing her answer against what Mikel had told them of the Hidden Faith. "There are spirits who serve the will of the Gods. The two-tailed lion, the..." She paused, looking for a word for masorax in the empire's language. "I don't know if you have them here. It is something like the giant snake on your sash, but one can make a bond with them and ride them."

Claire's brow furrowed. "We don't have those. But we have a giant serpent spirit. Which God is that for?"

Tahil's eyes fixed on her snake badge. "The Left-Hand."

"And the honey-bee for the Right-Hand," Darisia said. "But there are other spirits in the world, of course. Sometimes man may entreat them for aid. This is not against the will of the Gods."

Claire rose as abruptly as she had sat down. "Thank you." She turned and walked away before any of them could find their feet.

"What was that about?" Darisia asked in Temple Tongue.

Tahil dug up a handful of sand, making a hole beside the blanket. "She wants to convert."

"That one?" Darisia took some of Tahil's miniature mine dump and dribbled it to form a tower. "She believes in her own power."

The waves pounded onto the beach and sucked back into the surf, leaving a salty tang in the air.

Naira leaned on her elbows. "It won't be the first time a leader has followed the faith without belief. Those questions were certainly leading somewhere."

"We have a long ride to this rebel camp of theirs." Tahil extended his pit to become a moat around Darisia's tower. "I'll bet a chime to a pea she speaks to us again."

"We must find out more from Mikel," Naira said. "If his information is correct, this woman holds the key to a place where the followers of the Gods already live in great numbers. We need her."

"More even than we need Alund?" Darisia asked.

"Alund is a prince about to enter rebellion." Tahil smashed the tower, ebony fist drilling the soft sand down layer by layer to form a crater. "His status depends on his dukes, and we have one of them right here asking complicated questions. She is a far more powerful ally."

Darisia smoothed out the hole Tahil had made and started heaping sand again. "I hope we're doing the right thing. We came here seeking the Voice of the Goddess."

Naira placed her hands over his, drawing him away from his destroyed construction. "I know. My loves, before this I worried that we had left the path. But we cannot forsake these people. They believe that their souls could be destroyed. How can we leave them in bondage to such an idea?"

Tahil curled his arm over her shoulder. "We are called. We will answer."

Leaning into his embrace, Naira drew Darisia to lie beside them. The sun stroked warm lines across her skin and the waves susurrated on the sand. Light scintillated through her sowah charms, the refractions a reminder that her life belonged to Divinity.

Quietly, she made peace with the prophecy. "Then we are committed to the Hidden Three."

Darisia grimaced. "As long as no one tells me I can't be married to the two of you."

Tahil's grin flashed white. "Over their dead bodies."



Their days of travel along the isthmus passed slowly, surrounded by soldiers wearing the azure tabard of Claire de la Roche's duchy. Peasants scrambled off the road to make way for her banner, even the heavy wagons of merchants drawing to the verge.

Darisia carved molds and discussed the creation of sowah charms through ceramics and glass with Mikel. Tahil and Naira helped where they could, though their artistry did not compare to their right-hand husband's skills. But if they found priests who could learn to wield the power of the Gods, they would need such charms.

Both Prince Alund and Louis de la Roche, Claire's red-headed son, sought Naira and her husbands' company with increasing frequency. Louis was fascinated by the threesome's tales of Kisangi and spent many bells listening to their stories of home.

Alund sought knowledge of the religion of the Hidden Three.

Naira answered his questions honestly but kept an eye on Claire through each exchange. Tahil had been right that first day on the beach. They needed the duchess more than the prince, and Claire's eyes followed Alund every time he sought to speak with the priests. She was a hard woman to read, but Naira thought disapproval flickered behind that tight expression.

Ever at the duchess' side rode the girl, Isabella. Even in daylight, her eyes shone with the light of magic, blinding her to the observable world. They still needed to speak to Claire about the child and the words of prophecy that seemed to refer to her, but the road was not the right place for that.

All of these complicated situations tumbled through Naira's mind as Darisia called Mikel over for a conversation about Viero. Alund rode some distance off, talking with his lover, Roul. Louis rode between his mother and his cousin, Giselle. It seemed a good time for a quiet talk with Mikel.

Naira patted her horse's shoulder. The beasts remained an uncomfortable ride, but her muscles had adapted well enough to the barrel-like seat. "Tell me about the females of Viero."

"They are assassins, Good Wife." Mikel picked at the steel buckle on his leather reins. "At least, the ones we interact with are. I assume such things do not suit some of them, but they stay in the hidden monasteries of the women."

"You were high in the ranks of Viero." Tahil shifted in his saddle, pushing up on the stirrups till daylight shone between his drawstring pants and the leather seat. "Do you not know where these hidden monasteries are?"

"I'm sorry, Good Husband, but no. Only those in the inner circle of the Wheel's Champion know where the women go."

Naira traced her fingers along the smooth curves of her sowah charms. When they had first arrived in Lumiaron, they had been accompanied by two companions assigned to them by the Master Smith of the Order of Daggers. In Lumeaux, their jailors had taken those two women away.

Would they have been taken to these secret places? Or simply killed? Was one of them the traitor that had betrayed Naira and her husbands to Viero? If she could, she needed to send word to Kisangi. Traitors among the Daggers represented a terrible threat to the Hub Throne.

Tahil's voice broke through the maelstrom of thoughts. "What do you know of the female doctrine of Viero?"

"Women are not called to teach." Ice wreathed Claire's voice as she joined the conversation. "A woman's role is to correct sin."

The words made Naira's skin crawl. "That is an... interesting point of view."

Claire gave a thin-lipped smile that did not reach her eyes. "I promised you a boon when we met." She unhooked the azure tassel from her sash and extended it to Naira. "There is normally a ceremony that goes with this, but these are awkward times. My tassel entitles you to any favor that is within my power to grant and extends beyond my reign to that of my successor." Her gaze flickered to Mikel, and he inclined his head.

Naira took the tassel and ran her fingers along the threads. A narrow ribbon bound the loop that hooked onto the sash, a snake pattern embroidered on it. Purple thread edged the blue strip of cloth, only visible on close inspection. On the forked tips of the ribbon, geometric designs had been etched onto thin silver plates stitched to the material, giving the cloth an unexpected weight.

"Thank you." She inclined her head. The tassel represented safety for both her and her husbands. A tremble shuddered through her hands, a tension she had not even been aware of lessening. At least they would not starve in this land.

Alund and Roul rode over, both of them shooting quick looks at the tassel gleaming blue in the early afternoon sun.

"There is more." Claire smoothed down her horse's black mane, gaze flicking to Alund and back to Naira. "You rescued Louis, who is my son and heir. Your magic saved the life of my prince that I would follow as Emperor. I will build a temple in Talvis to the Three Gods."

Roul sucked in his breath, his eyes widening. Before he could speak, Mikel gave a delicate cough, his fingers playing a tattoo along his belt. "Viero won't like that, Your Grace."

"Viero tried to murder my son." Storms raged in her frigid green gaze. "I will expel the monks from Talvis."

"I would add to your thanks, Your Grace," Alund said, eagerness riding his voice. "It is my desire to convert to the Faith of the Hidden Three."

"I don't think..." Roul's voice trailed off and he glanced from Alund to Claire, rubbing his palms on his pants.

Claire's eyebrows edged together. "Your Highness, I am not speaking of conversion. There are those in the north who worship these Gods and for them, I will build a temple. But for you to convert would not be wise. The north is not the only duchy that supports you in this rebellion. I strongly advise that you take council with Duke Raffi and Duchess Regent Yolanda before taking such a precipitous step."

Alund's hands knotted in his reins, and muscles in his jaw jumped under his skin. "The Wheel's Champion stands shoulder to shoulder with my father's murderer. Why would I support their faith?"

Roul reached over and closed his fingers on Alund's wrist. "Viero has guided the Empire for millennia. Discarding the teachings without even considering reforms will not sit well with the soldiers or the sashed. The bulk of the army is from Tranchelag and we're a conservative duchy. Just have a little patience—there will be opportunity to prove the perfidy of Viero's leadership and then we can act, one way or another. Her Grace is right. At least wait until you've spoken to my uncle."

Naira's belly cramped with conflicting emotions. If Alund converted, it might give them a powerful ally. But not if it lost him his supporters. Should she counsel patience? But she could hardly recommend a soul remaining mired in heresy.

Alund gave an inarticulate growl in the back of his throat, but nodded, putting an end to Naira's internal debate.

"I will wait until we have sat in council. When do we arrive at Iselra?"

A piercing shriek from the heavens interrupted Claire's reply, sunlight flashing on blue and red wings. Naira's horse trotted sideways as bile climbed up her throat and her legs tightened about its barrel-like body.

The last time she had seen one of these bluron birds, it had been guiding a small army of enemies to their location. She exchanged a worried glance with Darisia and Tahil, but Claire held out her arm and the bird landed in a flash of crimson claws.

Its red eyes fixed on the duchess, and she cut a slight wound in her wrist. The sharp beak dipped into her blood and the sack-like lower mandible sucked in and out as it drank. Claire unhooked a tube as thick as Naira's thumb from a black harness strapped around the feathered body as Isabella rode up to take the bluron.

Claire's finger traced the bottom of the tube, and she held up her hand, halting the men. "We'll make camp here."

Naira eyed the sun, which stood just past the highest point. She bit the inside of her cheek. They would lose half-a-day of travel in hostile territory due to this unexpected rest. What had Claire deduced just from touching the wooden receptacle?

## Chapter Two

*How may a man know that which is righteous? Should he climb to the highest mountain? Or seek the heart of the desert? No. Look inside your heart and find the core of divinity that cleaves to your soul. Then you will know the righteous act from the sinful.*

*Wisdom of the Threesome*

Louis turned away from helping to erect a tent at Herself's summons. He left his page, Chayce, in charge of their belongings and walked over to join Herself and Giselle on the edge of the flurry of azure tabards. Under the direction of Chevalier-Captain Kalla, the men-at-arms worked to create a secure camp for the night, following Herself's abrupt decision to halt travel for the day.

"Follow," Herself said and strode away.

Louis traded a look and a shrug with Giselle, and they trailed after their liege, his mother, down the beach. Drawing on his elämää, he added some power to his injury weakened leg-muscles. The loose sand of the Sea Neck's shoreline didn't make for good footing.

They caught up with Herself under a myrtle tree with pink blossoms clinging to slender branches. The faint scent of honeyed spices tickled Louis' nose as he brushed past the late-blooming flowers.

"Marius sent me a message." Herself held up a wooden tube used to protect the thin paper transported by bluron birds. "It is quite interesting." She held out a sheet to Giselle. "Read for us, please."

Giselle took the message and cleared her throat.

*My Dearest Sister.*

*On the night of the Berry Festival, the Snow Council conducted a ritual under the midnight sun, as always. This year's prayer to the serpent spirit resulted in an unusual occurrence—the snake appeared to us in the smoke.*

Louis raked his finger along his jaw, brushing against the rough line of stubble. This last year, he had learned more of the spirits than he had ever wished to know. Every time he turned around, there seemed to be another strange occurrence waiting to pounce.

Giselle continued reading, oblivious to the tightening in Louis' throat.

*Along with the spirit, other images formed. Three people, two men and a woman, stood behind the Wheel and the serpent bowed to them. It sailed around the fire three times and then vanished. The image of the people and the Wheel match the amulet you sent to me for Loysa.*

Naira had called that amulet a faytani—an artifact holy to her Gods. It had saved the life of Louis' daughter. His eyes burned as he remembered the terrible day in the Salle when his power manifested.

He'd nearly killed Loyssa.  
The Three Gods had saved her.

*In light of your letter about the priests Louis found and the knowledge they have, I think the serpent was trying to tell us that these Gods are worthy of worship. The Snow Council agrees. The serpent spirit knows them and that suffices for us.*

Giselle lowered the paper. "It cuts off there, Your Grace. Is there more?"

"Yes, but it's not pertinent to our discussion." Herself took the single sheet back and tucked it into the tube. "I have been considering converting to the Threesome religion. Marius' letter laid aside my doubts about the effect of conversion on the Rullara people. However, there is still politics to consider."

Louis stared at his mother with round eyes, the tightness in his throat spreading to a tension in his chest. "Co-Convert? You?"

She waved a hand, knocking one of the pink blossoms to the golden sand. "I don't have to believe to be part of a religion, Louis."

"But you just told Alund..." He pointed back down the beach, looking for words.

"The temple in Talvis had nothing to do with conversion." She raised her brows.

Giselle pulled at the spiky green leaf of a palmetto plant. "Your Grace, politically, this is complicated. We're in rebellion against the Emperor, who we claim is a trollkarl. But it is Viero and the rechtshus who most strongly speak against trollkarls and their bloody magic. This threesome religion does very little to support our position and could alienate the peasants."

"Not the northern peasants," Louis said. "Viero is a distant thing to most of them."

"It's not the north that worries me." Giselle let go the leaf, frowning at a drop of blood pearl on her finger from the serrated edge. "With the Snow Council's support, we'll have no trouble at home. It's Etendulat and Tranchelag. Your Grace, what does conversion to this religion gain us?"

"The ability to secede if we need it."

Giselle's mouth dropped open, and Louis took a step back, raising his hands in denial, his belly roiling. "Secede! Your Grace, we're in the midst of one rebellion already."

"Exactly." Herself frowned, her lips drawing to a tight line. "Both you and I, Louis, could be accused of sang sorcellerie, depending on how you measure the art of the trollkarl. There is no denying that we draw power from blood and that is the heart of their magic. But we don't use their spells and that would be my defense were we ever accused."

She crossed her arms and stared out over the waves sparkling in the sun. "However, should that defense fail us, we need a fallback plan. I have no intention of allowing you to be hung as a trollkarl. This religion offers us an option of last resort. We can say that the art we practice is not against the Threesome faith."

Louis walked a tight circle, sand rubbing against his boots. No amount of swallowing would clear the obstruction in his throat as he worked through Herself's logic. He had come to Viero's teachings late in his life, but he had followed their teachings on obedience and ownership of choices as best he could. Now, she proposed leaving those philosophies and perhaps even the Empire itself.

Laroche had always been loosely connected to the rest of Lumiaron, but still...He couldn't deny the existence of the Gods, and he was grateful for Loyssa's life, but to worship them....

Stopping, he turned to face Giselle and Herself. "Can we just abandon the faith of our forefathers like that?"

Herself raised her eyebrows. "If the teachings bring you comfort, by all means take what wisdom you can from them. But as for faith, I'd rather put my trust in our power."

Louis' thumbs rubbed slow lines down his hips onto his thighs. Beneath the brushed weave of his black woolen hose, ugly purple scars snaked all the way down to his feet. Darisia had cut Louis' legs open to align the remains of the broken bones so that Louis could heal himself. He could walk because of that healing.

A monk of Viero had ordered the maiming. In Louis' memories, Hawk's Talon walked toward him once more, sledgehammer glinting in her hands. Brother Talbot, with his blotchy liver spots and cataract shrouded eye, stood in the door of the mirrored cell.

Louis sucked his cheeks between his teeth as bitter saliva flooded his mouth. His skin twitched with remembered pain and heat.

"Your Grace, it is a viable defense, but neither Duke Raffi nor Duchess Regent Yolanda are going to like it much." Giselle's words interrupted Louis' dark thoughts. "And what about Isabella?"

"What about her?" Herself shrugged. "She's too young for any official declaration of faith. Such things can wait until her sash hangs from the right shoulder."

Giselle grimaced, her pursed lips forming a moue. "Perhaps, but she's not of the north. Will there be trouble with her guardianship?"

Louis glanced back down the beach to the camp. Alund and Roul would share a tent there tonight. "It won't just be us that converts in the end. Alund owes his life to the Gods, and he speaks of them touching his spirit when Naira and Darisia healed him."

"If the Empire at large converts, especially the Emperor, what does that mean for our defense of your magic?" Giselle asked.

"The defense still applies, though it undermines the ability to leave the Empire." Herself frowned, golden-red eyebrows edging together.

"It would let us be first." Louis drew his thumbs away from his legs and crossed his arms. "Is there an advantage in that?"

Giselle pinched her fingers around the brown stem of a myrtle branch, drawing the green leaves down. "Maybe. We could set the tone for what is to come if we're first on the stage. Naira and her husbands will be pivotal, and we could bind them to us now." She met Herself's gaze and nodded. "Your Grace, it will be a narrow needle to thread, but we can do it."

"Good." Herself said. "Then I will speak to Naira and find out what is required. I would prefer to settle the matter here, on the road. Once we reach the camp, it will be a spectacle and while such things have their place, the less attention we draw to the strangeness, the sooner it will pass, I think."

Louis choked off a laugh in the back of his throat. "Nothing is going to lessen the strangeness of riding into camp with a full-blooded Consang woman who has two husbands."

Herself shrugged. "Perhaps that will even disguise our strangeness. Come, let us return."



Louis could find no peace in the quiet darkness of the camp. Herself and Naira had discussed the conversion. By his liege's command, Louis would adopt the Threesome religion at dawn. He was supposed to confess his faith and accept the Threesome as his guiding light.

That the Gods were real seemed without argument. Worshiping them—that is what kept him awake.

Herself would say his doubts didn't matter. Giselle would likely agree with her. Louis crawled out of his tent, leaving his sleeping page, Chayce, behind, and walked down to the water's edge.

What if the Gods didn't approve of being worshipped falsely?

The sand soughed behind him, and he turned.

Roul smiled, silver moonlight highlighting his blond curls. "Saw you come down."

Despite the troubling thoughts, Louis returned the smile. He sat, squishing his toes into the wet sand as dark wavelets lapped at his feet. "What are you doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep, really." Roul settled on the ground, bare feet burrowing dark holes. "How do you feel about converting tomorrow?"

Louis tossed a handful of sand into the surf, the ripples lost in the susurration waves. "I don't know." He looked at his friend out of the corner of his eye. "Alund didn't look happy."

"He's not." Roul glanced at Louis, then away. "He's jealous that you're getting to convert and he's not. But I didn't ask about him. I asked about you."

"I've never been all that attached to Viero." Louis leaned back on his elbows, sand rubbing against his wrists. Naira would tie colored ribbon to them tomorrow and later would come porcelain sowah charms. A messenger had already raced off to the ceramic guild in Iselra. "It's not like the Threesome faith denies the Wheel. It's just that they say the Gods created the Wheel, rather than it always existing."

Roul grunted. "I won't tell you not to do it. It's not my place. But are these people worth risking being trodden beneath the rim of the Wheel?"

Fear burned a cold fire through Louis. If Viero's philosophies held true, he already risked that fate every time he used his magic. "The philosophies don't say anything about the Gods." He managed a shaky smile to disguise the fear. "If I am condemned for sang sorcellerie already, this won't change my state."

"There is that." Roul sighed, leaning back on his arms.

They sat without words as the waves crashed onto the beach, foam dancing over their toes. Louis heaped up a handful of sand and dug out a small cave with his finger. He pushed away his doubts about the change in religion. The Gods had saved his daughter. And the Wheel's Champion, the leader of Viero, supported the false Emperor.

The moonlight turned Roul's blond hair silver and Louis frowned. His friend had been reunited with his lover and yet, here he was, sitting with Louis on the beach instead of cuddled up with the prince in their tent. "How is Alund?"

"It's a little complicated." Roul scooted aside to avoid the slowly rising tide. "When we fell in love, I was barely of age. Since then, I have witnessed my father's death, run away from assassins, met you, been declared outlaw, visited the north, and learned more about magic than I thought existed. But all he remembers is the boy he met in the courts of Lumeaux."

"Tricky." Louis rolled up his drawstring pants, extending his legs into the surf, letting the waves roll over his scarred skin. "Do you love him still?"

"Oh, yes." Roul's smile flashed in the light of the hunter's moon. "It's just complicated with the rebellion and everything."

Louis lay on his side, bracing his head on his hand. "I would have thought you'd be pushing for him to convert."

Roul knotted his eyebrows together in a frown. "Why?"

"The threesome marriage." Louis flicked a thumb full of sand at his friend. "Alund will need an heir, but if he converts, maybe you can marry him, too."

Mouth gaping open, Roul stared with round eyes. "M-Marry..."

For the first time in days, an honest belly laugh shook Louis, and he sat up, slapping the ground beside him. "You hadn't even thought of it?"

Roul shook his head, eyes so wide the brown irises didn't even touch the lids. "Men don't marry men."

"Apparently they do." A grin still lurked in the corners of Louis' mouth. "In Kisangi they do anyway, and that's where our ancestors came from. It's an ancient tradition."

"Well. That's certainly something to think about." Roul dug a finger into the sand. "It would be... amazing." He drew the outline of a dolphin, his brow furrowing. "But... for all my life I've been going to temple whenever I'm troubled. I've read the philosophies and talked to the monks." He met Louis' gaze, his eyes serious, almond brown skin shading to gray under the moonlight. "Remember Brother Robine, who told us we knew each other in past lives?"

"Yes." Louis lay back, pillowng his head on his arms. "Back in Somfaux at that temple with the hand-drawn sign of the Wheel and the rickety gate."

"Well, most of the monks I've known have been something like that. Wise, helpful, and studious."

"Not me." The stars glittered bright overhead and Louis picked out the constellation called The Lion. "The first monk I met was on my twelfth birthday for my Dusang Trial. He didn't like that I was pig-ignorant of the philosophies. Then, of course, there was Brother Talbot." A shudder rippled through him, heat flashing in the purple scars.

Roul patted Louis' shoulder lightly, but did not let the touch linger. "Are you alright?"

"Not really." The words slipped out before Louis could gate his mouth.

"Want to talk about it?"

Louis pointed his toes, the motion pulling tendons behind his knees to a painful tautness. "I've never felt as helpless as I did in Lumeaux. Helewys wrapped her fire around my neck, and it was all I could do to stay alive. Then I woke up in that cell and Brother Talbot ordered Hawk's Talon to break my legs. Then..." Bile burned up his throat, and he twisted away, spitting sour slime into the wet sand.

"Louis?"

Hunger curdled in Louis' belly and he edged away from his friend. "Don't touch me."

Sand squeaked on flesh as Roul put some distance between them. "What happened after she broke your legs?"

Herself had heard Louis out, long days of travel ago now. But she was his liege and his mother. What would his friend say?

"Helewys brought people to my cell." Louis hunched his shoulders, speaking fast. "She called my hunger. They have some kind of drug that can make anyone's elämää blush, no matter how slight. I fed on them." His eyes burned, and a tear dropped off his chin. "I couldn't stop myself. She kept bringing them in and I kept eating. I can't even remember their faces."

His harsh, panting breaths synchronized with the waves rolling up the beach and sucking back into the surf.

"I'm sorry, Louis," Roul said at last, his voice gentle.

Louis drummed his fingers in the six-beat pattern on the sand, gaining control of the desire to rip into his friend's spirit and eat his power. "They haunt me. I see this long row of faceless people, all of them wearing a blue cap."

"It's not the same." Silver moonlight limned Roul as he moved round to crouch before Louis. "That bitch Helewys was in control, not you."

"Tell that to my dreams," Louis said with a short, harsh laugh that owed nothing to humor. "I don't want to talk anymore. Nothing good will come of wallowing in misery. Let's go back. I bet Alund is already looking for you."



Standing on a canvas mat below the overhanging branches of a myrtle tree was not how Louis ever imagined adopting a new religion. Not that he ever had imagined such a thing.

Herself had addressed the men-at-arms, emphasizing the serpent spirit vision and the approval of the Snow Council for this course of action. All of her handpicked guard had chosen to convert.

Could Louis do less as her son and heir?

There had been a long discussion about the ceremony of declaring the faith. Louis had expected his mother to protest kneeling before anyone, but she seemed entirely indifferent to the motions the ceremony required.

She preceded all of them, kneeling with grace before the makeshift chest that served as an altar. The words of her declaration of faith rang over all of them without a tremor or a hint of falsity. And yet Louis knew she considered the Gods to be at best a source of power.

What did he believe? He knotted his fingers together as his mother rose. As her heir, he was next to be called.

Naira smiled at him as he approached. Balancer, that was the title she would carry under the faith of the Hidden Three—the Threesome Gods of Laroche. Herself had sent couriers with sealed declarations north already. By the time they reached the rebel camp at Iselra, Laroche would have broken with Viero.

Azure ribbons plaited through Naira's hair, crimson through Tahil's tight cornrows and gold in Darisia's. The same as the tricolor ribbon lying across Naira's hands.

Louis knelt before the altar.

"From the Right-Hand God comes creation," Darisia, the right-hand husband, intoned the ritual words.

"It is written." The rumbling voice of the men-at-arms responding covered Louis' whispered agreement.

A deep tremor ran through his chest. Darisia had helped him heal. The priest had saved Alund's life. The power that flowed from his faith could not be denied.

"From the Left-Hand God comes destruction," Tahil chanted in a booming voice.

"It is written."

Tension spanned across Louis' shoulders. In his belly, the hunger that came from his power writhed in his guts. Tahil had broken free of the iron chain of Viero and saved all their lives in the Babineaux Dusang Cave. He had called it the blessing of the Left-Hand God.

"Unto the Goddess falls the balanced path," Naira sang into the dying echoes of the chant.

"It is written."

Naira's power flowed like water, supporting her husbands, making them more. The hunger in Louis' belly settled. A warm curl of faith expanded his chest and his shoulders relaxed.

Perhaps he did believe after all.

"Louis de la Roche." Her gaze met his and the scent of daffodils danced between them—a delicate and unmistakable fragrance even with the briny ocean smells permeating the beach. Naira's eyes widened, but her voice remained steady. "Declare your faith."

The scent of summers gone by had haunted Louis over the past year, guiding his life down new paths he could never have imagined. It steadied him now and he folded his thumbs between his palms, forming the Eye of the Gods as the threesome priests had instructed him.

"I believe that the Balanced Path leads to the blessing of the Three in this life and the next. I believe that I am evoked by the Right-Hand God. I believe that I ride the Wheel to find the Will of the Goddess. I believe that my soul will be gathered by the Left-Hand God, and I will return to Godhead beyond the Hub."

The spicy perfume of daffodils drowned out the salty beach scents and warmth spread from Louis' belly, radiating throughout his body. He lifted his wrists, peace filling his heart. Darisia tied the tricolor ribbon to his right wrist, Tahil tied another to his left.

"Let sowah guide your life so that you might learn the lessons taught by the Wheel, now and always." The voices of Naira and her husbands mingled in a three-part harmony and their joined hands rested on Louis' head in benediction.

He rose and joined Herself standing in the shade of the myrtle trees while Giselle took his place.

"You seem more at peace," his mother murmured as the ceremony began again.

"I am." Louis hesitated a flicker, but there was little sense in keeping the scent from her. "I smelled daffodils."

She grimaced but inclined her head in an imperceptible nod. "I see. Keep an eye on Alund. He seems decidedly out of sorts, and much of that ire is directed at you."

Louis' gaze flickered to the prince standing next to Roul as the long line of men-at-arms started the process of adopting the Threesome faith. Alund's dark eyes flashed as he met Louis' gaze.

Was Roul right? Was it jealousy of Louis' new religion that made the prince's lips thin and his fists curl?

Under the fiery glare of Alund's dislike the unexpected peace of the confirmation ceremony deserted Louis.



*Alund meditating*

## Chapter Three

*Let one who would follow the Gods declare his faith in the presence of a holy threesome. If his heart is judged sincere, let them bind sowah charms about his wrist, a prayer that sparkles with every gesture.*

*Rites of the Three*

*Order of the Threesome*

Alund gritted his teeth and averted his eyes from Louis' porcelain sowah charms dangling from gold, silver, and copper wires, all threaded together. It wasn't the marquis' fault that he had stepped into the Gods' grace and Alund had to wait. But it was one more bitter burden to bear.

In the distance, sunlight sparkled across the northern tip of Etienne's Lake, laying a golden trail across the deep blue waters. He shifted in his saddle, the morning rays a play of heat on his back. The warmth of the Right-Hand God stroking across his spirit had been like that. A balm that healed not just the wound in his leg, but the tearing agony of knowing he had sacrificed his father for his own life.

Brice had tied the Emperor to an altar in their dusang cave and spilled his blood into the trollkarl's runes while Alund did... nothing.

He tore away from the memory and remembered instead the flicker when the golden power woke him in the forest. In that moment, it had seemed so clear that he should embrace the Gods.

But then came politics and power, as it always did.

The sand of the Sea Neck Road churned under his horse's hooves. Not that it was his horse. Like everything else here, it belonged to Duchess de la Roche.

Herself.

The horse danced sideways as Alund tightened his fingers on the reins and he forced his hands to relax, patting the beast in apology.

Roul rode closer. "Something wrong?"

"Except for everything?" Alund brought his mount under control and gave his lover as much of a smile as he could manage. At least he had Roul back, even if it wasn't quite the same.

Roul reached over and squeezed Alund's hand. "We'll be there soon. The courier rode only a day to find us with those new sowah charms."

Alund nodded but gave no reply as the Sea Neck Road curved past a knot of trees. He reined to a dead stop, his jaw dropping open. Ahead of them, a hundred paces away, a wall towered between a clump of wildlands on his right and Etienne's Lake on his left.

"Where did that come from?"

"My uncle probably." Roul rubbed his chin. "We build fortifications like these if the pirates in the Sunset Archipelago get serious about raiding." He pointed at a deep, V-shaped ditch before the wall. "He isn't done yet. That's the dry moat. He'll make a wet moat further out and probably build some platforms for siege engines."

The border between Imperial Lands and rebel held Etendulat could not be starker. Alund closed his mouth and looked away, across the sparkling blue lake. He had made his choices in that lonely hunting lodge when Louis told him of Brice's treason.

Jutting out his chin, he kneed his horse to trot beside Herself's palfrey. Roul guided his mount to ride at Alund's left, keeping slightly back, playing the role of the gentleman in waiting.

Alund's heart crimped together. Would that be their life from now on?

His eye caught Tahil and Darisia riding on either side of Naira. Besides saving his life, the Gods offered another option for his love. Though if the rebellion would accept an emperor with a wife and a husband...

"Halt!" The sentry's challenge drew Alund out of his reverie.

A squad of men-at-arms marched behind a mounted chevalier, the bends of a captain on his vert sash. It indicated a higher rank than Alund would have expected from a gate guard. But they had likely seen Herself's purpure sash from the walls.

Chain glittered on the chevalier's chest, and a sword hung from his pommel. Behind him, boiled leather warded the men-at-arms' chests, quilted clothing providing meager protection for their arms and legs. Halberds stretched up to their shoulders, the spear and axe mounted on smooth wooden handles. Vert shields hung from their left arms, the color of Tranchelag. Alund's fingers tangled in the tassels of his sash. None of these men belonged to him.

"I am Duchess Claire de la Roche." Herself spoke with precision, no hint of emotion in her voice.

The chevalier bowed from the neck, men-at-arms taking a knee behind him. "Your Grace. Welcome to camp. Please, follow me."

At the words, the soldiers rose and turned to march back through the giant gate in the wooden wall. The captain leaned forward and whispered a few words to one of the men who took off at a run.

The darkness of the gate tunnel fell across Alund as they rode through, leaving his ancestral lands behind.

Between the fortified access point and the sandy white shore of the lake sprawled an encampment of soldiers. Bivouacs formed neat rows with pennants fluttering from their poles. A wooden palisade had been erected around the tents, towers rising at the corners and gates set in the center of the sides.

Hard packed squares provided training spaces for soldiers. Great corrals held a multitude of horses for mounts and pigs for meat. Long lines of wagons flowed into

the camp, creaking under the weight of supplies and materiel and the song of hammers sounded even over the clangor of arms.

"See?" Roul pointed at the redwood forest where men scurried about half-built siege engines. "Told you."

Alund grunted in agreement. The engineers had been busy with other construction projects too. A new wooden bridge stretched across the river, connecting the camp to the road leading to Iselra, the ducal city across the lake.

Duke Raffi had the rebellion well in hand.

Alund grimaced. Was he here to lead? Or to be a puppet? He shook his head, clearing his thoughts.

In the central command area of the camp, three flags flew over a round pavilion. The argent snowflake on the azure background of Laroche, the vert banner with the anchor for Tranchelag and the Etendulat wheatsheaf on its gilt background.

All the rebellious duchies. Alund had agreed to lead them. His banner, the Babineaux Dragon, should join those flags. Did it mean something that it wasn't there? Or perhaps they simply waited for his official arrival.

Alund twisted in his saddle to speak to Roul. "How many soldiers do you think?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand." Roul squinted at the camp. "If the Larochian troops set up bivouacs as we do."

"We do," Herself said. "Raffi has run a good press, though it's not done yet. Etendulat's army should be gathering at another camp closer to Iselra. The bulk of my forces remain at Talvis in case Brice strikes directly for the Blood Gate."

Alund had all but forgotten the strange tale Louis had told him of a magical barrier that held some kind of life-sucking creature at bay. "Do you really think that's his goal? He has the throne."

"I doubt the throne means much to Brice, Highness." Herself's eyes flickered toward him as they approached the camp. "He wants raw power to wield with his own hands, not the proxy power of politics. The gambit with the throne is a steppingstone, not an end goal."

The gates of the camp swung wide, and they rode past soldiers wearing the vert tunics of Tranchelag over boiled leather breastplates. Men resting before the tents rose as the sashes passed them and Alund tangled his fingers into the dirt-encrusted threads of his tassels. Sable and purpure, his sash indicated his status as imperial heir. A bitter laugh bubbled in the back of his throat.

He would be Emperor only if he could beat the trollkarl who had stolen his father's face and throne.

A broad road stretched down the length of tents to the central command area. Four massive pavilions formed a colorful semi-circle there, yellow, blue, black, and green.

The colors of the rebel houses, his included. Gratitude flushed through Alund. At least he'd not have to share a home with one of his dukes. The noble residences embraced the command marquee, three of its canvas sides up to let the air flow in.

Servants swarmed them as they drew to a halt. Some took the horses and baggage, others escorted them to the giant black command tent. A square table dominated the shaded area—with five upright wooden chairs to a side, it could easily seat twenty. On the only unfurled wall, a map of Lumiaron sprawled.

Sashes crowded the place, noble attendants and military commanders alike. But the two dukes held all the attention. A mane of tawny blond hair swept back from Duke Raffi's face and a smile scrunched his cheeks as he inclined his head in the bow between equals.

Duchess Yolanda wore the left-to-right slanted bars of purpure and gilt on her sash, indicating her regency on behalf of her grandson. Her white hair framed a face that had grown old with grace, though a sadness haunted her eyes.

Despite Raffi's bow to Alund, it was to Herself that his eyes turned. "Claire, I am glad you have returned."

The corners of her mouth tilted upward. "Raffi, Yolanda, this is Prince Alund of course, and these are Naira, Tahil and Darisia. They are Consang and come bearing much lost knowledge."

"Highness." Raffi greeted Alund in a deep, rumbling voice. "And Consang! It seems you have quite a tale to tell."

"We do," Alund said. "There is much to discuss, if you are ready?"

"Indeed." Yolanda turned and waved to the table where pages set porcelain cups and wine jugs. "We have been awaiting your coming."

The conversation ran long as they first told the story of the events in the capital. That tale led to the fight in the dusang cave where the drummer, Taika, had lost her life. Alund's voice broke as he spoke of the death of his father, and Roul's hand closed on his wrist.

Giselle told of their flight and Alund's near death at the hands of the Dragon Guard and Viero assassins. Her eyes flickered to Herself, then.

The red-haired duchess took up the tale. "I found them in the forest. Fortunately, my dusang proved greater than the military might of the Guard." Herself touched one of the porcelain sowah charms that now decorated her wrists. "That was where I learned of the Threesome Gods and their power, for they saved Alund's life. Naira, if you would explain?"

Naira told the dukes of the Threesome religion and the true history of Viero as a heretical branch thereof. She emphasized the role of the Wheel, the rebirth of the soul, the journey the spirit took, life to life. All articles of faith the two religions shared.

Occasionally, Naira called on Mikel to add details and he spoke of the Hidden Three, already existent in the Empire.

"Viero hold that there is nothing beyond the Wheel, just knowledge," Naira said at last. "This is both right and wrong. When we have learned all that we can from the Wheel, we do indeed move through the hub and exist in perfect truth. But it is not an empty space. Three Gods live beyond the Wheel, the Right-Hand God, the Left-Hand God and their wife, the Goddess, who balances them eternally."

Silence filled the tent, candlelight flickering on tired faces. They had talked the day away.

Raffi leaned back in his chair, his smile long gone. "And what do you propose to do with this religion?"

"Laroche will provide a home for this faith," Herself said, her voice flat and firm. "We have no Vieroan temples beyond Talvis. The drummers still guide much of my people's life and the Snow Council supports this decision."

She tapped her porcelain cup, fingers tinging against the silver snowflake pattern on the fine white ceramic. Isabella poured, her light-filled eyes peering into the distance even though her hands guided the jug correctly.

Herself lifted the cup, her sowah charms sliding into the sleeve of her gown. "The spiritual animal of the Left-Hand God is a giant snake. The guiding spirit of the Rullara is a giant snake. There is much of the Rullara wisdom that is similar to the teachings of the Threesome Gods." She leaned forward. "Naira and her husbands saved the life of my son. The honeybee of the Right-Hand God showed Isabella a vision that saved the life of my granddaughter. The least I can do is ensure the safety to those that follow the Three Gods."

"This will make everything harder," Yolanda said. "We are already in rebellion and the Wheel's Champion threatens to declare us apostate. Now you propose to become apostate, lending truth to his words."

Alund pushed his plate aside. "His Excellency, the Wheel's Champion Wischard, stood by while a trollkarl murdered my father. The death of the Emperor fueled a sang sorcellerie ritual to steal his face and fill his sash. Wischard did nothing." Alund snatched at a cup which Roul had filled and gulped down the contents. "He approved of the binding of the dusang spirit of the Babineaux line. These are things I saw with my own eyes. In contrast, these priests come with power and lost knowledge. Vieroan assassins attacked me, but Darisia called the power of the Right-Hand God and healed me. What has Viero done for us except bring incalculable harm?"

"The Wheel's Champion is not the whole of the philosophies," Raffi said. "All my life, I have lived by Viero's tenets." He drummed his fingers on the table. "When I had doubts about what course of action to choose, I would meditate in the temple. On every key-stone event of my life, the monks were there, bearing witness before the Wheel. My uncle wrote a book of contemplations that bring me comfort when I grieve for my lost family. I accepted that my choices are my own, and that I laid out my life

while I rode the Wheel. Now you propose to change all that? Based on the wickedness of one man and the testimony of three strangers?"

Alund knotted his fingers together on the wooden table. He had tried to live his life in Viero's knowledge. But the touch of the Right-Hand God had been so much more.

"No one needs to adopt this faith right now." Herself held up her hand, porcelain charms jingling.

"But you have converted." Yolanda pointed at the baubles chiming on Herself's wrist.

"I do not care if Viero declares me apostate," Herself said with a shrug. "For us from the north, it was a decision driven by our guardianship of the Blood Gate, which is not a burden that the south has shared until recently." Her eyes flicked between Yolanda and Raffi, and they nodded. "But certainly we cannot let Wischard's actions slide. At the least, reformation of Viero is required. Why should that not include the original faith of our ancestors?"

"This goes well beyond reformation." Yolanda raised a cup to her lips, the wine riffling as her fingers trembled. "I can see similarities in the faiths, but even more differences."

Leaning forward, Alund touched her hand. "Your Grace, I understand your reluctance. But Viero is a frigid faith." He tilted his head to meet Duke Raffi's grim gaze. "What does it teach? That the poor chose to suffer and the weak have no desire to be strong." Alund threaded his fingers through Roul's. "It teaches that you choose to lose those you love. And that those who love you choose to leave you. For me, there has always been an emptiness in those philosophies."

Alund tightened his hold on Roul's hand, seeking words to convince them. "When Darisia healed me, the warmth that washed over me, the love..." Heat prickled over his skin and his throat tightened, making it hard to speak.

"The Gods love us," Naira said, certainty and warmth wrapping around her voice. "They love all their creation, even the Left-Hand God who would see it destroyed, for He would give us the chance to move beyond the Wheel and return to perfect divinity."

Silence soaked into the pavilion at her words, the dukes exchanging grim glances.

The muscles in Raffi's jaw feathered in rigid lines. "I still say it is too soon."

Alund clenched his lips over hot words and sought a fresh line of attack. "The three of you have asked me to be your Emperor and stand against Brice Rennaurd. Do we have six monks to witness my sashing? The Wheel's Champion supports the Blood Emperor. How many of his people follow his lead? How many spies and saboteurs are waiting in our ranks?"

Raffi turned a plate in a slow circle before him, eyebrows knitted in a frown. "Your sashing is indeed a problem. But not one I think we should solve with foreign priests standing in for the monks." He framed the plate between his hands. "You have passed the Trials of

Dusang. The purpure on your sash is there because your father chose you as heir and he is dead. On your power rests your claim. If the monks cannot witness it, so be it. Why should these Gods be involved at all?"

"Perhaps we should separate these matters," Yolanda said. "As you say, Raffi, there is no need for either the monks or the priests at the sashing. It will break with tradition, but not with sash law, not if we get the rechtshus onside."

"Agreed." Herself sipped at her cup. "Also, we hardly require all the land to suddenly adopt a new faith. But here is a simple truth—there are already those who hold to these Gods in our realm and they have been awaiting Naira's coming. These people require a spiritual home. I propose we liaise with the players guild and spread the news of Brice's perfidy and the blessings of the Gods." She met Raffi's eyes. "We must counter the message of Viero that we are all anathema."

He shook his head. "We must give Viero a chance to reform."

Alund clenched his fingers around Roul's hand. "And part of that reform should be acceptance of this faith. Find us monks who will lead a reform of Viero on those principles."

Roul grunted, his fingers wriggling against Alund's palm, and Alund forced his grip to relax.

"Surely we can do both?" Yolanda said, her voice calm. "We can send messages to the Vieroan temples where we know monks and find those who can lead a reformation. At the same time, we can let the people know about these Gods that have taken an interest in our Empire."

"And I must wait?" Alund's belly cramped to a hard point as the words scorched out of his throat.

Naira held up her hand, spreading dark fingers wide. "The Gods are eternal. They will always be there."

"I agree with Yolanda," Herself said. "Let us take a two-pronged approach and win the hearts of the people."

Raffi gave a reluctant nod, and Alund gritted his teeth. He was outvoted and Emperors who defied their dukes did not have long reigns.

"Very well. What about the military situation?"

"If we wish the people to support us, we must wait." Raffi rose and went to the map. "So, we should focus on defense. Let us discuss that strategy after the sashing, which I think we should handle soon."

"I can host a feast for the sashing in a week," Yolanda said.

Alund knotted his hands in his lap. He would be Emperor in seven days. It seemed an insane thought. "I will work on a speech."

"Good. It's decided then." Raffi returned to the table. "Can I show you to your pavilion, Highness? We have much to arrange and little time to do it in, but a good night's rest will benefit us all."

Alund's gaze flicked to Naira and Herself, who had risen together.

"I will see to the comfort of Naira and her husbands," Herself assured him.

Alund and Roul trailed Duke Raffi to the black pavilion with the dragon decorations. As they walked, a tension settled in Alund's chest.

He had not expected such resistance to his wish to adopt the Threesome faith. Viero's leaders stood on the side of the enemy. Why could Yolanda and Raffi not see that?

The desire to forge ahead, to insist on getting his way, burned in his guts. But he was all alone in this camp.

Roul's took Alund's hand, reminding him that he had one friend at least. "We'll figure it out."

Duke Raffi left them at the black pavilion and a chevalier in a vert sash showed them to a room with a sideboard squeezed between the back wall and a giant bed.

Alund sat on the edge of the mattress and rubbed across his forehead. "What do we do now?"

"We wait." Roul poured cider from a jug on the sideboard, releasing the heady scent of apples. "We rest and prepare for your sashing." He sat down on the bed. "War will come soon enough."

Alund fell back on the bed, staring up at the tented ceiling. Roul's words brought slight comfort. "I don't want to wait. I want to avenge my father."

Roul brushed his hand across the hard muscles of Alund's belly. "We're asking a lot of people to make a lot of changes. That takes time. You're the political one, you know that."

Alund pulled his lover into his embrace. "I don't feel very political."

Roul laughed and nestled his head against Alund's neck. "But you do feel very nice."

Dropping a kiss on the blond curls, Alund wrapped his arms tighter around Roul. He would have done more, but the weariness of the day washed over him, and he closed his eyes. Even as he drifted off to sleep, he wondered what the future would hold for him and the Empire.