

Far to the west, beyond the last frontier town, lies the Forest – unknowably old, unknowably vast.

The Forest is the home of the sylueds, an ancient and long-lived race that some call “elves.”

Long ago, at the end of some lost century, land hungry and ever-westbound human settlers began to encroach on the Forest’s borders, straining the already tenuous peace with the sylueds.

It was during this time of fear and uncertainty that the Elsebrin, an order of sylued monks, came to the human city of Vessena on a mission of peace. They were escorted by two young swordsmen called

Palm and Timriel.

## THE ELECT STORIES

### Chapter 1

“Purpose,” or “The Swordbearer’s Lament,”

being a recollection of how the swordsmen Palm and Timriel first came to the Free City of Vessena, and the tragic death that would reveal the true nature of their mission.

“It is too fucking cold for killing so many men,” Timriel said. He scowled at the sight of his breath clouding in the brisk morning air and hunched down against his horse’s neck for warmth. “Too much fucking bother.”

“We’re not going to kill anyone,” Palm said. He stood in his stirrups to get a better look at a merchant wagon sitting in a muddy field up ahead, just off the sloping shoulder of the road, out of the way of the nearly constant stream of travelers headed for the bustling markets and busy harbor of the Free City of Vessena.

Near the wagon burned a bonfire where three men stood warming themselves. Another three were sorting through the merchant’s goods. They tossed their choice of items into a heap on the ground and threw the rest into the flames. None of the travelers on the road seemed to notice at all, though Palm noted how diligently they kept their eyes forward, their minds on their own business. Two of the men were armed with muskets and swords, the rest with poleaxes. They looked young and soft and inexperienced, as children of peace always do, but there were still six of them. Timriel was right: it would be a bother.

“Come on,” Timriel said. He whistled his horse to a walk. “We’re not even through the fucking gate yet. Can we at least get to Great House and unpack our fucking bags, maybe have a cup of fucking tea before we start drawing fucking steel?” Timriel had long resisted learning to speak the Eremoran language, but he had recently fallen in love with their word “fucking.” He had bowed to Father Saren’s command that they all

speaking Eremoran whenever out in public in Vessena, but on the one condition that he be allowed to speak it any way he fucking pleased.

“We’re not going to…” Palm began, but then he noticed that Timriel was already on the move. He dropped back into his saddle, giggered his horse to a trot, and caught up. “We’re not going to start anything,” he said, coming alongside Timriel. “We’ll just question them and keep them busy until the guards arrive. This close to the gate the city watch will surely…”

Timriel burst out laughing.

“What?” Palm asked. He sincerely didn’t understand what Timriel found so funny. His sincerity just made Timriel laugh harder.

“Let us go, then,” Timriel said, blowing into his hands to warm them. “We will greet these men and shake their hands and wait for the city watch to arrive, shall we? Wait, I have an even better idea: you do it and I will look on in admiration.”

The two swordsmen guided their horses through the herd of men and animals ambling along the road that passed through Vessena’s western gate.

The road was like a city unto itself, crowded on either side by travelers’ tents and wagons, but also more permanent houses and stables and shops that were bustling both day and night. Palm and Timriel had purchased beds at a roadside inn the night before and were stunned when a fellow traveler in the crowded common room informed them that they weren’t yet in the city proper. By morning light, they could see Vessena’s gray stone curtain wall still in the distance, rising above the rooftops of the village growing in the city’s shadow.

As Palm and Timriel left the road and descended the gentle slope toward the wagon, the merchant came running around the side of the bonfire, cursing at the men. He was a sylued, a member of Eremor's indigenous people, who men like these would call an "elf."

"We are going to kill six human men to defend one sylued merchant?" Timriel asked. "On our first fucking day?"

"We're not going to kill anyone," Palm repeated.

When Father Saren told him that he would be joining the mission to Vessena, Palm knew that he wouldn't just be serving as a bodyguard. He was the only human among the Order of Elsebrin. His hand was here to clasp other hands, not the handle of a sword. Of that he was certain.

"Think a few moves ahead," Timriel said. "How do you see this ending? You ride down there and tell those men to stop harassing that merchant... and then what happens?" He nudged the sword under his riding cloak and nodded at the one under Palm's.

"I'm just going to talk to them," Palm said, "man to man."

"You talk like a man, alright," Timriel said. "But can you talk *to* a man? How many humans have you even met before, man or woman?"

"That farmer at Gathendry Cross," Palm said. "He let us water our horses and take shelter in his barn, and all it took was a friendly greeting." It was a weak riposte and he knew it, but he hadn't let a jab from Timriel go unanswered since he was nine years old and he wasn't going to start now.

“That farmer!” Timriel said and he laughed through his chattering teeth. “How could I have doubted?” He leaned down against his horse’s neck and pretended to whisper in one of its ears. “He is out of the forest for three weeks, he meets one human along the road, and now he is a fucking diplomat!”

“I didn’t say that I was a diplomat...”

“Good,” Timriel interrupted, his voice hard and humorless. “We are the Swordbearers of Elsebrin, and that means only one thing: we go where Father Saren goes and we stand behind him holding swords.” He pointed to the men around the bonfire ahead. “I have met dozens of human men like these, Palm. Dozens. I know how this will all end.”

They let their horses pick their way slowly down the roadside in silence for a moment. Then Timriel smiled again and said, “I am just a lower branch *gareeyu*, and I cannot speak their language as prettily as you, but by experience, I am more of a human than you will ever be.”

“Half,” Palm said with a grin. “You’re exactly half the human I will ever be.” It was a dirty attack, and overused, but calling each other out for their questionable parentage was, per usual, where the fight had taken them.

Timriel laughed again and blew out a cloud of steaming breath. “Exactly half thanks to my dear old father, so watch your fucking mouth.”

Palm said, “I’m just doing what we came to Vessena to do: protecting the local sylueds, and forging a real and lasting peace between the syluedim and humankind.”

“That sounds like a speech,” Timriel said. “And it sounds like one of Father Saren’s. Is that what he told you? Is that is to be our grand purpose? We, the swordbearers of the Order of Elsebrin, are reduced to watching over whatever rabble of Houseless elves we find stuck in this seaside shithole?”

“Well,” Palm said, “we do still get to stand behind Father Saren holding swords.”

“In that case, I’m convinced,” Timriel said, “Let’s go kill these men.”

“We’re not...!” Palm started to shout, but then he saw the teasing smile on Timriel’s face and tried not to fall for the feint. “We are just going to introduce ourselves as officers of the city, because that is what we’re about to be.”

“One of us will be,” Timriel said. “The other is about to be put on household chores duty for doing something fucking stupid.”

Palm led the way to the wagon.

“Get back on the road and mind your own business,” one of the men called out as Palm and Timriel approached. He wore a three-cornered hat, what the Eremorans called a “cocked hat,” instead of a pot helmet like the rest of the men. There was a white plume stuck in the hat and he acted as though that signified something.

“This *is* our business,” Palm said. He gestured to Timriel, who made a token effort at a bow. “This is Timriel, a master swordsman of the kindred of the Sylued Forest. And I am Palm, of the royal sylued house of Yesidreel, his apprentice. We are the swordbearers of the Order of Elsebrin.”

The white-plumed man spat in the dirt and grunted, “Order o’ what, then?” This prompted snickering from the other men.

“Do you see this? Do you see this?” The sylued merchant shouted when he saw Palm and Timriel. He spoke in a haughty mid-woods accent and his richly embroidered coat was the sky blue of the noble House Oreel. “These men are stealing my wagon!”

“Your wagon is safe,” Palm said in Sylued. Then, in Eremoran, he shouted to the men, “Step away from the wagon and let this merchant pass. He is of the kindred of the Sylued Forest and under our protection.”

“He ain’t in the forest now,” the white-plumed man said flatly. “And neither are you.” His fellows must have noticed the change in the conversation’s tone. They turned from the wagon and the bonfire and shifted their weapons in their hands.

Palm felt his right hand twitch instinctively for his sword. The hateful, ignorant look on the men’s piggish faces made him feel ashamed, not just of doubting Timriel’s warning, but of his own race. How did he share blood with these people? He inhaled deeply and slowed his angry heartbeat.

The merchant marched toward them, shouting at them like he was chastising a lazy servant. “Well, are you the Elsebrin swordbearers, or not? Why are you listening to the yammering of these thieving jacks? Kill them at once!”

“I was wrong. This is going really well,” Timriel said. “Definitely stick with this plan whatever you do. I’ll try to enjoy watching the ceremony alone while you are showing the new pageboy where to empty his piss pot.”

Palm lanced Timriel with an icy blue stare and then dismounted his horse. There was no arguing with Palm once his mind was made up. Timriel knew better than to waste time trying. He dismounted as well.

“You better get back on those horses and ride,” the white-plumed man said. He leveled his musket at Palm.

“Our order has been appointed by Council of Vessena to represent the local Sylued population in all matters of Eremoran law.” Palm opened his riding cloak to reveal an old-fashioned chainmail vest worn over a traditional sylued coat, and a sword hung low on his hip. He hoped that would be enough to dissuade the men from fighting. “On whose authority are you seizing this wagon?”

“On the authority of the City Watch,” the white-plumed man said and tapped a metal badge emblazoned with the crest of the Free City of Vessena hanging from a chain around his neck. “Now drop your weapons, you elf lovin’ sonsofbitches.”

Timriel sighed. “Well, fuck.”

What happened next would challenge the descriptive skills of bards and barroom storytellers for years to come.

Palm charged, rapidly closing the distance to the white-plumed musketeer. He remained focused on the white-plumed musketeer’s eyes, which widened with fear. In them, he saw the man’s intention to fire his musket a full heartbeat before the man’s hesitant finger pulled the trigger. Palm took a step to the left and continued forward, drawing his sword as he moved. By the time the musket’s muzzle flashed and belched smoke, Palm was moving alongside the barrel and striking the white-plumed musketeer on the temple with the steel pommel of his sword. The musket’s report was still hanging in the air when the musketeer hit the ground, unconscious.

Timriel rushed the bonfire where two men with poleaxes stood, conveniently doing their duty without straying far from the fire's warmth. As he ran, he screamed the ritual words like a battle cry. He was channeling and he let the men know it. He could channel without speaking the ritual words aloud, but he knew that humans' fear of magic was as potent as magic itself. When the first man made a clumsy lunge with his poleaxe, he was shaking so hard that Timriel simply pulled the weapon out of his grip and tossed it onto the bonfire.

As the second man rushed forward, Timriel parried his poleaxe aside and pulled him into an embrace. Before the man could wrestle himself free, Timriel leaped into the bonfire, dragging the man with him. The man tumbled out the other side of the fire, rolling across the frosty ground to extinguish the flames eating at his hair and skin and quilted coat.

Timriel stepped from the fire unscathed, drawing the heat that would have burned him alive into himself. The metal blade of the poleaxe in his hands glowed, hot with the flame that now raced through every nerve in his body. He felt just like that blade. Burning. Incandescent. He rushed the last two men. One was raising a musket. Timriel grabbed the barrel of the musket and released the fire's heat. The metal beneath his hand glowed a bright white-orange and the black powder in the musket's barrel exploded, sending a lead ball tearing aimlessly through the morning air. A split second later, the powder in the priming pan exploded with a sizzling pop and the musketeer dropped the weapon and clutched at his eyes, screaming.

The last of the men dropped his poleaxe and ran.

Timriel whistled for his horse, which had bolted at the sound of gunfire. “Well,” he said. “Was that how you saw this scenario ending?”

Palm sheathed his sword and shook his head in bewildered frustration. Hadn’t the city watch been told that they were coming? Did the council appointment mean nothing? If the men of Vessena would not recognize their authority, then what was the purpose of their mission?

The merchant stood for a moment, staring at the injured and unconscious men left strewn across the ground. Then he ran, clambered onto his wagon’s seat and flapped the reins in a panic. Soon the wagon was trundling over the rutted, muddy earth and back onto the road to the western gate.

“You were right after all, though,” Timriel said. “We didn’t kill anyone.”

Palm allowed himself a grim smile. “I’m sure the council will appreciate that we didn’t kill any watchmen on our first day in town.”

“I will let you know what they say when I come back from the welcoming ceremony.” Timriel mounted his horse and favored Palm with a bow and a smile. “After you finish giving the new pageboy those pisspot instructions.”

## 2

Ten-year old Cassian Vessena was the last of the council pages to be assigned a post, so he knew long before his new guardian arrived where he was going to spend the rest of his youth. Like most council pages, Cassian had hoped to serve the Lord Mayor, which meant a nice room in the servant’s quarters at the Lord Mayor’s estate and tailored

livery to wear, amongst other privileges. Those posts were given to the sons of councilmen. Cassian had also thought that it might be fun to be posted to the College of Magical Arts. The older boys liked to frighten the new ones with stories of the unlucky kids condemned to that post. They told stories of boys turned to pigs, boys lost forever through magical doorways, boys devoured by the unnamable beasts that the mages kept as guards for their arcane secrets. Cassian had never found those stories frightening. As far as he was concerned, any post would be a welcome change from daily dorm chores, and endless classes in arithmetic and penmanship and etiquette. And it seemed that all twelve of the council's seats had their good points. Cassian, however, was posted to serve the council's *thirteenth seat*.

The thirteenth seat was new, so there was no hand-me-down wisdom. All that was known about the thirteenth seat was that it would be occupied by a priest of a religious order called the Elsebrin. And all that was known about the Elsebrin was that they were rabble-rousers. Trouble-makers. *Elves*. Cassian imagined being led from the pages' dormitory by a stone-faced and cold-hearted elf like the ones he'd seen in pantomime plays, the ones who were always stealing human children in their sleep. He sat alone on the hard wooden bench in the echoing front hall of the dormitory awaiting his fate at the hands of one of those ancient creatures with skin like leather, and hard, staring eyes, and a voice like ice water, who would make him sleep in a tree and eat nothing but acorns. He cried for the first time since he was six, when his father had taken him from his mother and given him to the chamberlain at Council Keep.

"My name is C-cassian Vessena," he whispered to himself. "I am appointed by the Council of the Free City of Vessena to serve as your page..." He wiped his nose on

his sleeve and tried to swallow his gasping sobs before an older boy saw him and cuffed him for crying. Then a shadow fell over him.

Cassian's first impression of his new master was greatly colored by relief – it was not an elf but a human who came to retrieve him, a man maybe twenty years old. He was a soldier or swordsman of some kind. Beneath his riding cloak, he wore an old-fashioned chainmail vest over a long shirt of exquisitely fine green cloth. He wore buckskin breeches and knee-high boots. A sword hung from a belt slung low around his hips. Though most Vessenan men wore cocked hats or wool caps, this man was bareheaded and he wore his thick, black hair long, as Cassian had heard was the custom of elves. The man's eyes were dark blue like the bay outside the city wall. He was tall, broad-shouldered and imposing, but when he spoke to Cassian he knelt down and addressed him eye to eye in a gentle voice.

“You must be Cassian Vessena,” the man said.

“Yes, sir,” Cassian said, wiping at his eyes. He hoped that his crying hadn't spoiled everything and gotten him held back for being unfit. “There's just me, sir. I'm the only one left.”

“Then you're the one for me,” said the man with a smile. “I'm Palm.”

“I am at your service, Sir Palm,” Cassian said with a bow, already feeling better and, consequently, better remembering his etiquette lessons.

“I'm not a sir,” the man said. “I'm just Palm. What was your name before you were given the city's?”

“Florin, s...” He paused, embarrassed, and then forged ahead. “I was born Cassian Florin, the fourth son of Julian Florin. Now I am Cassian Vessena, servant of the city.”

“I have a better one for you,” Palm said, standing. “You are now Cassian Will. You are a servant of the city and of the Elsebrin, but you do your duty because it is *your will* to do so. Does that suit you?”

Cassian nodded and stood as well.

“Come along then, Cassian Will. I’ll take you to Great House, your new home.”

3

“*Giken soll*,” Palm pronounced, helping Cassian maneuver one arm into the sleeve of his new livery.

“Is this an elfish shirt?” Cassian asked, a bit confounded by its exhausting number of tiny buttons and the tight, stiff band of a collar.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get it soon enough,” Palm said. “You’ll be doing this in your sleep.”

Cassian laughed, though mostly in frustration.

Palm took over the buttoning for him. “I’m wearing one under my chainmail, do you see? If I can learn how to wear one, I’m sure a council page can. Now. *Giken soll*. Repeat.”

“What’s it made of?” Cassian asked, fingering the silky cloth. “It feels like nothing at all!”

“It’s nothing at all like wool or cotton, that’s true,” Palm said. He repeated the Sylued words again, hitting each syllable: “*Guy ken soll*. Repeat, please.”

“Giken Soll,” Cassian said dutifully, still rubbing the cloth between his fingers. He had actually learned a fair amount of the Sylued language from his tutor at the Council Keep, but actually speaking it now felt strange, almost impossible. “This is dreamcloth, isn’t it? The older boys say that elves can steal your dreams at night and weave them into tapestries.”

“It’s called *meerin*,” Palm said with a chuckle. “And it’s not made from dreams, Cassian. That’s nonsense.”

Cassian bowed his head, chastened.

“If you want to know,” Palm said, “it’s made from spider silks. Fine stuff, very soft, very light, but also very strong. This shirt could stop a blade more surely than a breastplate.” He lowered his voice and favored Cassian with a conspiratorial tone. “In fact, the chainmail I wear is just for show, to help those who would attack us understand that we can defend ourselves. But it’s the *meerin* coat underneath that provides the actual protection.”

Cassian ran his hands over the sleeves of the shirt with new appreciation, though he couldn’t help wondering if Palm was playing some elaborate joke at his expense.

Palm dropped to one knee to look Cassian straight in the eye.

“There will be many things you will see here among us that will be strange to you. You are now serving the Order of Elsebrin and our master, Father Saren Yesidreel, the son of the Prophet. That honor will require more of you than simply learning a new

language, Cassian. It will require a new understanding. Do you understand what I am trying to say?"

Cassian nodded, trying.

"The first lesson then: Our brothers and sisters here are called 'sylueds,' not 'elves.' That's a derisive word made up by small-minded men. Say *sill-weds*."

"Sill-weds."

"Good," Palm said. "And our order is called the 'Elsebrin.' Say *ell-SEB-rin*."

Cassian repeated.

"Excellent," Palm said. "There are two dozen brothers and sisters here at Great House, and there are hundreds more living in other Elsebrin shrines and temples, and there are thousands of followers in the forest, all faithful to the teachings of the Prophet. But of all of them, you and I are the only two humans. So, just as the Order of Elsebrin has come to this city to represent the syluedim to humanity, you and I must serve as a good example of humanity to the syluedim."

*You and I*, Cassian thought, and it warmed him. He asked, "Why did you join the order?"

"My parents were settlers on the Fringe, which is what we call the land along the borders of the forest. Marauders attacked my parents' camp one night. My parents were killed. I was just a baby, left to die." Palm said these things in a distant, matter of fact tone. But then he smiled and said, "Father Saren found me, and took me in and raised me as a member of his own House, like family."

“Father Saren is the leader of your order? Like an abbot or a priest?” Cassian asked, “And he’s also an elf prince?” He winced in embarrassment. “A seel-wed prince, I mean?”

“*Sylued* prince,” Palm said. “*Sill-wed*. His father is the Vanir, which is what we call the ruler of the forest, the head of all of the noble Houses. *Vah-NEER*.”

Cassian repeated.

“So, yes, I suppose that would make Father Saren a prince. But his father is more than a mere king, he is the Prophet. We live by his teachings. In that way, we are all like his children. That makes us brothers.”

Cassian thought of his brothers, the three that he’d had as a member of the family Florin. The youngest of them was older than Cassian by ten years, and all three were out of the house when Cassian was still hanging on the nurse’s skirts. The first inherited their father’s land, the second received military training, and the third joined the priesthood, as was the tradition amongst the old families. Though they were his brothers by blood, he had never truly thought of them that way. To Cassian, his siblings were just busy young men who were loyal to his father, and as there were many ambitious young men in Vessena who were ready to kiss the great Julian Florin’s ring, that was not much of a distinction. As a member of the “family” of Vessena’s Council pages, Cassian had three dozen brothers, younger and older, and Cassian knew and loved every one of those “fateless fourth sons” better than his blood kin. But even in his happiest days at the page’s dormitory, he’d never had a brother quite like this new one, Palm. That he could tell already.

“This is an historic occasion, young Cassian,” Palm said, fixing the last of Cassian’s buttons. “For the first time, a sylued will take a seat on the Council of Vessena. That means a real chance for an ongoing peace between our people. The Prophet himself is leaving the forest for the first time in a century to bless our mission.”

*A century!* Cassian thought, but he contained his surprise and tried not to give offense. He was proud of how calmly and casually he asked, “Is it true then? The sylueds live forever?”

Palm smiled gently. “No. I wish that were true, but no. They do live exceedingly long lives compared to us. For instance, Father Saren appears to be perhaps fifty years old, when in truth he is closer to five hundred.”

Cassian felt his eyes go wide at this, and Palm laughed. It wasn’t a cruel or chiding laugh. It was a laugh of shared amazement.

“Palm!” A thin man with dazzling green eyes and a thick braid of blonde hair burst into the room with a shout. He wore the same old-fashioned chainmail and meerin shirt as Palm. A sword was slung low on his left hip. “Have you heard?”

“I’ve only just gotten back from...” Palm began. “Wait, what are you doing back so soon? Why aren’t you at the...”

“Of course, you have not heard,” the thin man interrupted, laughing, “you have been instructing the new pageboy!” He turned to survey Cassian, his green eyes as bright as a cat’s. “And *this* is the pageboy!”

“Cassian Will, page of the Council of the Free City of Vessena, at your service,” Cassian said and bowed.

“Timriel of the Order of Elsebrin, at yours!” the man said with a voice like articulate laughter. “How go the piss pots, young Cassian?”

Cassian blushed. He wasn’t sure if the hysterical green-eyed man called Timriel was making fun of him. Palm seemed to sense this.

“What happened?” Palm said. “You came to ask if I’d heard...?”

“The welcoming ceremony has been postponed,” Timriel said. “A man came from the city watch and starting talking the biggest fucking load of...”

Palm interrupted him with a touch on the arm and a glance in Cassian’s direction. “We should speak privately.”

“We should,” Timriel said. “But there is no time now. You have to prepare for the ceremony tonight.”

“Tonight?” Palm said.

“I believe that is what I just said.” Timriel turned to Cassian with a mock confused expression and asked, “Is that not what I just said?”

“It is,” Cassian said.

Timriel smiled and his green eyes twinkled. “I like this one,” he said. “It learns quickly.” He laughed and Cassian couldn’t help but laugh with him. “Father Saren looks forward to meeting you.”

Cassian’s laughter stopped. “M-me?”

“That’s right,” Timriel said, “you’ll be attending the ceremony. You see, Father Saren believes that humans often feel uncomfortable in the company of elves...”

“Don’t confuse the boy,” Palm said, interrupting. “I was just telling him that we don’t use words like that.”

“Oh, of course not!” Timriel said. “We are above such prejudice, Jack!”

“Don’t start that,” Palm sighed, but it only encouraged him.

Timriel bent down, hands on his knees, and spoke to Cassian in the saccharine voice of a wet nurse. “You see, young Cassian, if a member of the ancient and noble race of the syluedim ever calls you ‘Jack,’ it isn’t because they forgot your name, oh no. It’s because they think human men are all alike and bear no differentiation.” It seemed to Cassian that Timriel was telling the truth. Fairy stories, which some said were invented by the elves, were full of boys called ‘Jack.’

“Stop!” Palm barked.

“Whatever the matter,” Timriel said, raising his hands in surrender, “Father Saren believes that having another of their kind present at the ceremony may put the councilmen at ease. That is why you are wanted at the ceremony tonight, young Cassian.”

“Another of their kind?” Palm asked, confused. “There will be plenty of other...”

Timriel bent down to speak eye to eye with Cassian again. His expression was serious, his voice quiet. “Have you ever met a sylued before?”

“No,” Cassian said, his voice betraying more nervousness than he’d hoped. In his joyful surprise at meeting Palm and the exciting rush of information that followed, Cassian had almost forgotten about the Elsebrin themselves, this house full of sylueds that he – and Palm and Timriel, too, it appeared – was meant to serve.

“Ever seen one up close?” Timriel asked. He huddled closer to Cassian, as if to keep some fearful secret safe between them.

Cassian’s mind raced through scenes from fair day plays of grease-painted actors wearing pointed ears made of wax, and through the frightening illustrations he’d seen in the Council Library’s volume of “Langlofan’s Fables.” Then there was the time last year when one of the older boys said he’d seen an elf woman in the market and they’d spent the entire free afternoon chasing her rumor. But... “No.”

“Well,” Timriel said, “the next time you see the other council boys you can tell them you met an entire house full of sylueds.”

“The only ones that would believe it are the ones who are apt to believe anything. I don’t know that *I’d* believe it if someone told me that.”

“A house full,” mused Timriel with a nod of agreement. “Yes, it does sound a bit too fantastic to believe.” Timriel widened his eyes dramatically, pretending inspiration. “Would they believe you if you said you’d met just one sylued? What about just *half* of one?”

It took Cassian a moment to hear what Timriel was saying through the whimsical tone. *You and I are the only two humans among the Elsebrin*, Palm had said.

Cassian stammered. “Y-you’re...?”

Timriel extended his hand to shake, his eyes sparkling like sea glass. “From my dear departed mother, but my father was human through and through. Back home in the forest they call me Timriel Jackson.”

Cassian shook his hand and then Palm ushered Timriel out saying, “Thank you for the news, then, Mister Jackson, but young Master Will and I have work to do.”

5

The boy had to be shown how to do something only once. As Timriel noted, he learned quickly. That was good, because Palm was teaching quickly. His mind was elsewhere and his body wanted to be elsewhere, too, as soon as possible. As soon as his tour of Great House brought them to the kitchen, Palm served the new page boy a bowl of fish stew and told him to go eat his lunch on the sunny porch out back. He was charging back inside and up the stairs to Timriel’s quarters before the boy had taken his first bite.

He found Timriel kneeling on his prayer mat finishing his sword prayer, the ritual cleaning of the blade after combat. His sword had drawn no blood in the morning scuffle but that was irrelevant. *The weapon must be wiped clean*, so wrote the Prophet.

Palm held his tongue until Timriel rested his sword across his knees, refolded his cloth and placed it atop the oil jar. At last he burst out with, “Tell me what happened!”

“Oh, Council Keep was all abuzz when Father Saren and I arrived,” Timriel said, “you should have seen it.” They were alone so, per their agreement, Timriel was allowed to speak Sylued. He did so through a luxurious smile. “One of the watchmen that greeted us out on the road this morning came before the council with a lump on his head and wounded pride and claimed that elves had attacked him and his company without provocation.”

“What lies!” Palm said.

“Nevertheless, there were men who believed him, both in the crowd and on the council. ‘Oh, the shame of city watchmen being abused so,’ they said. And just when the city is opening its arms to welcome *those people*. The unforgivable insult of it!” Timriel sheathed his clean blade and rested it in its rack upright in the sentinel position, ready for the hand.

“Did anyone talk about what those watchmen were doing?” Palm said. “They were harassing a merchant! They were stealing his goods in broad daylight and burning the rest!”

“That’s apparently too common of an occurrence to make interesting court gossip. Elves ambushing the watchmen, on the other hand...”

“Ambushing? Elves?” Palm could feel his anxiety igniting into anger. Timriel’s flippancy wasn’t helping.

“As the story goes,” Timriel said, “a sylued merchant took offense at having his wagon searched at the western gate, so his security men – that’s us, apparently, and the word is that we outnumbered them – leapt out from the wagon and attacked. Were it not for the quick thinking and superior combat skills of the city watchmen, lives may have been lost. Unfortunately, they were not able to capture the squirrely elves, who retreated like cowards and escaped.”

“What? That’s nonsense!”

“That’s the way the story was told to me. By someone who wasn’t there.”

Palm moved for the door. Standing there listening to Timriel’s sarcasm would no longer do. “I have to go talk to them. I have to explain...”

“Explain what? To whom? The ceremony was only postponed, not cancelled.”

Timriel uncorked his water jug, poured two cups of water and offered one to Palm. “Still yourself. Sit.”

Palm took the water cup and sat on the mat next to Timriel. Doing so always made him remember when he was little, sitting on the mat while Timriel taught him to hone his weapon or sang to him from the prayer book. He felt his breath deepen and his heartbeat slow.

Timriel said, “Scores of sylueds have come into the village below Vessena in the past week and that’s more than have come in the past century. It was only a matter of time before swords were drawn.”

“They’re coming to see Father Saren’s installation on the council?” Palm asked. Father Saren’s decision to leave the forest to live in a human city had not been well received amongst the noble Houses. “That is a good sign. Perhaps the wind of opinion is shifting.”

“I doubt it, “ Timriel said. “The whole forest knows that the Prophet will be visiting Vessena to bless Great House and the mission. They are coming to get a glimpse of him before he disappears into House Yesidreel for another century, and they are being harassed by the locals. So it goes. This incident with the watchmen this morning will be forgotten with the all others, so stop worrying. Still yourself. Drink.”

Palm raised the glass to his lips but could not drink. Not yet. “What did you mean that Father Saren wants another human present? The whole council will be there.”

“No, it won’t,” Timriel said. “The ceremony was postponed so it could be moved here to Great House. We will host a small select committee for a private ceremony tonight. The council decided that there will be no public ceremony for fear of violence in the gathered crowds.”

“Having the public witness the ceremony was the point of the whole thing! The people need to see their council make a treaty and stand by it.” Palm put his cup down, suddenly unable to hold it without wanting to throw it. “They’ve lost faith in us already and we haven’t even begun.”

“We are not the Order of Elsebrin,” Timriel said. “We are just their swordbearers. Be patient. Drink.”

Palm picked up his cup again. But he didn’t drink. He blurted, “What should I have done? Let them rob the merchant?”

“I don’t know,” Timriel said. “Would the public ceremony have been cancelled if we had let those men rob the merchant? Perhaps not. But there is no way to know, so it doesn’t matter. Do you truly believe that our mission could end in failure because one ceremony was cancelled? Or because of one altercation with a half-dozen under-trained watchmen? Truly? Have a little more faith in the Prophet, if not in us. Aren’t we here doing his work?”

For a moment, Palm couldn’t tell if Timriel was mocking him with such pious talk. “When did you discover this faith in our mission? You’re usually so pessimistic about coming here.”

“I’m not pessimistic,” Timriel said. “I’m realistic about the years of work we have ahead of us, years of diplomacy and ambassadorship and other things with which sharp edged tools like us have no experience.”

Palm took a drink of his water and let it cool him, but he was not satisfied. At length, he asked, “Why are we even here? I thought we were supposed to make a difference.”

And Timriel replied, “Doesn’t the fact that we’re here mean that things *are* different?”

6

Just hours after his arrival at Great House, Cassian Will was to do his first official duty as a council page. The Elsebrin were hosting two of Vessena’s councilmen: Robert Wheelwright, the latest patriarch in a family whose bloodline could be traced back to the founding of the city, and August Wineblood, who had been a staunch advocate for giving the syluedim a voice in Vessena’s government. These were important and powerful men, not only in Vessena but throughout all of Eremor. Cassian could not fault Father Saren for wanting to impress.

Palm walked him through the steps of the ceremony several times and then brought Cassian to Great House’s temple for final instructions before the councilmen were to arrive. They stopped outside the temple’s heavy oaken door.

“Pay close attention to Father Saren’s instruction and you will do fine. Here, you need to leave your weapon.” Palm slipped the slim ornamental dagger from Cassian’s belt.

“That’s just my sigil,” Cassian said, watching Palm rebuckle his belt. The dagger wasn’t a really a weapon but a badge denoting Cassian’s position with the council, the one part of the page’s livery that remained the same regardless of the clothing provided by the individual post. The blade was made of brass and was too dull even for whittling.

“Even so, the path of Elsebrin is a peaceable one. We allow no weapons of any kind in the sanctuary.”

Cassian’s eyes shifted to the sword at Palm’s hip, but he said nothing. Instead, Cassian directed his attention to the thick, knotty door with its iron hasps and handle, the fertile soil of his young mind sprouting exotic images of what could be inside.

It was a moment before he realized: “You aren’t coming in, too?”

“No,” Palm replied. He did not elaborate.

Cassian stole one last look to Palm, whose eyes were on the door, as well. The certain blue of those eyes that had been so reassuring before now felt cool and implacable.

Palm stepped to one side of the door and stood at attention there. Cassian felt a cramp of nerves in his stomach like those he would get before a test in class. The nervousness wasn’t so much from the look of the door, which was rather nondescript, nor even from what might lay beyond it. It was from Palm; from the way his beneficent, brotherly bearing seemed suddenly to diminish in proximity to the door. Standing next to

it, eyes fixed in the middle distance, hands resting on the buckle of his sword belt, Palm did not seem at all like the warm-voiced and patient teacher he had been only moments before. Now he was a man with a sword, guarding a door beyond which no swords were permitted.

Cassian turned the iron door handle and entered the sanctuary alone.

The door opened into a tiny antechamber made by an encircling wood and parchment screen. The lulling odors of tallow candles and aromatic wood saturated the air. There was a small table bearing a wooden hand bowl filled with water. Cassian stood there a moment trying to recall any indication of what he might be required to do, what ritualized step might come next. Palm's lessons were suddenly a jumble in his anxious young mind. Silently, cautiously, he peered around the edge of the screen and into the sanctuary.

The space was dark and windowless, lit only by three massive pillar candles on a low altar on the opposite wall. For one skipped heartbeat, Cassian saw dozens of people skulking in the deep shadow beyond the reach of the candles' throw, but they were only life-sized figures carved in bas-relief on the wooden panels that lined each wall. Cassian cursed his foolishness, but he could hardly be blamed. Even as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, the figures appeared frighteningly life-like, from the natural postures of the bodies, to the sculpted folds of their clothing, to the way the flickering candlelight seemed to animate the beauty of their oil-polished faces. If nothing else had given them away as statues, Cassian thought, the faces would have. There the artist had outdone himself. He had made them too beautiful. Inhumanly beautiful.

“Do you like them?” asked a quiet voice from behind Cassian. The boy startled and turned, but could see no one else in the room. “Do you... *admire* them?”

The voice had the sure, measured rhythm of nobility, but there was also a hesitant quality - the self-consciousness of someone attempting to converse in a foreign language with a native speaker - that somehow made it less ominous.

“They’re beautiful,” Cassian replied. He felt his face flush with pride at his own bravery. A moment later, he remembered the speech he had been practicing on the bench that morning. “My name is Cassian Ves...” he caught himself, “Cassian Will. I am appointed by the Council of the Free City of Vessena as your page and servant in all Council business.”

Suddenly and without a sound, a figure appeared from the shadows before Cassian. It was as if one of the carvings had stepped forward from the bas-relief, and for the briefest instant as the light fell across the figure’s face, Cassian truly believed one had. Standing before Cassian was a slender man with bronze skin that seemed to shimmer in the candlelight. His shoulder length hair fell in pine-colored curls around his beardless face. These were the few details Cassian could take in before seeing the man’s eyes – the *sylued*’s eyes - after which all else seemed to fall away. They were the same bright sea glass green as Timriel’s eyes but with a sea’s depth beneath them. Cassian felt himself being drawn into those depths. For a moment he felt what he imagined a swimmer in the bay feels when he’s been pulled out too far by the undertow, a kind of hysterical panic.

“I am pleased to meet you, young son,” the sylued said in a voice that was soft as a whisper, but perfectly clear. “I am Father Saren, son of the Prophet, of the Order of Elsebrin, of the royal house of Yesidreel, of the people of the Sylued Forest.”

“I - - I... uh,” Cassian stammered. He had forgotten how to speak. Everything he knew was swimming away from him, deeper and deeper into Father Saren’s oceanic eyes.

“Do you know the *jessy*, young Cassian?” Father Saren turned his gaze from the boy to the figure in the panel next to them and Cassian felt his senses return.

“No, Father.”

“Each of these panels depicts one of the eighteen...” he searched for a word he could not find, then added, with a shrug: “*jessy*.” Father Saren’s face beamed with a kind of self-effacing bemusement that warmed Cassian. “You know, I have been translating the Elsebrin texts into your language but I cannot find the fitting word for *jessy*.” He pointed to a bas-relief of a sylued man sitting on a wine cask, his head wreathed in vines, holding a basket of luscious grapes in his lap. “This one I translated to ‘the wine maker’, though in my tongue the name would be mean something closer to ‘his soul is in the wine’.” Father Saren pointed to another panel, a graceful sylued woman weaving a tapestry. “She is ‘the weaver’. Or, ‘she weaves her soul’.” Then, to a figure of a sylued man playing a round bodied guitar, “He is ‘the music maker’. ‘He sings his soul to ours’.”

“They are all craftsmen,” said Cassian, who had always been a good student and knew how to talk to teachers, even a sylued teacher, he was relieved to find. “Is that correct, Father Saren?”

Father Saren made a slow chopping gesture with one hand, a gesture that said to Cassian ‘that’s right on the mark’.

“The Prophet teaches us this: whatever work you put your hand to can be a holy thing if you pursue it with a whole heart. And so each of us in the order chooses a craft to which we will devote ourselves. ‘Each to their use, with hand and soul and purpose,’ so wrote the Prophet. Practicing a craft becomes a meditation, and through the perfection of the craft is the glory of Creation revealed.”

“So, could jessy mean ‘craft’, Father?”

Father Saren seemed to consider this suggestion seriously, but did not answer.

Cassian moved along the wall, observing each panel. A sylued woman dancing. A sylued man with a bow and a brace of pheasants. Cassian stopped before a panel depicting a figure kneeling on the ground, its hands and face tilted heavenward in what appeared to be a religious supplication. An unsheathed sword lay at its feet. The figure’s face was serene, but looking at it made Cassian suddenly, painfully sad.

“What is this one, Father?” he whispered, as if afraid to disturb the graven figure in its prayer.

“For him I have no proper name in your language. His name could be called ‘the Elect’ or ‘the Chosen Soul’ or ‘the Required Soul’.”

“The Elect,” Cassian repeated, feeling the word with his mouth.

Father Saren came to Cassian’s side. He regarded the figure of the Elect with the same somber expression Cassian felt on his own face. His long, delicate fingers traced along engraved Sylued letters. He read:

“His soul is a sword, who knows he is the weapon and not the warrior.

His soul is a sword, who seeks justice not vengeance for the innocent slain.

His soul is a sword, who descends into darkness and returns with light.

His soul is a sword, who sees the whole and rejects the one.

His soul is a sword, who forgives the father's hand and son's mouth alike.

His soul is a sword, who numbers his betrayer amongst his beloved.

His soul is a sword, who lays down his sword before his betrayer.

His soul is a sword, who unites two houses in his blood.

His soul is a sword, whose life brings death, whose death brings life.

His soul is a sword. As the two are bound together, so are they free.”

It was a long moment before Cassian could find his voice to speak. “Palm said that there are no weapons allowed in the temple, because the Elsebrin believe in peace above all.”

“That is correct,” Father Saren said. “As I had hoped, Palm is as good a teacher as he has been a student. You have met his master, Timriel, as well?”

“Yes, Father,” Cassian said.

“Palm and Timriel are the swordbearers of Elsebrin. They are the only two amongst us who study the craft of war. They bear the sword for our protection, and they honor us in such a sacrifice.”

*Sacrifice*, Cassian thought, gazing into the sad, serene face of the statue, and at the sword lying at its feet. “Is ‘the Elect’ the jessy of the swordsmen? *Swordbearers*, I mean?”

Father Saren shook his head. “No. Each of the jessy reveals the perfection of harmony and creation. The swordbearer perfects only destruction. To grant peace, he is war. To preserve life, he brings death. The swordbearer accepts that he will die and be damned for his devotion to the sword, and in that acceptance he frees himself of the petty ways of mortality that beget war in the first place. But for the swordbearer there is no creation, so there is no jessy.”

Cassian thought of the way Palm looked as he stood next to the sanctuary door, cold-eyed and implacable. A confusion of questions rushed into Cassian’s mind, but before he could give them voice, Father Saren continued:

“The Elect, however, is a very particular swordbearer. As the Prophet wrote, the Elect will one day lay down his sword and his life to unite us all in peace. His death brings salvation from our enemies and absolution from his own destructive ways.” Father Saren seemed to consider the figure’s face for a long moment. At length, he said: “The pursuit of peace is the greatest and most difficult of the jessy.”

Cassian stepped closer to the prostrated figure, awed by the detail of the work: the minute links in the figure’s chain armor, the look of penitence and transcendent sorrow carved into the figure’s face.

“Your word, um... ‘jessy’? It doesn’t mean ‘craft’, then,” Cassian said. “I thought so because all of the other statues say that ‘their soul does something’. But this one says his soul *is* something. His soul doesn’t *use* a sword, it *is* a sword. ‘Craft’ doesn’t work for this one.”

“I like your word ‘duty’, but that also... ‘doesn’t work’.” Father Saren gave a satisfied sigh, pleased with the utility of this human turn of phrase.

“I like your names better, even if they are longer” said Cassian, studying the statues. “They sound more like what you mean. At least, I think they do.”

“It may be that you are right,” Father Saren said. “But just as it is his jessy to make wine, or hers to weave, or his to sing, my jessy is to bring the Prophet’s teachings to your people as well as my own.” Father Saren pointed to a figure holding an open book in one hand, and extending the other in a palm up gesture of welcome. “And to do that, I must...” he searched for a moment, “*shape* the words to your understanding.”

Behind the paper screen, the door to the sanctuary opened, and then shut again.

Father Saren took note of the sound, and Cassian saw the same thought cross the sylued’s mind as was crossing his own: *They have come early*. Father Saren moved toward the screen, to greet whoever had entered the sanctuary.

“Is it ‘purpose’?” asked Cassian after a moment. “The word for ‘jessy’?”

Father Saren stopped and turned to Cassian.

“*Purpose*,” he mused, and then smiled beatifically. He moved for the door again, and then stopped once more. His unfathomable green eyes alighted on Cassian, stilling the boy’s breath. “Chance,” he said. “Do you know this word?”

“Yes, Father.” Cassian said.

“And you understand the... *thought*... that the word ‘chance’ gives name to?”

“Yes, Father.”

“You will learn that I do not believe in chance, young son.”

“No?”

“No,” Father Saren said, and he disappeared out of the field of candlelight. “It is not chance that has brought you to us.”

Cassian was alone in the middle of the sanctuary. He had to force his nerve-squeezed lungs to take in air. “Do you think I will find out what my jessy will be while I am here?”

“Young son,” came Father Saren’s voice from the dark, “perhaps being here *is* your jessy.”

Cassian heard the door beyond the screen open and shut.

Quiet followed. Ten minutes passed unmarked by Cassian, who was carefully considering each carved figure in turn, before the door to the sanctuary opened again.

There was no sound of drumming.

There was no singing.

Instead of the planned procession, Father Saren emerged from behind the screen followed by a tall, gaunt-faced man that Cassian recognized a moment later as Councilman Wineblood.

Cassian did not understand what Councilman Wineblood was saying in his well-practiced but still awkward sounding attempt at speaking Sylued, but it sounded like an embarrassed apology. He had come to Great House alone. As Wineblood took a breath to launch into another memorized passage, Father Saren stopped him with a touch.

“Thank you for honoring us by speaking to us in our own tongue,” Father Saren said. “But the Elsebrin have come to Vessena, not the reverse. Speak to me in your Eremoran tongue. My ears will need to know it by the time the council is in session, will they not?”

Wineblood stood perfectly still, frozen at Father Saren’s touch, and did not move or make a sound to respond until Father Saren removed his hand. Even then, Cassian could see, the councilman was caught in the green undertow of Father Saren’s eyes, of his *very presence*.

“Of course, as you wish...” Councilman Wineblood muttered, and then seemed to gather his thoughts. He explained that Councilman Robert Wheelwright, who was to have attended the ceremony as well, had been called back to Cardoneth on family business. His absence should not be taken as an insult. The council would absolutely and unanimously welcome the new seat and hear the concerns of the sylued people. But there would be no ceremony at all now, public or private. Instead, Wineblood delivered the official proclamation, Father Saren at his side, to an audience of one ten- year old boy.

Minutes later, Cassian escorted Councilman August Wineblood out of the sanctuary and onto the front porch of Great House. Wineblood’s own page, an older boy that Cassian remembered from the dormitory, was waiting on the front porch.

“Have you been at your post long, boy?” Wineblood asked as he mounted his horse.

“One day, sir,” Cassian replied, and Wineblood’s eyebrows leapt up in surprise.

“One day?” he repeated in disbelief exaggerated for the benefit of his young audience. “You have learned your lessons well. That’s an honor to the council and to your family, son.”

“Thank you, Councilman, sir,” Cassian said, which was the proper thing. But Cassian, just one day into his post, had already decided that it was neither the council nor his family that he would ever again be concerned with honoring.

7

Two weeks later, a caravan flying the green and gold banners of the royal House Yesidreel arrived at Great House. The Prophet’s carriage, however, was not among them.

The choir that had gathered to greet the Prophet with song stood idle and confused as sylueds dressed in fine clothing of rich green meerin climbed down from the carriages looking exhausted and forlorn. The brothers and sisters of the order came out to meet them and they stood together in the yard in a quiet, sad knots until at last the royal visitors were welcomed into the sanctuary by Father Saren and the doors were closed behind them. Everyone else, every member of the order and every servant and teamster in the caravan, waited quietly to discover what this all meant.

As the waiting wore on from minutes to hours, whispered rumors began to travel from the servants of the caravan party to the members of the household staff. The Prophet had fallen ill on the road to Vessena and had returned home to his deathbed, so the rumors went, and now his closest circle of advisors had been sent to bring Father Saren back to the forest to assume his father’s throne.

“But will he do it? Will he leave his beloved order before its mission here even begins?” Cassian overhead one visitor ask another.

The first visitor was an ancient looking sylued fellow with pale eyes and a halo of white hair that seemed to float around his head. The second was a sylued woman whom Cassian instantly recognized as Father Saren’s daughter. Her short hair was brown, not blonde, and her eyes were more hazel than green, but the resemblance could not be missed, and neither could her beauty. She and the elderly sylued were walking the colonnade that encircled Great House’s inner courtyard and Cassian, their attendant for the evening, followed at their heels, carrying a lamp on a pole to light their way.

“Of course, he will return to the forest,” Saren’s daughter said. “He will not dishonor his father by refusing the throne.” She looked right at Cassian as she spoke, and her eyes studied his.

Cassian knew what she was doing. She was trying to tell whether or not he could understand Sylued, which she and the old fellow were speaking. Cassian would have happily accepted any reason she had for studying him. It allowed him to look into her almond-shaped eyes and try to figure out if they were brown, or green or hazel. She was the most beautiful living thing that he had ever seen, and he appreciated each and every moment that he was granted to look at her. He felt blood rush to his cheeks. Saren’s daughter seemed to understand his reddening face as a sign that he was embarrassed, but having only limited experience with ten-year old human boys she incorrectly assumed that the embarrassment was due to his inability to speak Sylued. He understood the language well enough.

“Some would say that Saren honors his father by remaining here,” the old sylued said pointedly. “Some would say that it would honor his father by taking a seat on the Council of Vessena, and carrying on with the order’s work, spreading his father’s teachings.”

“Who would say such a thing, Olido?” Father Saren’s daughter asked and her mouth curled into a provocative smile.

“Who indeed?” the one called Olido said and his ancient face creased into a smile, too. “Come now, child, I have already heard that you plan to commit yourself to the order so you need not pretend with me. I know that you wish your father to remain here and I know that you have advised him to do so. But answer this question for me. Why?”

Saren’s daughter started to laugh, but Olido pressed: “I am serious. Answer the question, Vee. Why should he remain here? Eh? What is the order’s mission in Vessena? To seal the peace with humankind? That is too vague. It is not an answer. How does Saren intend to bring about a lasting peace with the humans by sitting on a city council? Do you know? Does he?”

“Shhh! There they are,” said Saren’s daughter, who was apparently called ‘Vee.’ Palm and Timriel had stepped into the center of the moonlit courtyard and were facing each other in dueling postures. Vee put a finger over her lips. *Stay quiet*, the gesture said, so Cassian did. Then Olido gestured for them to withdraw into the shadows of the colonnade to watch.

Palm stood perfectly still in the center of the courtyard, his hands behind his back, his wooden practice sword resting on his left hip. Facing him, Timriel took a slow sideways step to the left and his hand went to the hilt of his own wooden sword.

“It will be Timriel,” Olido whispered. He was watching the half-sylued swordsman’s movements with an unmistakable look of reverence on his face.

“No,” Vee said. “It will be Palm. I feel it.” There was a heaviness in her tone that Cassian thought out of place for a simple wager on a sparring match.

Timriel continued circling to the left, one slow sideways step after another, slowly drawing out his sword, eyes never leaving Palm.

Palm remained completely still, his hands still folded behind his back, his head slightly forward, his eyes locked on the moving target of Timriel’s chest.

Olido gave a raspy but warm chuckle and shook his head. “To have so much faith in your father’s foundling boy! You are ever the loyal daughter.” They watched as Timriel’s steps and sword arm slowed and his muscles coiled like a snake poised to strike. “But these are dangerous times for our people, Vee. Your grandfather is on his deathbed, no matter what some may say or wish. The time is drawing near when we will lose our vanir *and* our prophet in a single death. Timriel is much loved among the Houses. He would be a great comfort to them. If the Prophet’s words should come to pass soon, *so it will be*,” at this phrase both Vee and Olido raised their open palms skyward in a gesture of affirmation, “there would be much support for Timriel undertaking the quest of the Elect.”

Cassian shot a look of surprise at Olido that was so sudden that he was sure that they would realize that he was following the conversation. They weren't talking about the sparring match at all.

"No," Vee said.

"No?" Olido said with a wry chuckle. "That is your response to all that I have said? Just, 'no'?"

"No," she said again, still smiling. Cassian could imagine her as a beautiful, petulant child teasing an elderly servant.

"Do you ever disagree with your beloved father?" Olido asked.

Suddenly, Timriel charged forward and Palm countered, moving backward in smooth, even steps. Timriel's sword described delicate sweeping arcs in the air around Palm, caging him inside its probability. Palm's sword hand did not move, not even when Timriel feinted back and then charged again, not even when Timriel leapt into the air, and somersaulted over Palm's head.

The moment that Timriel's feet hit the ground, Palm's right hand moved with a speed that was almost impossible to comprehend, much less see. He spun toward Timriel and presented his blade to the target. There was no dazzling move or graceful signature. It was just as if his wooden practice sword had always been out and its tip had always been at Timriel's heart. Timriel yelped in competitive disgust, and then bowed to Palm.

Vee turned to the old one and said again, "No."

At that moment, a young Brother stepped into courtyard with a message from Father Saren: Vee, Olido, and Palm were required in Father Saren's private quarters.

Palm handed his weapon to Timriel and followed the young Brother and ancient Olido inside. Vee turned and bent to look Cassian in the eye again. She favored him with another smile and stroked his hair, then followed the others.

Timriel remained in the courtyard, alone.

“Good evening,” Cassian called as he raised his lamp and stepped onto the damp, moonlit grass.

“Good evening, Cass,” Timriel said between huffing breaths. His skin glowed with sweat. He caught sight of the wide-eyed look on Cassian’s face and smiled. “Did the other two enjoy the show as much as you did?”

“They did, I think,” Cassian said, he blushed again. “I’ve never seen you practice the sword before.”

“Oh, we practice,” Timriel said. He twirled the two practice swords, one in each hand. “That is all we do with our swords now. Fucking practice.” He twirled the blades again and then slipped them both into their scabbards in a single, smooth, cross-handed move.

Cassian didn’t react. Timriel dried his hands and face on a towel. He snapped the towel at Cassian, whose eyes were on the grass.

“What’s this look?” Timriel made an exaggerated approximation of Cassian’s downcast face.

“They say that the Prophet is dying,” Cassian said.

“That is what I heard,” Timriel said. He studied Cassian for a moment. “But that isn’t why you’re upset.”

It took a moment for Cassian to find the words. “The Elect has to die, doesn’t he?”

“He ‘lays down his sword before his betrayer’, ‘his death brings life’, ‘two Houses are united in his blood’. These are the words of the Prophet.” As Timriel recited, his eyes drifted to the door through which Palm had disappeared. “Who was talking about the prophecy of the Elect? Is that something you have been learning about in afternoon lessons?”

“They were talking about it like it was really going to happen. Soon. Like the Prophet might die and Father Saren would have to leave and one of you two would... one of you would...” It was all becoming a jumble in Cassian’s frightened thoughts and he could only hope that he had misinterpreted.

“I see,” Timriel said. He sat down on the grass and patted a spot next to him until Cassian sat as well.

“How can they talk about it so easily?” Cassian said. “How can they want the prophecy to come true if it means that one of you has to die?”

Timriel thought for a long moment and then said, “The Elsebrin believe that you must give your whole self to whatever you do, correct? Well, this is no different. The Elect must be willing to lay down their own life, which would be literally giving everything they have, and everything they are, and everything they will ever have and be. And the reason that they can speak about it so happily is because they believe that becoming the Elect is an absolution. Do you know what that means?”

“Is it like... forgiveness?”

“It is. The Elect’s sacrifice forgives him for the sins he committed as a swordbearer, the sins of destruction. So that’s a good thing, right?”

“They were talking like it would be you or Palm, one or the other.”

“Father Saren teaches us that there will be one chosen, one who will be the Prophet’s Elect.” Timriel’s words seemed to come out on a sigh.

“Is that what you believe?” Cassian asked.

“It is what Father Saren teaches us about the writings of the Prophet. It is what Palm believes.

It was a long time before Timriel said more. He sat, picking at the grass, deep in thought. When he did speak, his voice was more hushed and serious than Cassian had ever heard it before. “Here is what I believe,” he said and picked a long blade of grass from the ground. He held it out to Cassian, who accepted it, though he didn’t know why. “I believe that whether or not there is one person who arises and does all of the things the Prophet wrote about is not important.”

With that, he reached out for the lamp sitting next to Cassian. Timriel touched the lamp’s flame with his fingers and it disappeared without so much as a whiff of smoke, as though the flame had been consumed by his touch.

Cassian gasped in surprise.

“It is far more important to realize that every one of us has the potential to do those things.” Timriel then touched Cassian’s left hand and the blade of grass in Cassian’s right hand caught fire.

Cassian laughed in amazement at Timriel's magic trick and then waved out the flame before it reached his fingers.

Timriel said, "Any one of us can be 'chosen'. We all can be. Perhaps we all are." Timriel looked into Cassian's dispirited eyes and gave another warm smile, and then added with a wink: "But what is easier? Doing all of the selfless things the Prophet wrote about, or worshipping somebody else for doing them?"

Cassian didn't want to smile, but he couldn't help it. Timriel stood up and then gave Cassian a hand and pulled him up to standing.

"But if Father Saren..." Cassian began.

"I don't want you to worry about this, Cassian," Timriel said. "Worry about delivering papers and keeping the candles lit and the prayer bowls filled with tea. Those are things worth your concern, not this prophecy business. Life's not all slaying dragons, you know."

"Have you slain a dragon?" Cassian asked, wide-eyed. After seeing Timriel's magic, he was ready to believe almost anything.

"Right," Timriel said, "you have got me there. I have not. But that is my point, Cassian. All of the grandeur of life is bound up in physical realities that seem insignificant to our ambitious minds. We would like good and evil to be larger than life. In some ways, life would be easier if they were, but they are not."

"It would be easier to sacrifice yourself to save other people?"

"Versus living selflessly and virtuously every day for the rest of your life?"

Cassian laughed, which seemed to be the response that Timriel had hoped to elicit. Timriel then gathered his things and retired for the night.

Cassian waited for another hour to escort the visitors to their rooms. Palm remained with Father Saren late into the night.

8

Weeks passed with no further word from the forest about the Prophet's failing health. Father Saren began attending council sessions with no fanfare and no outcry in the streets. Cassian fell easily into the Order of Elsebrin's daily routine and soon even the sylueds' exotic ways began to feel perfectly normal. In every way he was excelling in his duties as a council page, but his interest in becoming a diplomat or lawyer or councilman was waning. He was beginning to suspect that his jessy would be something else altogether.

One afternoon, a prankish rain interrupted Cassian's garden chores and he found himself with hours of his own. He slipped off to his favorite place, the small covered porch behind the kitchen house. On clear days he could see all the way across the city to the bay from that little porch. The heavy skies on that particular afternoon marred Cassian's view, but made the world seem quiet and still.

He took great care not to be seen sneaking off to his little porch. It was not because he was afraid of being caught idle. At worst, one of the brothers or sisters would give him some menial work to keep him busy. He was afraid of being caught with what he was carrying hidden in his shirt: a chipped and dented wooden practice sword. He

made absolutely certain that he was alone, and then he drew out the sword with soundless caution and bowed to his imaginary opponent.

And then Palm seemed to appear from nowhere saying, "Pardon me, Cassian."

Cassian leapt in fright and dropped the wooden sword clattering to the porch stones. "Palm! I was... I was just..." Cassian stammered and bent to pick up the wooden sword.

"Leave that," Palm said, and Cassian dropped both the wooden sword and any pretense. "You know the laws of the Elsebrin. What is the law of the sword?"

*"There is no blade that does not draw blood,"* Cassian recited. From the moment he'd sneaked the wooden sword out of Palm's room that morning his guilt had been digging a pit in his stomach. Though he was taught to accept just punishment in silence, he couldn't stop the torrent of words that gush forth from that pit. "I saw you sparring with Timriel and... it was amazing. I've never seen *anything* so... I wanted... I just wanted..." Cassian took a deep breath, summoned all of his nerve, and formed two words: "Train me." He looked up then, resigned to whatever recrimination might come, and found Palm smiling.

"I'll tell you what," Palm said. He unbuckled his own sword belt and held it out to Cassian. "Show me your stance as combat begins. Show me that and I'll know if you are ready to be trained."

Cassian gripped the sword's leather-wrapped hilt and drew it from the sheath. The blade was somehow both heavier and lighter than he'd anticipated and he struggled to

keep his arms steady. He stepped into the dueling stance that he had seen Timriel assume and waited.

Palm said nothing.

Sweat trickled down Cassian's side beneath his shirt, tickling him and stealing his strength. The point of the blade quivered and seemed to fight against his attempt to steady it.

Finally, Palm said, "No. I won't train you."

"But you said if..."

Palm interrupted, "If you showed me your stance as combat begins, I would train you. And then you unsheathed and stepped into first position. But unsheathing the sword is not how combat begins, Cassian. It is how it ends. Do you understand?"

Cassian nodded 'yes' at this, still concentrating on keeping the wobbling blade on point, but he was relieved when Palm explained:

"The glory of life is the multitude, the myriad. But the way of the sword is singular. It is the end of all possibilities. It only ends in death. 'There is no blade that does not draw blood,' so said the Prophet." Palm extended his hand parallel to the quivering sword and then still stilled its vibrations with the touch of a single finger.

"Now, for something more important," he said, clapping Cassian on the shoulder. "I have something for you to deliver to Council Keep."

"I'll go now before the rain gets worse," Cassian said, returning the sword to its sheath. He was disappointed that Palm would not train him, but as his hand left the hilt,

he felt a kind of relief, as though he had avoided something terrible. Standing there with Palm's hand on his shoulder, he felt ashamed to be glad about that.

"You'll have to go now, rain or shine," Palm said. "You're taking an important gift to Councilman Wheelwright. It's a peace offering from Father Saren after their... *debate* in session this morning."

Ever since August Wineblood came to Great House as a one-man welcoming committee, Robert Wheelwright had become increasingly vocal in his opposition to Father Saren's presence on the council. Cassian had been dismayed to observe that the more Wheelwright spoke out against Father Saren and the Elsebrin, or the syluedim in general, the more support he found on the council from men like James Boatwright and Leonard Coppersmith, men from the old families who maybe, Cassian thought, stood to lose something in that tide of change that brought the Elsebrin to Vessena. Whatever disagreement these men had with Father Saren, it was not likely to be resolved with a simple gift. Father Saren was still a new student of human culture, but even he should know that, *shouldn't he?*

Cassian followed Palm into the hall where a green bottle sat on a table of lustrous dark wood.

"Deliver this to Councilman Wheelwright," Palm said.

"Ryan Tanner is Wheelwright's page. I could..."

"No," Palm interrupted. "Father Saren has asked that the bottle go directly into Wheelwright's hands and no one else's."

The bottle was of a green glass so thick that its contents appeared to be nothing more than a vague black shadow, like a ghost trapped in green amber. Cassian picked it up and admired the beauty of it, the way the sunlight crashed and glittered on the cut glass surface without penetrating the dark liquid inside. The craftsman who made it had clearly known his jessy, and had revealed much glory in its creation.

9

The most direct route to the Council Keep was Falling Lane, but on this particular day it was impassable. Weeks of rain had turned it into a bog. Market Road was the central artery of the city and better paved than Falling Lane, but it would be chock-a-block with wagons retreating from the market square filled with rain-dampened goods and irate merchants cursing another day of lost revenue. That is why Cassian opted instead to take Shield Street, a street he usually avoided, a dark neighborhood that bred dark business. In this simple way are many fateful decisions made.

As Cassian passed under the crumbling archway that marked the entrance to Shield Street from Enoine Square, the diffuse misty rain fattened into heavy drops that fell with enough force to sting the skin.

The crooked, narrow lane was gloomy even at noon, shaded by the inner arc of Vessena's original but long over-spilled curtain wall on one side, and an unbroken row of slouching, decrepit buildings on the other. The overhanging second floors of the shabby shops and tenements might have offered some protection from the pelting rain, but would

also put Cassian within an arm's reach of too many darkened doorways. He decided he'd rather get wet, given the option.

He stayed to the far side of the street, hugging the wall, which was thick with peeling, sun-bleached, rain-soaked placards and broadsides. A few still-legible ones, pasted sloppily over the tatters of predecessors, announced plays coming to theatres in Bayside - "See 'The Cuckolding of Everyman'! Dramatic! Hilarious!" - or other entertainments - "Come all to the Albern's Day hangings! Ten necks stretched! Music! Diversions!" The garish bills seemed all the more desperate hawking their business to an empty street.

Cassian rounded the bend that marked Shield Street's halfway point, at the apex of the wall's curve. Soon he would come to the Midwall, which bisects the city and each of its three concentric internal walls from east to west. Shield Street would pass through the towered gate in the Midwall and into City Center, where the street was then called Merchant Street and the neighborhood improved significantly. Then it would be a quick right past the "Bunch o' Grapes" pub, a left on Clark's Road, and straight on to the Council Keep. Cassian ran those directions through his mind, reminding himself that he was halfway through a routine and brief trip, distracting himself from the strange, subdued silence of the rainy slum and the chilling sense that there were things in the crumbling buildings, if not the buildings themselves, that were watching him with bad intent.

For a moment, the only sound Cassian could hear above the steady rhythm of the rain was a murmur of voices coming from a nameless pub. The door to the place opened, letting out a red-faced drunk in a crumpled cocked hat and a stained, crusty wool coat

that Cassian could smell even from the far side of the street. In the moment before the door closed, Cassian could hear the flat, droning voices of the several dozen people stuffed into the dank room, drinking away the rainy day.

*At least they had sense to get in out of the rain,* Cassian thought. He watched the drunk weave his way to a stoop several doors down from the pub, pause, and then begin the unsteady business of undoing his breeches to piss. Cassian tucked the green glass bottle under his arm and picked up his pace. Then came a sound that stopped Cassian in his tracks.

It was the high-pitched, ragged cry of ... *a cat? A baby?* Cassian's eyes darted along the street, but he saw nothing. Behind him, the drunk began to sing tunelessly. He had given up on his presumably too-complicated fly buttons and stood pissing down his leg with a grin that spoke of some satisfaction at his efficiency. Cassian continued on.

The sound came again.

*Eeeeehaaaaaa...*

This time, Cassian was certain it was a child. The cry, pathetic and insistent, seemed to be coming from a doorway of a building up ahead.

Cassian looked back to the drunk, who apparently hadn't heard the cry, and then to the pub. Perhaps if he found the baby abandoned, Cassian could take it to the publican or a barmaid. He could think of plenty of better places to deposit a foundling child - it took no real thinking to come up with a list of ten cleaner places - but Cassian was out on official business. *Important* business, Palm had said. Perhaps he should ignore the cries altogether.

*EEEEEEhaaaaa...* The cry came again. Angry. Frustrated. Mournful.

Cassian stopped. The street-pisser was ambling away in the opposite direction. The street was otherwise empty, all windows shuttered tight against the rain, all doorways dark. No one else would be coming along. Surely the child would die exposed to this weather.

*EEEEEEEEE...*

“I’ll take it to Father Saren,” Cassian said to himself. “He took in Palm, after all, so maybe...” His voice sounded loud against the muted sounds of the gray day, and something in the way it echoed off the walls of the canyon of Shield Street made Cassian feel small and miserable. He was sure the child felt the same.

Cassian crossed the street, listening closely to pinpoint the sound.

*Eeeeeeh...*

The baby’s cry was fading to a whimper.

Cassian ran for the doorway of a dilapidated tenement. He paused for a moment just outside, unnerved by the smell of must and decay that came from within.

“Hello,” Cassian said, as loud as he dared. Hearing no reply, he stepped into the place, pausing again for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. His momentary relief at being out of the rain was quickly replaced by apprehension.

The rough-hewn wooden floor of the dark hallway was warped and even rotted through in some places. Rainwater ran in fat rivulets down the blistered walls to collect in pools. A staircase ascended into even blacker darkness ahead. Two doorways, one to the left and one to the right, let into the first floor apartments.

“Is anybody there?” Cassian called through the open doorway on the right. Had the lack of a door not informed him that the building was abandoned, certainly the hollow echo of his voice did.

*...eee...eehm...mmm...*

Cassian turned on his heels. The crying, now a low murmur, was coming from the left-hand apartment. Cassian leaned in the doorway. Like the right-hand apartment, the left was a bare wooden-floored room dimly lit by a few shards of colorless light that struggled through the split shutters on the one small window.

*Mmm... Memmm...*

In the far corner, Cassian could just make out a small shape like a balled blanket, the source of the cries. His heart going out to the sad, lost thing, Cassian abandoned his caution and ran to its aid.

Crouching near it, his dark-adjusted eyes fighting against the intrusion of the weak light, Cassian saw a wadded piece of oil cloth - or was it leather? - just large enough to swaddle a newborn. Sitting the bottle on the filthy floor, Cassian reached out for the bundle.

The moment his hand touched the slick material, he knew that something was wrong. The leathery stuff felt cold, but fairly trembled under his touch like a living thing. Cassian pulled his hand away instantly, unnerved by the fleshy, veined texture of it. A black residue stained his fingertips, something like wet mold or rotten leaves.

*Emmmmm*, the thing sighed.

Cassian instinctively backed away, hopping in his crouch like a frightened rabbit. The thing flopped over, rupturing the quivering membrane to reveal what appeared to be a mass of writhing black larvae.

Cassian's throat convulsed and he sprang to his feet. He stumbled for the door; his mind too shaken by this thing to realize that vomiting there on the apartment floor versus out in the street would make no difference. Cassian made it to the tenement stoop before falling to his knees and retching.

*What in hell?* thought Cassian, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. *What in hell was that... thing?*

*EEEEEEhaaaaaaaaa...*

That sound, which had only moments before seemed so pitiful, now raised Cassian's skin in bumps and harrowed up every hair on his body. He stared into the darkness of the tenement and felt his body start to shake. The bottle. He had left the bottle back in there. In the room. Next to... *it*.

*...eeeeEEEEAAAARRRrrrr...*

The cry became a wail. Cassian had thought before that the child - when he still thought it was a child - sounded hungry, desperate for milk. Having seen the thing, he quailed to imagine what the mewling, primal sound might mean.

*EEEEAAAAAARRrrrrrrr...* The cry was accompanied by a scuffling, a wet slapping. The thing was moving around in there.

Fear poured hot tears from Cassian's eyes. Fear and hate for his own stupidity. *How could he have left the bottle? How could he have deviated from his course? From*

*his purpose? Even for a child? But it wasn't a child, was it? Was it? WHAT WAS THAT THING?*

*EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!*

Cassian wiped at his eyes, and tried to clear his vision and his thoughts. The bottle was in there. No matter what that terrible, sad thing on the floor was, the bottle was in there, too. Father Saren's bottle. The bottle for Councilman Wheelwright. *An important gift*, Palm had said. Cassian clenched his jaw, biting back his fear, and drew the dull brass dagger from his belt.

The room was silent as Cassian crept back in, each step feeling leaden, his weapon feeling too light. Silent. And empty. The bottle stood shimmering in a pale ray of light. The thing was nowhere to be seen.

Cassian stopped.

He tried to listen for the thing even if he couldn't see it, but his ears were filled with the repetitive roar and mute, roar and mute of his own rushing heartbeat. Eyes wide and straining, Cassian darted for the bottle. Grabbing it up, he pivoted and dashed back to the door. Then the sound of his feet was joined by a slapping sound, like the sound of a duck's wings beating the surface of water.

Suddenly, Cassian's body was shot through with a hot-cold shear of pain, as though his veins were pumping ice water. The thing had dropped out of the shadows from above. Cassian felt it, wet and cold, as it struck his neck. The tiny larvae-like tendrils sank into the flesh of Cassian's throat and soon the chill clamminess of it was warmed by a hot spurt of Cassian's blood.

Cassian fell from the doorway of the building and saw the last of daylight as the creature's wings wrapped around his face, blinding him. He thought to call for his mother. It was the last thought he would ever have.

10

Father Saren blamed himself for the boy's death. He would later say so to the boy's parents at the funeral, and he would say so before the council. He had decided too late to take the gift to Councilman Wheelwright himself. He had missed the page boy by mere minutes leaving Great House and might have caught up to him in Enoine Square had he not gotten caught in a sudden outrush of sellers' carts, hastily covered from the rain. As it was, he didn't catch the boy's trail again until a block beyond the nameless pub on Shield Street.

There he found young Cassian Will, his body slumped unnaturally in the gutter, his face against the streaming pavement. Any thought that the boy may have been done in by one of the nearby taproom's patrons was perished at the sight of him. His head was slung back hideously, his neck all but torn away from his body. The boy's anguished face had gone grey, his lifeblood having already sluiced away and joined with the dead earth between the cobblestones.

Father Saren collected the boy and carried him back through the rain, up Shield Street and across the emptied Enoine Square, and back up Berne's Hill to Great House. Perhaps young Cassian had been a council page and a human, but his family was no longer the local gentleman who had made an unnatural orphan of him. The boy's family

was now the Order of Elsebrin, whom he had served briefly but faithfully. Father Saren brought him home for his new family to mourn.

Seeing the ruin of the boy's corpse, Timriel was moved to begin preparation of the body, the bathing and closing of wounds. But he did not, and neither did Father Saren. Palm had left Great House for the day, and they would wait for his return.

11

Palm returned to Great House late that afternoon. He had attended something called a 'luncheon' at the home of August Wineblood and his mind was still bright with conversation and music as he emerged from the cloakroom and into the hall.

The stillness of the place descended upon him immediately.

"What happened," he muttered, not really asking.

His eyes saw Cassian's body lying on the great table, but his mind resisted. He had a vague sense of Timriel and Father Saren standing at the far end of the table, but his attention, for the moment, could not extend that far. He could not move beyond Cassian's feet, which he reached out to touch but could not, unable to bear the sadness of them, the terrible sadness of a dead child's feet. "What happened," he said again.

Timriel stared down at Cassian's body and seemed to chant under his breath. "Senseless, senseless, senseless." When he finally looked up at Palm, his eyes were red-rimmed and glazed with tears. "Where were you?"

The question came like the shattering of glass, bringing Palm to his senses only to cut and wound him.

“Where was I?” he asked. His throat felt hoarse with grief and sudden anger. Where had he swanned off to while the boy was being brutally murdered? Had he been eating quail and sipping wine while the boy was dying, afraid and alone? Had he been laughing and chatting and sharing small talk while the world stopped making sense? “Where was I?” he demanded.

“Quiet!” Father Saren shouted. “In the death of the young there is more than enough pain and blame for all. Would you quarrel over your share of this, too? Honor him and attend to him. Weep in your hearts and use your eyes for seeing.”

Father Saren paced up the length of the table, his hand gliding over Cassian’s body without touching it. He stopped next to the boy’s head. The boy’s eyes were closed and the muscles of his face and jaw were still locked in a contortion of pain. The left side of the neck was torn open and the muscle and bone lay bare from the ear to the collar leaving a garish red mouth of a wound that drooled strands of a strange black sputum. The entire left side of his body was drenched in a sticky mingling of the boy’s blood and the black stuff.

“Black Water,” Timriel whispered, as if fearing the stuff could hear it’s own name. “It’s all through him. Hardly any blood left in him at all, just that... just.... It *is* Black Water, isn’t it?”

Father Saren did not respond. His eyes were on Palm.

Palm examined the torn flesh at Cassian’s neck, the soft skin at the nape that he’d so often placed a brotherly hand upon. The brutish destruction of such innocent beauty

seemed to pervert everything, as if the world was thrown from its axis with the breaking of that slender neck. “It is, isn’t it?”

Father Saren seemed reluctant to say so, but at length he muttered, “Yes.”

“Do you think... it... is in Vessena?” Palm said. He wanted to sound incredulous, but nothing seemed to make sense anymore anyway. “Could it be here? After searching the forest for so long, could we really find it here? By chance?”

Father Saren reprimanded Palm like the poor student that he was: “There is no such thing as ‘chance’. And we did not find it. It found us.”

“It found us,” Palm repeated, and suddenly he could make sense of the senselessness. Coming to the lawless human city, the Prophet falling ill, Cassian’s death... these things were not obstacles to the mission. These things *were* the mission. Everything was falling into place.

“Perhaps we are mistaken. Perhaps it is not Black Water...” Timriel began. He had seen the zealous spark in Palm’s eyes and seemed desperate to keep dry fuel away from the young man’s imagination. “The liquid certainly looks like Black Water, and it shares some physical properties with it... but it could really be any of a variety of...” he trailed off, his own hope sounding frighteningly false to his own ears.

“But it is,” Palm said. “It *is* Black Water.” He looked to Father Saren for confirmation and saw it there on his face, etched in lines of sorrowful certainty. “The Devil of Black Water, nemesis of the Prophet, is here in Vessena. Don’t you see what that means?”

The blood drained from Timriel’s face. “Don’t say it.”

“It’s the sign of the coming of the Prophet’s Elect. ‘His soul is a sword who seeks justice not vengeance for the innocent slain,’ so wrote the Prophet. Cassian was an innocent, slain by the Prophet’s nemesis. It is all coming to pass.”

“Palm, no,” Timriel said. “Your heart hurts for the boy, so does mine, but Cassian was a child, not a sign.” He turned to Father Saren and pleaded, “ Say something, Father! Tell him to stop this! Tell him this is blasphemy!”

Father Saren closed his eyes and drew a long, deep breath. When he finally spoke, his voice was distant and sad and sounded like the voice Cassian had feared Father Saren would have, the ice-water voice of an ageless, stone-hearted elf. “Whether the boy was the ‘innocent slain’ of prophecy, the one whose death foretells the quest of the Elect, I do not know. But it is the Black Water that taints his flesh, and that can only mean one thing: the Devil is here.”

“I know what I must do, Father,” Palm said. He unbuckled his sword belt. The next words he spoke were in the elder tongue. He had silently read these ritual words in his prayer book countless times, each time knowing that he would one day speak them aloud: “I wish to lay down this sword and take up another.”

“No!” Timriel shouted.

Palm paid him no heed, and stepped past him to hold out his sword hilt first to Father Saren.

“He is not thinking, Father!” Timriel insisted. “He is upset! Do not let him commit to this now!”

“I wish to lay down this sword and take up another,” Palm repeated, offering his sword to Father Saren again, more forcefully this time. When Father Saren did not take the sword, Palm knelt and held it out again above his lowered head, the sheathed blade lying across his open palms. “Each to their use,” he said. “Hand and soul and purpose.”

But Father Saren would not take the sword from him.

“Stand up and put away your weapon,” Father Saren said at last. “It is late and we have already said what needs to be said. Know this, both of you: the death of young Cassian Will is not without meaning. So we will wait and we will watch. We will mark the signs as we see them. Now I must go to the council and tell them what has happened.”

“We will come with you,” Timriel said. “I will fetch a carriage.”

Father Saren shook his head. “There is nothing to be done tonight. Sleep.”

“Yes,” Timriel said. “We should keep the counsel of our dreams.”

But they would not dream that night, nor would they the next. They would not dream again for twenty long years.