

AN EXCERPT FROM
KINGDOM BLADES

A PATTERN OF SHADOW & LIGHT
BOOK 4

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One

*"A man dare not trust Love to lead him. Love will stay the course,
even to the edge of doom."*

—The Adept Nodefinder Cassius of Rogue

Tanis lay on a blanket on a grassy hillside beneath Pelas's Hallovia manor, gazing up into a very blue sky. The breeze bouncing off the sea cliffs stirred his hair, while the sun warmed his face and Nadia's laughter warmed his heart. The spot they'd chosen for their picnic offered a commanding view of the white chalk cliffs and beyond these, the depthless blue sea.

It might've been the wine that was making it difficult for Tanis to concentrate on the conversation Nadia was having with Pelas that afternoon, though he suspected it was more likely the heady sensation of his newly fashioned bond with the Malorin'athgul, which had wakened him to the essence of the cosmos in marvelous, yet unsettling, ways.

'...Through me, you're bound to the heavens, and through you, I'm bound to the earth...'

They'd been two days bound now, and with each turning of the hourglass, Tanis gained some new perception of the cosmos. When he chose to sense the world through Pelas's side of the bond, he could discern the density of the air, feel the obdurate pull of the moon, or even conceive the far-flying motion of the planets in their propulsion around the sun; celestial bodies caught in a powerful equilibrium of forces.

But Tanis didn't often seek these perceptions, for they included a sense of largeness that quite disoriented him.

The lad had expected his and Pelas's binding to settle—perhaps into a passive state, like Phaedor's binding of protection, or at least to a quiet awareness, as with the bond he shared with Nadia—but as Pelas glowed on the currents, so also did he glow in Tanis's mind, even as Tanis seemed a star in Pelas's...or so the Malorin'athgul had told him.

They were anchors for each other now, a pair of circling stars creating gravity between them. Tanis suspected they would be able to find each other no matter what impossible distances separated them—across the realm or even on other worlds, through time itself.

Even as he and his parents could.

When Tanis had realized that his parents were still bound to him and he to them, his entire view of existence had changed—so many answers had been waiting for him behind the veil that had protected his identity.

And when he'd reached out across their bond and spoken to his mother...*oh*, the things she'd told him! He was still trying to make sense out of much of it, putting context to some and filing others for future reference, in some instances just trying to conceive of the possibility...

Nadia laughed suddenly, drawing Tanis from these thoughts. He looked over to where she and Pelas were taking luncheon on the grass. It reassured him to see color returning to her cheeks, to find her sitting up so easily on her own.

After their mad escape from Shail's underground temple, Pelas had drawn his brother's power from Nadia's veins, and Tanis had Healed the results of *deyjiin*'s touch, but her lifeforce had been drained nearly to an ember. She'd needed time to regain her strength.

They'd all needed time—to recuperate, regroup, reclaim a sense of themselves and each other.

They hadn't spoken about what would happen when they did finally return to Faroqhar, as they must, and soon. The Sormitáge would probably still be up in arms from the attack at the Quai match, never mind the Empress's missing heir.

And while these shadows lay across the path just behind, Tanis sensed an even darker storm looming on the horizon. The Danes were obviously planning some sort of revolt—Shail had kidnapped countless Adepts for *some* purpose, after all, but Tanis had no idea what the Malorin'athgul was truly planning. Felix's fate also weighed heavily on Tanis's conscience; had his friend survived the explosion that had caught them both?

Yet what sat most unresolved for Tanis was how he'd put Nadia in harm's way by involving her in his and Felix's investigation. He suspected Balance wasn't finished making him atone for that grave error in judgment.

A fluttering unease always accompanied this thought.

"Don't tell me that's actually you there in the painting." Nadia leaned forward to better study the illusion Pelas was crafting for her, a reproduction of one of his paintings from the Sormitáge. "That's *you*..." she gave him a disbelieving look and pointed to a figure wearing a crimson damask coat and a matching wide-brimmed hat, "right there?"

"Doesn't the coat give him away?" Tanis murmured.

Pelas eyed Tanis humorously. That day the Malorin'athgul was wearing a violet damask coat, which brought a vibrant gold hue to his coppery gaze. "I painted myself into many of my paintings, Princess. Somewhere inconspicuous of course, just to see if anyone would notice. It was a game of mine."

Nadia shook her head. "To think...all of those years I studied your paintings and wondered about you, the great artist Immanuel di Nostri, and theorized on your muses, and tried to imagine what you were like, and *you* were right there all along, just...smiling at me." Nadia shook her head wondrously. "Did anyone ever notice?"

Pelas winked at her. "A very few."

Nadia had been somewhat awed to learn that Pelas was Shail's brother, but when Tanis had told her that Pelas was better known as the artist Immanuel di Nostri, her jaw had dropped. She'd thereafter insisted on calling him Immanuel, which made Pelas smile, as he was smiling just then.

Nadia exhaled a contented sigh. "Will you show me another one, Signore di Nostri? I've never seen such artfully crafted illusions."

Pelas chuckled. "I fear your praise will go to my head, Princess. Soon I will become fat with it, and then none of my hats will fit."

Nadia flung a daisy good-naturedly at him. "I'll buy you as many new hats as you like."

Pelas gave an indulgent sigh. “Very well, Princess. For you, another, and hats be damned.” He refreshed Nadia’s goblet from a decanter of wine, then reclined on one elbow and blessed her with one of his devastating smiles. “What would please Your Highness this time?”

Nadia settled her goblet in her lap. “Something...different.” She glanced to Tanis, inviting of his opinion. “Something we’ve never seen before.”

“Something you’ve never seen before...” Pelas traced a forefinger beneath his lower lip and gazed thoughtfully off. “This would imply some place you’ve neither been nor witnessed by way of an artist’s hand. For an artistic connoisseur such as yourself, Princess, this means we must travel far indeed.” The finger lifted in a moment’s inspiration. “Ah. I have it.”

His gaze lengthened, as though across the shimmering ocean. The only indication he was concentrating at all was a slight tightening around his eyes. Then a scene began forming, superimposed before their canvas of blue ocean and cloudless sky.

First appeared the knotty trunk of a vast, white tree. Next followed many fat limbs. But as the illusion became more solid, blocking out the view of sea and sky, Tanis realized he wasn’t looking at a tree, but at a *city* crafted in the shape of one, with building stacked upon building, tower growing from tower, until the branches of streets angled off in countless directions. Doors and windows, arches and rooftops gave the trunk its bark-like texture, while hundreds of white twig bridges connected the branching streets and buildings in a leafy sprawl.

Nadia clapped her hands. “It’s *magnificent*.” She pointed out several of the city’s more noteworthy features by way of praising Pelas’s ingenuity. “It even has fountains—oh, Tanis isn’t it glorious?” Nadia gave a dramatic sigh of appreciation. “What I wouldn’t give to have such an extraordinary imagination as yours, Signore di Nostri.”

Because he shared Pelas’s mind, Tanis understood things Nadia did not. He shifted his eyes to meet Pelas’s gaze. “Where did you see it?”

Pelas smiled, a soft acknowledgment of the truth Tanis had plucked from his thoughts. “In Shadow.”

Nadia froze with her goblet halfway to her lips. “In Shadow?” She turned a look between the both of them. “But I thought...” Then she frowned.

Pelas angled her a wry smile. “You thought Shadow was a black nothingness, bleak and void of existence?”

“I certainly did.” Tanis pushed up on one elbow to better look at him. “Phaedor said Shadow was a dimension and that it had no *where*, nor even a *when*.”

Pelas vanished the illusion of his tree with a flick of his gaze. “Your zanthyr could likely explain Shadow far more adroitly than I can. My understanding is experiential.”

“But you’ve been there?” Nadia asked. “You’ve seen this tree city?”

“Indeed, Princess.”

She gazed wordlessly at him. “A *city* in Shadow, but...who lives there?”

An odd expression flickered across Pelas’s face. “I’m not sure anyone lives there. The city belongs to a Warlock named Rafael—if it still exists.”

Tanis pushed his thumbs to the bridge of his nose. All of the images and thoughts suddenly swirling through Pelas’s mind were starting to hurt his head. “*Gah*,” he looked up under his brows. “I can’t make sense of anything you’re thinking.”

Pelas grinned at him. “I’ll explain what I can, little spy.”

He refreshed all of their goblets and then rested an arm across one bent knee. “Calling Shadow a dimension seems correct to me, for it has no substance save for what the Warlocks give to it. Shadow is...energy bound into illusion solidified into form...sometimes—that is, if the Warlocks have chosen to make things solid enough for others to perceive them. When you travel in Shadow...” his gaze took on a faraway look, “...no, it’s not so much traveling as *shifting*. Imagine you’re in a formless sea, and then—quite suddenly—an island bursts into shape in front of you. In those moments, you’ve merged with a Warlock’s...*world* seems an inapt term to describe the universes shaped by their minds. Their worlds are not like this one.”

Nadia was listening intently. “Long ago, in the time known as The Before, the Warlocks of Shadow came regularly to Alorin—thousands of years ago, when most of what we understood about *elae* was superstition, before we made contact with the Council of Realms, before Cephrael bestowed upon the First Emperor Hallian the truths of the *Sobra I’ternin*.” She gave a little frown. “They were dark times for the realm.”

Tanis remembered the Imperial Historian Maestro Greaves lecturing on The Before, but he couldn’t recall the historian saying why the Warlocks of Shadow were no longer broadly terrorizing the realm. “What stopped the Warlocks from coming here?”

“The Council of Realms.” Nadia looked to him. “My mother says it’s a condition of membership in the Council of Realms that a realm refuses to have any interaction with the Warlocks of Shadow.”

“Yes,” Pelas arched a brow and fingered the rim of his goblet, “some Warlocks find this arrangement rather...unfashionable.”

Tanis didn’t want to be reminded of arrangements with Warlocks. “If Shadow has neither where nor when,” he posed, returning them to the earlier topic, which was safer to his mental constitution, “how do you navigate it?”

Pelas shifted his gaze back to him. “Similar to the way we operate in the Void...” he paused, frowned, managed an apologetic grin. “I’ve never tried to describe any of this before. I beg your forbearance.” Pelas rubbed at his chin and gazed off with a narrowed brow.

Whereupon Nadia said, somewhat awed, “Do you really unmake entire stars?” Pelas looked to her, and she added, “It just seems so incredible. I mean, you seem like just a man.” Then she dropped her eyes and added blushing, “I mean, not just *any* man...”

Pelas chuckled. “In the Void, my brothers and I assume a different form, a much larger form. But no form we could assume would approximate the space occupied by a star. To unmake a star, we first have to...” he paused and frowned again, “...it’s like we expand our minds to become bigger than the star, or perhaps to...”

Pelas rubbed at one ear and winced slightly. “This is challenging to explain.”

“No, I think I see.” Tanis gazed wonderingly at him, for a marvelous understanding was dawning. He recalled his mother’s lessons on Absolute Being—long dissertations on a wielder’s need to expand his awareness to encompass the space in which he intended to produce an effect; his father had written entire journals on the topic—and he connected this training with the images in Pelas’s mind. “Actually...I think what you’re trying to explain is covered in the Esoterics.”

As keen to Tanis’s thoughts as the lad was to his, Pelas arched a brow and leaned back on one hand. “I really must spend more time learning your Laws and Esoterics. I

well recall your mother saying to me...” but he fell silent upon this thought, and his mind became quiet.

Tanis had learned that this quietude meant Pelas was closing off parts of his mind, concealing the thoughts harbored there—clearly thoughts about Tanis’s mother and Pelas’s mysterious relationship with her. The lad knew Pelas still had some confession to make to him about it, but neither of them had yet felt ready to broach the subject.

Tanis laid his head back on the blanket, closed his eyes and tried to dull the swarming feeling that still edged his thoughts.

Nadia meanwhile said to Pelas in a tone tinged with wonder, “Your illusions are so much more elaborate than any I’ve been able to craft.”

“Your rose a bit ago was perfect and lovely, Princess.”

“But that rose is something I studied long upon and worked hard to capture,” she returned. “You seem able to craft illusions more easily than either Tanis or me—and the gift comes to *us* innately.”

“It is merely the product of an artistic eye, Princess.” Tanis heard the smile in Pelas’s voice. “Your talent is far more formidable.”

“Tanis,” she tapped him on the arm, “do you see how Signore di Nostri flatters me with his every breath? You could learn from him.”

Tanis opened one eye to peer at her. “You would have me learn *more* ways of making you blush?” He emphasized this question by placing certain images in the shared space of their minds.

Nadia pressed fingers to her lips and tucked her chin into her shoulder, blushing vividly.

Pelas chuckled. “I’ve had many years to hone the skill of illusions, Princess. When working on the Sormitáge’s Grand Passage, I would craft the illusion first for my own eyes and then paint it as I saw it.”

“Oh, that makes so much sense! Art historians have long praised the astonishing lack of error in your work.” Nadia brushed a strand of hair from her face and smiled at him, but then her expression sobered, as if the breeze had blown a sudden solemnity into the conversation. “Immanuel...did no one ever know you were fifth strand?”

Pelas settled his gaze on Tanis—the lad both felt his attention and sensed it emanating across the bond. “*I* didn’t know until Tanis showed this truth to me.”

Nadia shook her head. “All those years at the Sormitáge and no one knew.”

Tanis opened his eyes and turned his head to meet Pelas’s gaze, both of them struck by the same thought—

They well knew that Shail had spent even longer at the Sormitáge in the guise of an Arcane Scholar.

Pelas cast Tanis the private thought, *I still do not know what my brother was doing there for so many years.*

Tanis inwardly grimaced. *I expect we’ll find out soon enough.*

With the unease roused by this uncertainty still thrumming between them, Pelas said to Nadia, “When the great wielders of the Fourth Age roamed the halls of the Sormitáge—Markal Morrelaine, Arion Tavestra, Malachai ap’Kalien...your mother, little spy—” and he cast an unreadable look at Tanis, “I had to be careful to conceal my nature, but in truth, I was in little danger of being discovered. The greatest men of that Age

walked past my scaffolding every day, and not a one ever thought to seek the fifth in my construction. I was but a lowly painter, a mouse among giants.”

Nadia choked into her wine.

Pelas cast her a quietly amused look. “The Sormitáge and its sister Citadel had their own aristocracy reigning above the blood of kings. Rowed wielders were the true royalty of that time. The art circles I traveled in were rich but decidedly less... illustrious.”

Tanis propped his head on his hand again and gazed at him intently. “Did you know my father?”

Pelas shifted his eyes back to the lad with a look of gentle apology. “I knew of him, but we spoke only a few times in all my years there. Your father walked in the highest circles, for he was the Alorin Seat’s closest friend and held the heart of the High Mage of the Citadel.” Pelas gave him another smile, reflective of admiration. “Your father was the envy of all who knew of him, little spy.”

Nadia turned to Tanis, her eyes bright. “Do you know what an amazing secret you are, Tanis? No one knew that Isabel van Gelderan and Arion Tavestra had a son.”

“Only the household staff in the valley,” Tanis offered by way of absent agreement, his thoughts elsewhere.

“But oh—what a *mystery*.” Nadia looked him over as if he was suddenly very intriguing. “Centuries between your birth and now...surely you weren’t hidden in the Adonnai Valley all that time?”

Tanis exhaled thoughtfully. “All I know is that the zanthyr brought me to Her Grace’s estate in Dannym when I was just a toddler.”

Nadia squeezed his hand and grinned at him. “So mysterious.”

“Yes, our little spy is quite the undiscovered gem.” Pelas winked at the lad. “But I think it’s your turn to craft an illusion for our pleasure, Princess.” He lifted the decanter to fill her goblet again.

“Please no more!” Nadia laughingly waved away the wine. “My head is far too fuzzy. Tanis, you take my turn.”

“Very well, Your Highness, if you insist.”

Rolling onto his back again, Tanis clasped hands behind his head and let his mind wander. As had happened ever since binding with Pelas, Tanis’s free attention was immediately sucked into Pelas’s gravity.

Soon, Tanis saw himself floating amid spiraling galaxies, passing through vast clouds of colorful gasses, sinking into a black sea studded with billions of stars...

One particular section of stars captured his fascination, and Tanis began fashioning the pattern of those stars with the fourth strand, positioning each star as he saw it in relation to the next, dotting the landscape of his illusion with points of light.

He was so intent upon duplicating the exact relationships and relative distances of each star to its neighbor that he hardly noticed the larger picture he was forming until Pelas sucked in his breath.

Tanis opened his eyes and pushed up on one elbow. “What’s wrong?”

Pelas was staring at the illusion glowing in the space between them: myriad diamond dots forming multiple swirling designs. “Tanis...” he looked extremely uncomfortable. “Where did you see this?”

Tanis turned his gaze to the illusion. “It just sort of...came to me.”

Nadia was peering intently at it. “Why, it almost looks like a wo—”

“Tanis, please let this creation go.” Pelas sounded dismayed.

Tanis banished the illusion at once, though its image remained vivid in his mind’s eye. He knew, too, what Nadia had intended to say. In the way one can draw imaginary lines among the stars of a constellation to outline a perceived shape, so had the swirling patterns of the stars in his illusion seemed, when drawn into a whole, somehow reminiscent of a human form. What he didn’t know was why that form had caused Pelas such pain.

“Well...it was lovely, whatever it was.” Nadia touched Tanis on the arm. “I think I should rest before dinner. Would you walk me back to the house, Lord Adonnai?”

Tanis stood and bent to help her stand up. “You’re really going to keep calling me that, aren’t you?”

She gave him an arch look as she took his offered hands. “The title is your birthright.” Nadia got to her feet, shook out her skirt and then looked him up and down with one eyebrow imperiously cocked. “You’re not just Arion’s heir, you know. You’re Björn van Gelderan’s also.”

Tanis looped her arm through his. “Are you trying to help me feel more comfortable with the idea or less?”

Nadia grinned impishly. Then she turned to Pelas, who had also risen, and bobbed a curtsy. “Signore di Nostri, thank you for the lovely afternoon.”

Pelas gave her a lavish bow. “The pleasure was all mine, Princess.” His tone sounded light, but he met Tanis’s gaze as he straightened, and the lad saw a shadowed concern lingering there, its cause hidden in the sudden immense quiet of his mind.

Tanis escorted Nadia back to the manor feeling a welling unease. He attributed it to a perception that had been growing throughout the day, one that he’d come to associate with a calling on his path.

As he saw Nadia into her bed chamber, the unease grew so strong that he feared she would perceive it in his thoughts and wonder at it. He realized then that it wasn’t his own feeling but Pelas’s, the latter’s rising dismay overflowing across their bond.

Tanis helped Nadia prepare for her nap, doting on her because he enjoyed it and because she let him. After she’d finished the tea he’d prepared for her—one of his lady’s recipes—he sat on the bed at her side until her lids grew heavy and she sank into sleep with a soft smile gracing her lips.

Then he went in search of Pelas.

He found him on the terrace. The early evening sky remained clear, but a rising ocean breeze was whipping Pelas’s long hair into wild designs, even as it had on the night Tanis had met the real Pelas, free from the influence of his brother’s compulsion.

Tanis halted at the Malorin’athgul’s side and joined him in gazing out over the sea, whose waters had assumed twilight’s mercuric hue. Tanis no longer perceived the darkness that had so often overtaken and possessed his bond-brother, but a grave disquiet thrummed within Pelas now, much in contrast to his mind, which had gone completely still.

After a time, Tanis glanced to him. “It’s still there, isn’t it?”

Pelas kept his gaze on the distant sea and his hands clasped behind his back.
“Yes.”

“But you’re no longer subject to Darshan’s compulsion. That’s what you meant before, when you said that acts beneath his compulsion would no longer plague your conscience?”

Pelas exhaled a slow breath and turned to meet Tanis’s gaze. The lad had never seen him look so troubled. “I think it’s time I explained to you how I learned to overcome it.”

Both his expression and the turmoil of his thoughts, which suddenly tumbled forth upon an avalanche of disconcertion, unsettled Tanis greatly. He sought to reassure him. “Whatever it is...I promise I will hear it.”

Pelas turned back to face the sea. “From the instant I first saw you again, I’ve sought a way to tell you. Now the moment is here...I still don’t know how to shape the words.”

“It has something to do with my mother, doesn’t it?” Tanis didn’t need to be sharing Pelas’s mind to have gleaned that much.

Pelas closed his eyes and exhaled a sort of groan.

Concern pulsed in Tanis’s chest. “What is it?” He took hold of his bond-brother’s arm and made him look at him, searching his copper eyes with his own. “What do you feel so desperately unable to tell me?”

Grave apology darkened Pelas’s gaze. He slipped free of Tanis’s touch and walked further along the terrace. Stopping by a marble urn, he clasped his hands behind his back and stared out to sea. When he spoke, his voice was low and tightly controlled. “You know what Darshan’s compulsion required of me.”

Tanis felt an immediate ill apprehension descend upon him. “Yes.” He watched Pelas working the muscles of his jaw, clenching and unclenching, even as his thoughts seemed to alternately clench and slip around the secret he was holding so close, yet was so clearly desperate to release.

“I don’t know how it came to be...” Pelas spoke as if each word was slicing a piece of flesh from his soul through its utterance, “perhaps she simply willed it so, after we crossed paths at Tal’Afaq, but your mother and my brother Darshan...”

Tanis suddenly couldn’t breathe, his chest was so bound by foreboding. “What about them?”

Pelas turned to him. “For a time, your mother and I were both Darshan’s prisoners...together.” Pelas pressed palms to his temples and confessed between his bent arms, “My brother tortured me into unconsciousness and then worked an illusion to deceive me. When I awoke, I was convinced that he’d taken my power away. He locked me in a tower from which I thought I had no escape, and after a time, he...gave me your mother, strung to the same poles as he’d used to electrocute me—his humorous idea of a gift.”

Pelas dropped his hands to his sides. Contrition made a storm of his features. “Darshan meant me to...he had *compelled* me to...”

Tanis felt like he needed to sit down. He realized he was doing so when pain flared through his knees. Kneeling there on the patio stones, he stared at Pelas with the terrible realization and all of its ramifications taking horrifying shape in his thoughts.

My mother? You had my mother bound and—

Pelas strode quickly to Tanis and fell to his knees before him. He took him by the shoulders. “I didn’t harm her like the others you’ve witnessed. For days, I tried to resist harming her at all, but the force of Darshan’s compulsion bearing against my will— Tanis...I couldn’t *stop* myself—”

Tanis sank his head into his hands. This was so much worse than he’d ever imagined. He didn’t know how to respond to it—mentally, emotionally...rationally...

“Isabel said she was there to help me.” Pelas was begging his forgiveness with his thoughts and his tone and his every breath. “She was my prisoner, yet she said I was *her* path. Tanis...”

Tanis, please...

Tanis felt sick. He pressed his palms to his forehead and tried to breathe around the clenching feeling in his chest. After a time, he managed grimly, “What’s the rest of it?”

Pelas exhaled a measured breath. “I harmed her, Tanis. By Chaos born, I wish I’d been stronger! She...” Pelas braced his hands on his knees as if to support the weight of his confession. “She said to use patterns, and I—I...penned them into her flesh with a razor stylus—”

Tanis scrambled to his feet, suddenly unable to hear any more—unwilling to *know* any more.

The swarming feeling in his brain made his legs unstable, and he staggered to the closest urn and braced a hand against it while the world spun dangerously. He wanted to flee, to run, to lash out in rage and horror and protest all at the same time, but he stole some breath back from his incredulity to gasp, “How did she free you?”

Pelas remained on his knees behind him, head bowed, radiating dismay. “She taught me how to sublimate the compulsion, how to claim its power as my own and channel it to my own will. It was application of the Fifth Law...she said.”

Tanis, I beg you, please forgive me!

Tanis spun him a stricken look. “Just...” He really thought it might destroy him, knowing this had happened. “I need...some time,” and he flung himself into a desperate sprint, running as far and as fast out of Pelas’s company as his legs would carry him.

Two

*“The truest power there is in this universe is understanding.
It is the greatest force for change.”*

—Björn van Gelderan, Fifth Vestal of Alorin

All the next day, Tanis walked the lonesome Halloviaan moors, keeping company with the gorse and the wind and his own troubled thoughts. He tried to push images of the Healers he’d seen Pelas torturing from his mind—tried not to imagine his mother in the same guise—but the constant wind blew ill pictures into his head. He didn’t seem able to escape either of them.

He was reeling, both from the turbulence that came with the knowledge of what Pelas had done, and from sensitivity to Pelas’s acute torment on the other end of their bond. Several times that day, Pelas contacted him, mind to mind, to convey again his sorrow at having harmed Tanis by harming Isabel. He’d begged Tanis to let him explain better of his acts. But Tanis didn’t think he could handle knowing more details.

He felt Pelas’s dismay as if it were his own. He perceived the man’s deep contrition. He didn’t even really *blame* him, for he understood how Pelas had suffered beneath Darshan’s compulsion—and he knew from his own experience that a Malorin’athgul’s compulsion was impossible to deny.

But could he *forgive* him?

Should he forgive him?

After thinking himself in circles for the better part of the day and feeling sick over it all the while, Tanis finally determined that he needed more information before he could reach any conclusion about what to do, or even decide how he really felt about what Pelas had done. Yet the very idea of Pelas telling him more details filled him with dread.

He saw then only one path.

Sunset was painting the clouds a violet-rose when Tanis finally found his way back to the cliffs. Sitting down near the crumbling edge, he hugged his knees, gazed out at a dark line where sea met sky, and tried to regain some sense of equilibrium.

Finally, still not ready to face more truth but too emotionally exhausted to endure the indecision any longer, Tanis closed his eyes and cast his thoughts along a different bond...an older bond. His mind seemed to travel *so far*...reaching out across an immense distance, but then...

Tanis, love of my heart.

Mother—

Abruptly his thoughts just started pouring out—a turmoil of confusion, horror, disbelief, even a desperate desire to reject the truth, all of it in a flood of wordless emotion.

He felt her startled silence. Then an ethereal sigh, redolent of regret. *I see he told you.*

Her admission oddly wounded him. Until that moment, the truth had seemed so unreal to him that he hadn't fully accepted it; part of him had still been rejecting the idea that it had happened at all. But upon hearing her reply, confirming all...

Suddenly, Tanis didn't want anything to do with the truth. He felt himself mentally punching it away as if it were a battering fury of crows. He had an overwhelming urge to distance himself from both Pelas and his mother. He didn't know what he'd do, perhaps just leave—bindings be damned—and flee with Nadia to elsewhere in the realm, just anywhere he wouldn't have to deal with *this*.

Oh, my dearest son, I'm so sorry...

His mother must've sensed the dismay that gripped him, for suddenly the world around Tanis shifted, *altered*—

—He found himself standing on a high balcony overlooking an immense white city. The sight was so startling and at the same time so awe-inspiring that he almost forgot his troubles in lieu of the view.

Part of its majesty was how *real* it seemed. He had to be dreaming, yet his mind felt awake—*alert* even—perhaps more so than it had just a heartbeat before.

“Tanis.”

He started at the sound of her voice—so real, so *close*, as if truly hearing it with his own ears instead of mind to mind—and turned.

His mother stood in the portal between two open doors. She wore an aqua robe of heavy silk, and her dark hair hung in an elegant plait across one shoulder. She looked exactly as she had in his lessons. As he met her gaze for the first time since babyhood, he saw his own eyes mirrored in the shape of hers.

For a heartbeat's pause, Tanis clung to the railing at his back. Then he launched himself across the space between them and threw his arms around his mother.

She caught her breath in a joyous inhale. One hand cradled the back of his head while the other clutched him close. “Oh, my son...my dear, dear boy.” She smelled of jasmine and sunlight, just as he remembered.

Though in truth they remained realms away, yet his mother felt solid and warm in his arms. And being in *her* arms...

Tanis was smiling so wide his face was starting to ache.

Isabel pressed a kiss to his cheek and released him from her arms, but only to take him by the shoulders, that she might better look upon his face. “You've grown so tall.” Her gaze reflected admiration and immense pride. “So like your father.”

He met her colorless eyes, feeling a wondrous, welling joy that quite overshadowed all that had been troubling him. Though they'd spoken across the bond, this was their first meeting in the flesh—or as close as they could manage—since he'd left her arms as a toddler. Standing there, bathed in the warmth of his mother's adoration, Tanis felt as though they'd never been a day apart.

He looked around again. “Where have you brought me?”

“Dreamscape.” Her eyes strayed out across the city, and a softness came to her expression. “Niyadbakir, T'khendar. My home.” She looked back to him and cupped his cheek tenderly with one hand.

Then her smile faded, her brow furrowed. “I regret that he had to tell you,” she stroked his cheek with her thumb, “but how could he not? You two are bound; there can

be no secrets between you.” Tanis glanced away at this, to which she added, “And you wouldn’t want there to be.”

“No.” Then he flinched at what it would mean, knowing *all* that Pelas knew.

“Oh, Tanis...” She ran her hand lovingly down his arm. “Say what you would to me. I’ll answer what I can.”

Tanis pressed a palm to one eye. He wanted to know, but he didn’t want to know. He *had* to know, yet couldn’t bear the knowing, and he certainly didn’t want to *ask*—

She stroked his arm. “I’m unsure of the source of your turmoil. Is it fear for my welfare, or do you feel betrayed by him? What is it that bothers you most?”

In their dreamscape meeting, she was regarding him steadily, but through their bond, the truthreader in her was permeating his thoughts, seeking the answers to her questions—answers he wasn’t even sure of himself.

After a moment she caught her breath. “It cannot be...surely you’re not concerned for my dignity?”

Tanis’s eyes flew to hers. “He *cut* you! You were *bound* and—” Tanis pushed both palms to his temples, wishing he could sear the images out of his head.

“But here I now stand, Tanis,” she replied gently. “What harm remains that *you* need worry for?” When he didn’t answer, his mother drew in her breath and let it out slowly. “Would you fashion me as his victim? Who is aided by doing so?”

Tanis dropped his hands and looked at her.

She arched an inquiring brow. “Pelas is not helped, for he becomes the tormentor. I am not helped—indeed, I’m made helpless by the description. Who gains from your pity? Your *own* sense of dignity, perhaps?”

He frowned at this.

“Blame and regret...no one gains by walking in those shadows, my dearest son. Every time you blame the cause of something on another—every time you say the responsibility lies elsewhere than yourself—you’ve given some of your power away. For mortal man, the path through this forest of blame leads only to unhappiness. For a wielder, it is the road to ruin.”

“*KNOW the effect you intend to create,*” Tanis quoted the First Law with a frown.

She gave him a telling look. “A wielder acts from a place of causation—*always*, in every sense, with every step along the path. I don’t see myself as a victim of Pelas’s acts, Tanis; I beg you, don’t do it in my stead.”

“But...” Tanis exhaled a forceful breath. Pelas *had* harmed her. Surely there should be consequences.

Yet even in having the thought, Tanis realized this was an unfair assessment. Pelas had been enduring consequences throughout—he’d been made to do things he hated and regretted, yet without any ability to withhold himself...he’d even taken steps to sequester himself on a remote Hallovanian shore, rather than bring more harm he felt incapable of preventing. For centuries, he’d conceived of himself as a monster. The personal cost had been high.

Yet...in relation to what harm he’d caused...?

Isabel sighed. “I know where your mind would lead you, Tanis, but there are no answers in that direction.” She took up his hand again, and with a look of invitation, drew him towards the railing. “This game is bigger than you or me, Tanis, bigger than any of

our personal desires. Bigger even than our personal concepts of justice. The game *isn't* fair in many regards. It is not kind to individuals, and it's certainly not kind to love."

She stopped at the railing and laid her hands on the marble balustrade. His mother radiated calm—no matter the emotions she might've been personally experiencing in that moment, and Tanis suspected they were powerful and intense—outwardly she projected only a sense of serenity.

Isabel glanced to him, and her expression resolved into a tragic sort of smile. "Your uncle has lived three hundred years without the woman he loves. I have done the same; while your father has died three times for this game and now lives anew, but as yet without the full knowledge he'll need to survive it."

She didn't tell him what name and face his father wore now, and he didn't ask. It was not the time to go hunting down that path.

Isabel sighed and shook her head. "I would've kept you free of the game if I could have."

Tanis thought of that sense of duty that had initially bound him to Pelas, and the newer feeling that pushed or pulled against him when he seemed to set his will in the wrong direction. "Somehow..." he lifted his eyes to meet her gaze, "I think I've always been bound to the game."

His mother exhaled a slow breath by way of agreement. "Our paths are entwined, yours and mine, even as mine and your father's are, and mine and your uncle's within the fabric of the tapestry."

She looked back out across the sparkling city, and a faint furrow came to her brow. "I couldn't have freed Pelas from Darshan's compulsion if you hadn't begun the process of freeing his mind, Tanis. Pelas would not now be bound to a path except for what we together have done. And we have all three of us made sacrifices to gain the place we stand now."

She turned him a look of deep concern, yet her eyes were luminous with adoration. She lifted a hand and stroked his cheek. "I think that when it comes to Pelas, you are the last person who needs an explanation of why those sacrifices were worthwhile."

Tanis dropped his gaze, for of course, this was true.

"And he *loves* you." She placed her hand on his arm and squeezed it gently. "When we two were together in Darshan's tower, all was darkness in Pelas's world except the memories he kept of you. Seeing the likeness of you in the shape of my eyes was the thing that allowed him to overcome the melancholia that had claimed him and—ultimately—to overcome Darshan's compulsion."

Tanis looked desperately to her. "But he *harmed* you—"

"Tanis, that was my path." She took him by both arms and made him face her. "I had to walk it, even as you must walk yours."

When Tanis still stared at her with the faint shadow of horror behind his eyes, his mother exhaled a measured breath and loosened the sash at her waist. She slipped one shoulder free of her robe and revealed the pattern etched there. The scar lines were thin, barely more raised than a tattoo, and delicately inscribed by a painter's masterful hand, but the way the silver lines glowed...they might've been traced in mercury.

"Do you see, Tanis love?" She searched his gaze with a deep meaning in the conflict marring her brow. "There is a truth here that must be acknowledged."

Tanis swallowed and shifted his eyes back to hers, but he quickly looked away again, for the truth she was showing him across the bond made him feel wobbly inside.

“He didn’t know, you know.” His mother ducked her head to capture his attention and pulled her robe back up over her shoulder. “When Pelas was drawing his patterns in my flesh, he didn’t know I was your mother.”

Tanis’s eyes flew back to hers.

She acknowledged the question in his gaze. “Yes, I could’ve told him. He would’ve stopped at once if I had. He would probably have freed me immediately. But then where would we be?” She searched his eyes with her own. “Tanis...I knew my path was leading me to Pelas, and I knew that I would somehow be given the opportunity to bind him to our game, but I didn’t know the circumstances under which that chance would appear...only that it would require sacrificing something very important to me.”

She took his hand in hers and ran her thumb across his knuckles. “Along my path, I made choices. Some of those choices were...” she frowned slightly, seemed to search for the right word, “unusual. When I saw that those choices had led me to the circumstances under which Pelas and I met...I’ll admit I was concerned. But I trusted that I would somehow find my way through. I believed I could still bring about the effect I intended to achieve—application of the First Law—even though I didn’t see how I could possibly help him at the time.”

Isabel released his hand and turned and laid both of hers on the railing. She gazed out over the vast, glowing city. “If I had made my personal safety more important than my path...if I’d told Pelas who I was in order to make him stop hurting me, where would we be now?”

Tanis lifted a tormented gaze to her, for he understood her meaning too nearly.

“I was not a victim in my interaction with Pelas, my son. If anything, I manipulated him to the best of my skill—because *I alone* knew the potential outcome. I was unwilling to compromise in any way, not even to avoid pain. I made no move to stray from the path until I saw that my postulated outcome could be achieved and knew the way to go about achieving that effect. It is the First Law, and an unbreakable one.”

Tanis exhaled a slow breath and nodded once. “Yes, mother.” This was a lesson he would never forget.

Looking him over then, she exhaled a sigh and drew him into her arms. Holding him close, she murmured at his ear, “Whatever Pelas has done to violate the Balance, whatever forces he’s set in motion against himself as a result, *we* need not be the agents of its retribution.”

Tanis heard much more in this statement than he understood, similar to the way the zanthyr spoke in dualities, conveying multiple layers of meaning. He hugged his mother closer and rested his chin on her shoulder. “I understand.”

“To love and forgive despite anything that is done to us is the truest expression of greatness, my dearest son. It is your choice now how to treat Pelas, your choice what you will feel towards him...but I would like to see this greatness in you.” She blessed him with a smile then, and a caress of her fingers along his cheek—

—And he was suddenly back on the cliff, hugging his knees and staring out across a mercuric sea while the moon rose slowly in the east.

Feeling somewhat relieved if not exactly resolved, Tanis made his way back to the manor. While he dressed for dinner, he considered everything his mother had told him.

The feeling of her presence remained heady in his mind. He wondered if she'd stayed with him somehow, for he felt an almost gentle prodding away from thoughts of Pelas to ruminate instead on the other truths, ones she'd hinted at as much as ones she'd given him bluntly.

'...your father has died three times for this game...'

Three times? Tanis shook his head while absently donning a clean tunic. No wonder the zanthyr had said his father wasn't as he remembered him.

The lad had long suspected that his father had died, though the zanthyr had never said so, but something in Phaedor's gaze when he'd spoken of Arion, some shadowed duality in his words... Tanis had known.

In their first conversation, his mother had intimated that Tanis and his father would know each other again one day, and though Tanis knew enough not to press her for more truths, he was eagerly anticipating their reunion.

Through reading his father's journals, Tanis had grown to admire him immensely. Indeed, Arion's philosophies had shaped the way Tanis worked the lifeforce.

Even more valuable than any one technique was learning how Arion *thought*. Tanis found himself easily following the same logical paths his father had walked down, finding connections between ideas and action in a way he wasn't sure he could have explained to anyone, yet which Arion had been able to do with alacrity. Arion hadn't just been strong in his talent, he'd been brilliant in its execution.

Like Isabel, but by way of a different gift, Arion could predict events. He could see beyond the curve of causation and posit an outcome, *because he could see patterns in life as easily as he could see them in elae*. Arion could observe myriad paths of cause and consequence and know how each of them would connect at some future point. He could predict outcomes in ways that others couldn't fathom.

Tanis had gained enormous respect for his father through the ideas and thoughts he'd penned in his journals. Now, knowing that his father lived anew...even with a different face and name...even without remembering all that he used to be...suddenly the Returning took on a grave new importance for Tanis.

If any portion of that man remained, Tanis wanted to know him.

He chose a coat from his armoire somewhat absently and paused as he slid his arm into the sleeve. It was one of the many coats Pelas had commissioned for him. Looking at it more closely now, something in the arabesques on the sleeve reminded him of the mercuric design etching his mother's shoulder.

Tanis exhaled a heavy sigh and slumped down on the edge of a chair. With Pelas claiming all responsibility and his mother claiming all responsibility, there didn't seem to be anyone left to blame.

Oddly, he no longer wanted to blame either of them. He just wanted to walk his path, and he wanted to walk it with Pelas beside him and in the fullness of his mother's approval.

Odd that he could've felt so tormented just hours ago and now be able to put so much behind him. His mother's wisdom had grounded and focused him in ways no one else's could have.

Tanis finished dressing and headed out of his rooms. He heard Nadia's laughter while still on the stairs, and he rounded the dining room archway to see Pelas and the princess already seated at the dining table.

Pelas looked up as Tanis arrived. Tanis had never seen him wear an expression so akin to fear as what he saw in his gaze in that moment.

"Oh, Tanis, there you are! Immanuel and I have had a marvelous day—where *have* you been?" Nadia gave him a smile that only lightly chided his absence.

Pelas quickly pushed across the explanation that he'd kept Nadia occupied to give Tanis time with his thoughts.

Tanis imagined that Pelas, *aka* Immanuel di Nostri, might've been the only personage in the entire realm capable of so distracting Nadia van Gelderan that she hardly noticed Tanis's absence for an entire day.

Nadia continued brightly, "Immanuel was just telling me about a fountain he sculpted for the Maharajah of Anhara-Dadra in Bemoth."

"Oh?" Tanis moved slowly on into the room.

"He carved it from four blocks of travertine that were each as wide as this table and as tall as the ceiling."

Tanis rounded the table and started towards his chair. Pelas followed him with his gaze. "That is certainly impressive."

"It's a *famous* fountain, Tanis." Nadia's tone implied his response had lacked an appropriate degree of appreciation.

Tanis smiled at her as he reached his chair. "I'm sure the fountain is quite impressive, Nadia, but there's just no way its beauty could compare to yours."

Nadia blinked. "Why, Lord Adonnai..." a smile hinted on her lips and a faint flush brightened her cheeks.

Tanis placed a hand on Pelas's shoulder but said to Nadia, "You told me I could learn much from our host." He squeezed Pelas's shoulder and angled a look his way. "I intend to."

Pelas met his gaze in a heartbeat's pause. In that breath of frozen time, he radiated immense relief, an almost desperate curiosity, bemused wonder...

Tanis...you've forgiven me?

Tanis held his gaze. *We're brothers now, and brothers we will always be.*

Something released in Tanis the moment he said this, as if an absolving wind had blown away the last of his angst and dismay. Logic, reason...these might've dictated a call for restitution, even atonement, but Tanis's heart simply wanted to forgive.

He suddenly saw his mother's point. There was nothing to be gained from holding onto the feelings that had plagued him since Pelas's confession—they would only become chains around Tanis's own ankles—and everything to be gained by letting go of them.

Perhaps even more importantly, he and Pelas were brothers now, eternally united through the Unbreakable Bond. But that binding was not merely the forging of a permanent connection, it was also a promise of devotion, one so complete that each might take on the other's acts as though they had been their own. Tanis knew that had the

situation been reversed, Pelas would not have hesitated—Pelas never would've turned his back on him, no matter what he'd done.

Oh, how truly his mother had known the feelings residing in his heart, even before Tanis had recognized them himself!

Tanis, I am overcome. Pelas's eyes were vivid with gratitude, yet his admiration glowed more brightly still.

Smiling softly, Tanis took his seat.

And the world started again.

Pelas reached to pour Tanis some wine. Tanis settled his napkin in his lap and lifted a smile to Nadia. "So tell me more about this fountain."