

CHAPTER 1

Tap, tap, ching..., tap, tap, ching..., tap, tap, ching...

The tinny percussion stabbed Taemal's inner ear. "Stop it."

Tap, tap, ching...

"Stop!"

Tap, tap, ching..., tap, tap, ching...

"Great Mother, do it!"

Taemal was certain his shout resonated, yet why did he hear his throat croak out half-whispered words?

The *taps* and *chings* chimed in even rhythm, making Taemal ready to kill the idiot causing that teeth-grinding racket. He lifted groggy eyelids to look for his mark, but was unable to see a thing past a coal haze so dense he choked the moment he drew breath. Taemal clamped his jaw shut to inhale thinly through his

nose as a dull ache mounted in his breastbone. He would have rubbed his chest were his arms not pinned to his flanks. He would have paced through the haze and ended the maddening *tap, tap, chings* were his knees and ankles not clamped bone to bone, but the more Taemal became aware of himself the more he realized he could not move a muscle below the neck, and yet he felt weightless as a force writhed over his skin to heft him up.

Tap, tap, ching... Great Mother, his chest hurt. *Tap, tap, ching...* Great Mother, that sound was worse than a stone scraping glass. *Tap, tap, ching...* And why couldn't he move?

He was captive! Battle magic coursed, waking Taemal fully, but the haze bound his naked body even as it gagged and blinded.

Tap, tap, ching... Tap, tap, ching...

Taemal focused his awareness to appreciate his situation. Only one labor produced such meter. He must be in a forge, but how? He had been with the Mountfolk, standing in battle to prove himself worthy of their one rustic maid whose milk hair drifted about indigo eyes flecked with chalk, *Crystla*.

Prove indeed. He was the First Sword. He stood at the Guiding Star's Right and held martial authority over all lands east and west of the Rhue, the great river from which the world derived its name. But those pelt-wearers did not respect Sword

authority and so he had helped them repress a foothill onslaught - when a Mont mace had struck him in the chest before a shadow had taken hold of him.

It had been Crystla's own father! Taemal realized it now for why else would the man have asked to guard his shoulder? He had poured false waters! They all had! Mother curse every one of those feculent goat-eaters!

"Hate them," a voice encouraged.

Who was that?! Taemal drew a breath to demand answers but haze filled his lungs, and as he gasped - which caused him to swallow enough haze to retch - Taemal struggled to free himself for fear he would either suffocate or drown in his own vomit.

Tap, tap, ching... Tap, tap, ching...

The haze lifted allowing Taemal to cough out the intolerable ether and force bile back down his throat. He blinked wide only to find himself in a cavern where the haze's coal tendrils coiled tightly to suspend him upright. A craftsman stood at a lump rock anvil beside a forge where black and blood red flames reflected against the cavern's countless crystalline mirror points.

Though a battle mage who should damned well fight, Taemal found himself mesmerized as he watched the craftsman *tap* his hammer twice on the anvil, his hand shifting from view before *chinging* out sparks against a glowing sword blank.

Taemal's jet eyes narrowed behind the raven bangs sweat-plastered against his mud-splotched brow, before a chill shot up his spine for he recognized that inconsistency of being just as he recognized the flash of gold in the craftsman's mildewed hair and the tone of flesh chasing across his grayed cheek.

The craftsman lifted white steel in his bare, shape-shifting grasp so that it highlighted an evanescent forearm. He examined his blade from tang to tip and then banished the hammer as he turned fully toward his *element*.

Taemal's breath drew up. The craftsman's face was so fair despite ages straddling life and afterlife. His person still radiated the Rhue's magical undercurrent, and as a shot of the craftsman's smoked-aqua eyes met his own, Taemal Airlight convulsed from an inner jolt.

Traevis Airlight struggled to break loose, breath short, heart racing, every muscle straining as the craftsman's smoked-aqua eyes burnt a hole through his soul.

"Wake, my son!"

A white flash ripped behind Traevis' eyelids, and his comforter and sheets flew aside as he leapt from his bed. He

inadvertently alighted on a woven runner which slid along polished floorboards to bear him into the depths of a darkened room, but knowing only that he was free to fight, Traevis sprang sideways to land in crouch and grasp the Alleman dagger in his right boot.

His fingers curled into his empty palm and he groped in blackness for the Alleman's graywood handle, but felt only his bare calf as his toes gripped the hardwood. He was wearing nothing but a linen sleeping shirt that clung in sweat-moistened patches to his upper back.

Traevis braced for a hand-to-hand attack as distant thunder sounded. A second white-blue bolt refracted through a window bay's cut diamonds, and in the sting of after-sight Traevis recognized that he stood alone in his old Manor suite. He wasn't captive in that damned cavern. He was safe inside Airlight Manor. It had all been the night terror of old Taemal's murder.

"Avenge my death."

Traevis tensed as more thunder crawled overhead. How could those words call to him *now*? He was home, damn it.

"Avenge my death."

The phrase swirled about Traevis' brain while its essence crept through every nerve to shoot battle lust through his veins. The urge to fight then exploded through his soul, and Traevis

threw fists to his forehead as he fought the call of his blood's curse, the *geas*. Mother take him! He was too tired for this!

Traevis locked every muscle until he forced the *geas* to center in his gut where he mashed and balled it. Voiding his lungs, he held himself in taught check until he shoved the *geas* to his spine's base where it pulsed and tricked.

Traevis breathed deeply, but fearing his hold on sanity was finally giving way - for why else would his blood's plague call him inside Airlight Manor where it clearly should not - he paced to his desk. Magical awareness guided his fingers to his striking tin, and he tipped out a *sparkstone* as his free hand lifted mottled glass from a lamp. With a few rough bites against the tin's abrasive under plate, the oiled wick bathed the suite in soft gold allowing Traevis to take in the room that had been his playground, his wrestling paddock and most recently his tactical center.

It's just the night terror. Get hold of yourself.

Traevis surveyed the suite in hope that old comforts would ease the *geas* from his mind. His eldest brother, Ricaerd, had gifted him with the conference table crowned with the bronze Airlight Falcon and its nine U-chairs inscribed with the family motto, *Forever on wing, Forever of service*. His middle brother, Caerl, had suggested the black cherry base paneling and ceiling

coffers which accented the grayish-pink plaster. His mother had painted the self-portrait above his hearth's carved bloodwood mantle, her patient brown gaze ever reminding him of duty, and Ghislaine had commissioned the Valley Rose tapestry above his bed's headboard, two lovers in a bower of whitekiss.

Ghislaine. The *geas* dulled as Traevis savored her hair's sunlit gold and conjured the feel of her body's perfect warmth. The time had finally come. From Rhueatha here in the east across the waters of the Rhue to Rhuethalan and the West. He had won enough people to his faction, which he would make clear to his father at morning sup. This time he would have her.

Another lighting strike reminded Traevis of the storm rolling in from the Eastern Ocean, and he went to the window bay to slide sword red brocade over cut glass diamonds before he brought more lamps to life, thunder peeling as he reasoned full well why the *geas* was rising. Old Taemal's sword rested down in the family nichevault.

"Avenge my death."

"Oh, shut up," Traevis said as he set his mind to petitions and correspondence. He was the Swordson, after all, and were he not a man of magic, his life would be given over to position and politics. Though his eyes ached to close as neck tension spread to his shoulders, Traevis lifted a stack of parchments from the

Central States. The Comraderie of Guilds had sent more than expected, but replies would take place later today in the Guiding Star's City, the Hedm, Heaven's Dome, where his secretary, Andrés, and his clerks would address every request with practiced quill nibs.

Traevis sifted through updates from his west coast kin of the Hadm, Heart's Dome. He glanced at Grain/Grassland inventories from his trade managers and barge manifests from the Trescelle faction. He skimmed letters of recommendation to his personal guard, one from RhueMaster Marrion putting forward his daughter Ondelisse... daughter?

Traevis reviewed the word to ensure taxed vision had not misinterpreted the line, and then smiled as he tri-folded the parchment. Progressive as he was, he was not about to shock the Rhue with the sight of a woman bearing arms among his Reds. Let the Mount and Teethfolk do as they will with their war maids. If Ondelisse was adept enough to tap the Rhue's hidden efficacy, she might be suitable for his network. If not, the letter would receive a politely enigmatic refusal.

Lightning flashed behind the sword red so soundly it felt nothing short of a whip's lash.

"Avenge my death!"

Traevis spun about, expecting to find shattered diamonds

littering the floorboards - shocked that projectile shards had not cut into him and as thunder pounded the suite's walls, the *geas* cause Traevis to sprint for the door.

The distance was sufficient to realize his idiocy and he stopped short. What was he supposed to do, go out his sleeping shirt? *It's just the sword.*

Traevis thought of Ghislaine's eyes, pure lavender wells in which he could utterly disappear, and then turned toward his desk, passing his bureau before backing a step to gaze at the mirror. Jet eyes behind raven bangs returned his stare from its matte silver pane. He was a mess, unshaven and unkempt. Were she here, there would be no end to Laine's chiding him about his 'lack of care for his well-being'.

"Avenge my death."

"Great Mother, leave me be! Is one night of decent sleep too much to ask?"

"*Not now, my son,*" whispered to him. Traevis straightened, for that voice was not the *geas*. That was a direct response to a direct question, and Traevis did not question further. Airlight Manor was warning of something was on the wind in these early morning hours and he trusted in the fact that his home had never, nor would ever, betray him.

Traevis summoned the Rhue's magical undercurrent to his

fingertips and then to his palms where he gathered it as he placed his hands over his solar plexus. Soon his jet eyes opened fully. His muscles rebounded from a lack of sleep, and lines of strain vanished from his face.

He cast aside his sleeping shirt and moved to his standing closet to don a gray shirt, gray trousers and coal boots. He flexed his fingers into ashen gloves before he moved to the bloodwood stand bearing his Tyree rapier and Alleman dagger. Slipping the Alleman's sheath into his right boot and buckling his gray sword belt so that the Tyree's swept hilt rested within easy grasp, Traevis Airlight primed his battle magic and ventured into Manor's residential wing, steeling himself for any surprise.

"What in the Great Mother's name are you doing out here?!" Traevis called as he ventured through an access door onto Airlight Manor's central turret.

The wind so fierce it nearly rammed the words back down his throat, and the man at a far crenellation did not respond, nor did Traevis expect him to for he stood some forty paces off and the fellow could hardly have heard him.

Traevis had difficulty seeing the man past the flames

burning wildly in the Manor's great brazier - grand scroll ironwork affixed to the turret's center point that not only bore the signal fire warning travelers and mariners to be wary of the Eastern cliffs, it emblazoned the family namesake to the whole of Rhueatha; a light in the air forever guiding the weak and waning.

"My Sword!" Traevis called as he advanced, hoping a formal address would spark awareness. The man did not move, though lightning outlined him superbly while hastening Traevis to a skyward glance and a quick jog. "Get inside, will you?!"

Thunder clamored as wind rushed, and though Traevis thought himself clear of the brazier's bowl, a roar blew flames down about his head. He dropped to a knee beside a massive cast leg but the moment he could look up, he saw no one and Traevis' heart leapt to think that the man might have just been blown over the turret's edge.

Traevis shot for the crenellation, scanning what he could of the blackness below, straining to hear the faintest trail of a cry - when a chill chased across his shoulders and he sidestepped while grasping the man's wrist, struggling to hold it so that the man's dagger - a twin to Traevis' Alleman save for the redwood handle - caught the brazier's firelight rather than Traevis' arm.

"Naethan!" Traevis cried, but the familiar address proved as pointless as the formal.

Burgundy night robe thrashing as did his salt and pepper hair, black/steel eyes so blunt they seemed to be hardcoal, Naethan landed a blow to Traevis' side, twisted and broke free. Traevis dodged chest and neck slices, but as Naethan lunged for his heart, Traevis caught his wrist again and wrenched it behind his back, clutching his elder's opposing arm to hold him fast.

"Father!" Traevis insisted, butting him forehead to back of skull.

From the side, Traevis watched his father startle at which point he eased his hold, but the *geas* surged so suddenly that he cast his father to the turret, locked sight on the nearest crenellation break and ran to attack the very wind swirling about Airlight Manor.

A redwood butt struck the base of Traevis' head, shocking him to his situation and he grabbed a crenellation corner, seeing only blackness as his gray gloved fingers slipped off the masonry.

Something caught his belt and drew him away from the brink, allowing Traevis to throw his mass behind him and land a hip hard against the stone. A man caught his neck and cradled it, and Traevis clutched a burgundy lapel as he looked up at his father's side-lighted face.

"Traevis, what are you doing out here?"

Traevis exhaled as he loosened his grip. "Father, we've got to get below."

"*Avenge my death!*" swelled within both men, rocking Traevis' heart and pounding Naethan into near apoplexy, but not about to have his blood's curse take his sire, Traevis slipped past the *geas* to offer a hand, which Naethan yanked to draw Traevis off balance so that he might scramble for his blade. Traevis stilled himself as Naethan's fingers curled about his weapon for there was only one tactic. As his father turned, Traevis called the Rhue's power to his palms, placing them over his solar plexus where he directed the land's essence to swell about his person to cloak him within refractions of his surroundings.

Fading from sight, Traevis watched a question play across his father's face. Now if he could just get the long blade out of his hand and force him back across the turret to the access alcove, everything would be--

Lightning tore across the clouds while thunder boomed so loudly Traevis' camouflage melted. All when white and silent, and yet the moment he shook his senses clear, Traevis caught sight of his father on all fours, his redwood Alleman skittling across the turret stone.

Traevis heard his far-off voice call his father's name - before he froze solid, sensing it, even before the *geas* alerted

him to it; for as brilliant red swathed his vision, Traevis turned and gazed up to find the gentlest trace of supernal manifest solidifying against the coalesced clouds to assume the guise of a hand reaching down as might the Great Mother's own Consort extending heaven's own touch. A common man would have been struck dumb by the apparition's gossamer wonder, its grace and seeming splendor. A magical man would have sensed the full flow of the Rhue radiating from the flex of ephemeral digits; but the *geas* spurred Traevis to action born of old Taemal's rage in the craftsman's cavern - for the hand belonged to that craftsman, Kanalian, the Rhue's Shadow.

"AVENGE MY DEATH!"

"Yes!"

Traevis leaped but the hand cast out a mortal shock, which he evaded by pressing a sprint no eye could trace as he dove for his father's dagger and hurled it up through the phantasmal palm, the Alleman's alloy disrupting the hand's composition so that only lightning drawn down from above restored it.

Bolts shot from its fingertips, but Traevis rolled his shoulder to fall flat against his haunches so that white/blue forks raced out to sea, and though he felt his muscles lock in the near miss, Traevis called the Manor to restore him even as he kicked his legs out from under him to back flip onto his feet.

The hand centered over a bewildered Naethan Airlight, who sat on his knees staring dumbly, but the brazier's flames leapt to set the hand alight even as Traevis shot for the loading ladder where he leapt to the top rung, his Tyree and Alleman coming quickly to hand as he ran along the fire bowl's edge to launch himself upward, a battle surge from Airlight Manor thrusting him high.

"Son!"

Oblivious to the shout, inured to any sensation other than the *geas'* eternal cry of vengeance, Traevis thrust his rapier skyward while slicing his long blade in compliment, and sensing resistance against his steel, Traevis felt the *geas* ebb as Kanalian withdrew, the brazier's airborne scorches flaming out as his hand vanished into the pre-dawn darkness.

Traevis' fall to the turret might have snapped a limb had not some softer medium broken it, and taking advantage of the cushioned set down, Traevis jumped up again when something, possibly an arm, wrapped about his upper torso, followed by another coiling about his gut, both pulling hard to spoil his balance.

Traevis landed in a crumple caught up with another body and fought to right himself, but the arms offered resistance to hold him - bind him - causing Traevis to struggle.

"Traevis," someone half-shouted in his ear. Traevis reacted to the voice, knowing it to be familiar, but he was unable to appreciate its intimacy in the panic of entrapment.

A palm gripped Traevis' brow, forcing his head against a chest while another palm pressed against his sternum, pulling him against a body. Only two men had ever held him thus, his father and his eldest brother and given that Ricaerd was dead and gone, Traevis relaxed into the embrace belonging to only one man.

"I have you, son," his father said. "Quell what remains of the geas. You've sent him away."

Traevis dropped his blades as he clung to his father's burgundy-clothed arms, feeling wholly secure.

Lightning split the night. Thunder boomed and torrents poured out to drown the great brazier and inundate the last of the Airlight line.

Traevis dove for his Alleman before it washed away, boot-sheathing it as he grabbed his Tyree in one hand, his father's soaking velvets in the other and helped his sire to his feet. Battle magic established the track past the great brazier to safety.

"I can't see anything in this, son!"

"I'm heading for the door!"

Traevis hauled his father forward, but the Manor warned of a tremendous surge above and Traevis hurled his father toward the access door as he slipped in the ankle-high waters.

Lightning blasted a crenellation into a shower of mortar and stone.

Naethan could not see past eyes which burned behind half-closed lids. He heard nothing beyond incessant ringing, and yet the moment his shoulder struck a stone edifice he did sense one danger - a wooden door careening toward his skull. He spun aside to avoid the impact, reached out after the door had slammed against the stone surrounding its jamb and caught its latch.

Golden torches from the access alcove below came into view, and realizing his vision was restored Naethan reached out to secure his son. However, he felt nothing beside him, and his nerves chilled for the last thing he remembered was Traevis throwing him forward. No, the last thing he remembered was seeing that terrific bolt highlight his son's gray in stark white!

Naethan let go the latch and fell to hand and knee, splashing forward with outstretched reach while praying to the Great Mother that his boy was not drowning on the flooded stone.

"Traevis, answer me!"

Traevis was oblivious. Emerging from underneath the brazier's overflowing bowl as remnants of the *geas* needled his veins, he could see only one end. He must take up the sword made from old Taemal's spirit and kill the shadowed Sacred Kin who had forged it. He must do it before the *geas* stole the last of his sanity, but how could he stand against Kanalian without a *true mage* to aid him and how could he wield that demon blade a second time knowing how easily it would seize his soul?

"Son!" Naethan cried.

Traevis' head snapped aside for his father was still exposed! He sheathed the Tyree and dove for his sire, windswept rain keeping them apart, and yet their hands managed to find one another's. They joined palms to wrists and arms to arms as they brought one another close, and rising together they slogged in unified step, Traevis leading as they groped in the blackness before they grasped the access door's latch.

Naethan held the door while hurling his son inside, a mass of soaked gray tumbling across the threshold. Traevis recovered, spun about and grabbed his father's drenched burgundy to pull him in afterward. Wind blew while the two men strained to shut the door, when ethereal hands reached to Traevis' shoulders.

Whether they were an ancient First Sword's touch or another

of Airlight Manor's energy swells, Traevis did not know, nor did he care for the added strength tipped the balance in his favor and he slammed the door into place as his father threw the bolt.

Lightning flashed through jamb cracks, but no storm surge could touch them within a Manor where the mages of old had mixed magic into the very mortar. Sanctuary achieved, Traevis guided his father before him to send him down the steps but he stumbled.

"Is all well?" Naethan asked as he turned back to steady his child.

"Well enough."

"You look tired, boy."

"I'm fine," Traevis said, not believing it, certain his father did not believe it. "I've got to get you downstairs."

"As I you, son, as I you."

"Hancock!" Naethan shouted as he and Traevis sloshed into the centerpiece of the Northeast's showcase estate. The ceiling of Airlight Manor's Grand Hall rose in timber-vaulted crown capping a four-story hexagon, a brilliant starburst wrought of polished steel, gilded brass and red-patina bronze affixed to the apex to denote the great brazier above.

A two-story bloodwood hearth with its man-tall, hammered firebox and red-veined celestine flooring to one side, carved Sorondesburg furnishings set upon Valley Rose falcon-motif carpets and enough sword red to clothe half of Traevis' fifty-man guard, no residence could rival a place where the most renowned of the Airlight line lived in three-man-tall stained glass effigy set within the hexagon's sides.

"Hancock!" Naethan bellowed in the ambient light of the ever-burning wall sconces set below the window wonders. "Where are you man?"

Traevis sensed life stirring in Airlight Manor's recesses which was no doubt resulting in the hasty donning of shirt and shoe, cap and apron; and would shortly result in both he and his father being attended by a body of folk eager to wait upon their rightful family rather than upon the endless guests and western kin invited to busy their positions.

"Let's have some of that brandy you brought home."

"On the sideboard," Traevis said as he watched his father stride to a carved bloodwood piece and pour out from a laminate antler decanter bearing the Airlight falcon to fill two matching nippers dotted with red gems.

Why had Kanalian wanted him? To fetch the sword of Taemal from the family *nichevault*? What other reason could there be for

his father could not fight the *geas* as well as he used to and Kanalian must have found a way to possess him with its incessant mantra.

But how had that monster leached out from the Kalison desert and why hadn't Traevis network alerted him? True he was merely a battle mage, but his network could touch his soul over distances if they called collectively. What had happened to his people?

Traevis tensed as his sight line drifted up from his father's initial toss backs to gaze upon the window of his own near double, Naerris Maerran, First Sword of the Rhue's Fourth Age who had died so that his Guiding Star might reseal Kanalian in the Kalison Quey tomb the Second Age mages had crafted to hold the renegade Mont-Lestarre after consuming his body with *true light* so that, incorporeal, he could commit no further murders.

"Excellent, son. The Rushdale vintners never lose their form, do they?"

"No, they don't."

So much for that tack. Naerris had martyred himself in the Fourth Age because Kanalian had escaped during the Third when a Tresvought *blackmage* had fed him enough of the Rhue's essence to manifest. Apart from creating a slew of *geists* in the Bloodless Wars, Kanalian had captured old Taemal and only Taemal's unborn sons, the unfortunate firsts to bear the *geas*, had been able to

later reclaim the sword crafted from their father's spirit.

Traevis looked over at the famous pair, Caerl Daerren, the raven-haired master mage who shared the pane with his twin, Ricaerd the Elder, sporting his jet triple crop.

From these two to each of the other Airlights so en-glazed, every one of them had done what Swords do, protect the Guiding Star, the Great Mother's voice to the common people, and yet how pointless was this duty for this morning Kanalian had bypassed the Eastern Rhuelines - and it suddenly struck Traevis that Ghislaine's father, Jolain II the Rhue's present Star, had done nothing to hinder his long-dead kin. Was Jolain sound? Was Ghislaine? *Great Mother, he had only left twenty of his boys in the Hedm to guard her.*

Traevis turned, only to find his father before him, setting the decanter on a table along with his nipper so that he might grasp Traevis' hand and press in an alcohol-laden cup.

"Drink up, son."

Traevis allowed his father's black/steel gaze to hold his before his fingers curled about the cup; and he looked absently at the amber liquid, unable to see past Ghislaine's lavender eyes, his heart quickening to think of them widening in fear. No. She must be safe for she was under the Dome. Not only that, five of the men he had left behind were his Core Nine and the

rest were damned skilled at *geist*-work. They would all give their lives to protect her, and had they died she would surely have reached out to him for she knew his soul and could touch him though he was leagues away.

She must be safe. The Guiding Star must be safe, and Traevis knew couldn't allow worry to get the better of him or he'd be unable to act; and though he calmed his breathing and forced his mind to see her as he adored her most, with her hair in that top bun she loved to decorate while the rest hung loose to catch the afternoon light, his grip tightened at the suppressed thought of her in distress so that a hairline crack fractured in his antler cup.

"Hancock!" Naethan shouted, causing his son to wince. "Honestly, Traevis. Don't waste the brandy. Didn't the Devroy faction send it as a gift?"

"They'll send more," Traevis said as he brought himself into taught check and poured his cup into his father's even as Naethan had taken the decanter in hand and was about to refill. "Father, I must ask you something."

"I imagine you do. You wrote me to join you here at home so we might speak about the Rhue's future, and given that you've ridden how many days to reach me...?"

"That's not important."

"Isn't it? Well, that aside I can see we have business."

Naethan tossed back and poured again for his son, only to watch his boy drain the contents back into his nipper before placing the cup on a table and pacing a few steps away.

"Father, I know you sensed him outside. He reached for you."

"And inspired you to two death leaps. Hancock!"

"I don't want you going out again."

"And I don't want you making decisions when you're tired," Naethan said, evoking a moment of paternal authority before he raised the decanter. "This is really quite good. Have some and calm down."

"I am calm."

Naethan examined his son, ill at ease with his evenly-set shoulders and measured tone.

A pound on polished floorboards attracted attention and both men turned to find Hancock Countingpat, the Airlight Headmaster, dressed in one of his more formal sword red longrobes, the gold fox collar accenting his falconed Chain of Fealty. Hancock was perfectly put together considering the time it took to move from bed to regalia, and Traevis sensed the entirety of the household behind him, queued and ready for Hancock to sound the charge.

Grasping his Staff of Office, a black stick bearing the Airlight Falcon atop its head, Hancock bowed. "My Sword."

Naethan Airlight, First Sword of the Rhue, The Guiding Star's Right and Keeper of the Eastern Provinces, tossed the nipper his son had filled and shot his Headmaster a sharp glance, noting that Hancock did not move save to squelch a nascent yawn.

"Hancock, stand up and look at us, man."

Hancock obeyed, a tiny shock registering in the hairline wrinkles about his eyes and mouth. "Master Naethan, you're soaked to the bone."

"Hancock, I am relieved to know your powers of observation have remained constant since evening sup." Naethan's black/steel gaze cut through the Grand Hall's emptiness. "We are not only soaking, we are freezing. Pick up your jaw and fetch us dry clothes. Build a fire, and for the Great Mother's sake let's have more of this Devroy brandy."

The silver-blond Hancock jumped, pounding his Staff of Office to open the floodgates. Servants in sword red, light mustard and cream poured in from the Hall's two entrance arches where bloodwood timbers in the caps formed the bases for two gold-vein celestine Airlight Falcons, their wings outstretched clutching swords in their talons.

Though the need to be certain of Ghislaine's - and the

Rhue's - safety begged him to have already ridden out, Traevis could not help but watch the bustle; especially the apprentice Lighters lifting lamp glass and touching *slowpunks* to oiled wicks under the careful direction of elder Lighters, for of all the Manor's activities Traevis found this one the most hilarious - as though one required instruction on how to light a lamp. Logmen drug in a wrought iron wood trolley and stoked the man-tall firebox while Draughters brought the requested brandy.

Maids hovered, their presence not required given that two men were in attendance, to fluff cushions and straighten rug corners. One was so industrious that she backed into the bluewood harp placed against the Hall's western-most wall, an instrument that had once belonged to the lady of this house, Arlauetta Lilaura of the Westaullars; and as soon as the maid realized her carelessness, she curtseyed to the harp as she would to her lost mistress before continuing about her business.

"Sir."

Traevis looked past some valets to find his point men, Adair and Lothan, striding toward him. "Boys," he beckoned.

Traevis had designed his Reds' kit, a sword red tunic piped with ash and closed with pewter buttons over dark gray trousers tucked into black boots, gray shirts with cuffed sleeves, gray gloves and of course their Tyree rapiers and Alleman long blades

forged to match his own.

Lothan was newer, but Adair was one Traevis' Core Nine and bore the epaulette patch of a heart pierced with three golden swords. The two came before him and saluted by touching their right hands to their left shoulders - Lothan looking at Traevis' left side and right boot. "You're armed, sir."

"Yes. Wake the boys. There was trouble outside."

"It's nothing we can't discuss," Naethan asserted.

Traevis waved off Lothan, who saluted and left while Hancock barked anyone wearing a skirt from the Hall in preparation for his masters to undress. Traevis caught sight of one young maid trying to bat her fawn blues in his direction, but lavender was the only color he could ever cherish.

Traevis unbuckled his ashen sword belt and handed the Tyree to Adair before pulling out the Alleman's sheath and passing it over. "He's found a way to manifest."

"I told you we will talk about this, Traevis."

Adair registered disbelief as Traevis began to don a fresh set of gray, wishing life were simpler for with the comforts of home about him and one of his best boys at his side any other man might find peace in the early morning hours; and he did have a life, damn it. He was the last surviving Swordson, a First Man in the Rhue, a key powerbroker on both sides of the waters and he

would gladly leave behind thoughts of living blades and blood curses in favor of mattress down, warm sheets and a later day's trip to The Hedm.

"I need to know what's happened under the Dome," Traevis said to Adair. "Tell Skott and Malin to ride immediately and have Kassur report on Ghislaine's condition and her father's."

"Yes, sir."

"Come now, son, we have other matters to discuss before you jump into the saddle."

Traevis placed a hand on Adair's shoulder so a valet could tug off his waterlogged boots and socks. "I also need to know what's happened with the network. I'll touch them through the Hedm's *portal* as soon as you and I and the rest of the boys can reach the Dome, but I may need to send dispatches to the remote outposts. After you send Skott and Malin, fetch my desk."

"Yes, sir."

Traevis could hear his father suppress a grumble as Adair saluted and left, but his course was set. The Rhue needed him. Ghislaine needed him and no amount of fatigue would stop him from tending to the Sword work his father could no longer execute.

Traevis drew more of the land's power into his body, the great starburst above seeming to channel it down through his crown, but lightning chased behind the stained glass eyes of

Caerl Daerren and Traevis looked up again at the window of the famous twins, an offensive sparking in the back of his brain.

These two had attacked Kanalian with Caerl acting as a *true mage*, for his power was nearly that of a Mont-Lestarre, and Ricaerd acting as the Sword. If Traevis could involve his cousin Lataurance, a Western *true mage*, they might work in tandem to surprise Kanalian as soon as that monster manifested again.

"So are you thinking of Ghislaine?"

"What?"

Traevis felt exposed in that he hadn't noticed his father come to his side, and he was sufficiently put off by the question that he watched the man settle into a large armchair, pouring more bandy into his nipper before placing antler decanter on the bloodwood table separating the chair from its mate. The hearth blaze caught the nape of Naethan's velvets, and Traevis thought it odd that the firelight seemed to linger on his robe, but he decided to indulge his father's pension for conversation - at least until Lothan reported that his boys were ready to ride.

"Ghislaine, son. Why else would you ride all the way from Camrodsrow in a single effort if not to tell me that my sisters have secured enough votes in the Comraderie to support your heart-fasting Jolain's girl."

"How did you know about that?"

"Your Aunta Jaenether and Aunta Baethery are my anchors in the Central States as well. It's a place where I'm told the people call you their True Sword."

"That's not something I cultivate."

"And yet it's not the only whisper I hear. Some call you the Great Mother's own Consort. They say Jolain not longer holds Her favor, but She smiles upon you. Now the Guiding Star is waning and his son should be afforded the titles you enjoy, and so I ask you as we speak of you and Ghislaine and the Rhue's future, what about Roland?"

"His name is Rolain. He should stay with tradition."

"You know he hasn't. So? What about him? He's Jolain's son and if you intend to have his daughter, you'll have her brothe in the bargain."

"Father, if you want to discuss Rowland, meet me later in the Hedm."

"Come now, son, you know what it's like once we're under the Dome. There's always someone who wants our attention and we can never find a moment."

"I'm not going to talk about that *billowed* idiot. I've told you before, there's nothing I can do for him."

"You could help save him from himself."

"What would you have me do? Keep him captive until the

withdrawals wear down? If I took charge of him, the Rhue would believe I've established another protectorate, and this time they'll believe I mean to keep it."

Naethan tossed back another nipper, his eyes darting minutely before they closed in thought. "So only the Guiding Star's girl is to be yours. Her brothe, you'll set aside."

"Until I can figure how best to deal with him."

"For which I'm certain you have a plan. You always plan, but as far as Ghislaine, have her then. I bless you both."

The fire crackled noticeably, nearly attracting Traevis' attention. "You're... supporting me?"

"Yes, Traevis, and you're right to remind me of how you last governed the Rhue. When Jolain and I faded, you kept the Guiding Star's and the First Sword's offices in harmony, and by that act you did more than you could possibly know. When you released those positions back to us, let's just say the Rhuelands had never felt more secure in a time of trial. The people trusted you, or rather you gave them reason to trust you. From Rhuelord on down, they all looked to you, and you are right that they will do so again if you act against Rowland.

"But I do regret something from that time. I should have raised you up then as my best blood, I should have insisted you heart-fast Ghislaine that year, join the Airlights with the Mont-

Lestarras as we all hoped Ricaerd would have done, but I've always thought your desire for her was a disgrace to your elder brothe's memory. Not just a disgrace, a betrayal but our Ricaerd and your Ghislaine would not have been happy together. You love the woman and she loves you. I've been thinking a good deal since you've been in the Central States, and I see that I have never let Ricaerd go. We never found his body, just as we never found Arlauetta's."

Traevis' assumed a well-practiced ambiguity in reference to his mother's passing on the night his father had drawn Taemal's sword, for there was no way the man could know the truth of that tragedy and live with himself.

"For years I hoped my *first* would come home," Naethan continued. "I thought I would see him again, but it is you who has been *forever on wing*, and your service is beyond value. A father's folly can be a dangerous thing, Traevis Naegil, and there is nothing more wasteful I can do now than to ignore my *second*." Naethan paused then added, "Swordson."

Traevis was struck dumb. He had struggled for years to be free of Ricaerd's ghost. Now his father was handing him acclaim and a wife in the same dish, and though Traevis was accustomed to his reference as a *second* when he was truly a *third* - for talk of his middle brothe, Caerl, was anathema - he sensed there was an

agenda tucked inside his father's grin; which Traevis realized was to settle him down so that he might lose his fighting edge and not ride out. Great Mother smile upon him for trying to do what he thought was prudent.

Wind blasted down the hearth's flue, flattening licks even as Naethan offered a slightly inebriated, "So when is the date?"

Traevis looked from his father to the hearth, and then back. "I need to speak with Ghislaine."

"Well hurry to it boy. Let's have those grandchildren." Naethan swatted his thigh then forced himself up to cross toward the sideboard, decanter in hand.

A log snapped in half, crashing with two others to the hearth's hammer-iron base. The geas leaped within Traevis in response, and he turned to the blaze where he saw the unbelievable - again Kanalian's hand! The Shadow had breached Airlight Manor was once more reaching for Naethan Airlight!

"Father!" Traevis shouted, charging.

Adair had returned with Traevis' case desk, but planted it on the falcon carpets and sprang forward as he saw his commander sprinting even as Lothan and the remaining Airlight Reds advanced from the opposing entrance arch, fanning out quickly into the Great Hall so that Traevis most called upon names could assist

him in forward formation.

Naethan startled at his son's pounce and the advance of his son's nearly thirty men, but Traevis snatched the decanter from his hand and threw it to the back of the hearth while hurling his father into his Reds' grip. The antler laminate shattered against the firebox, scattering brandy to feed the flames with an alcoholic *whoosh*.

"Get him out of here!" Traevis ordered as he dove for the sand bucket and smothered the fire. Kanalian's hand fluctuated - but did not fade and Traevis watched incredulously as it regained clarity. "Where's my sword?!" he cried.

Adair appeared to offer his Tyree, but as Traevis took hold of its swept hilt he looked it and then sharply at his Core Nine man. "Not this one!"

"No, son!" Naethan demanded as he forced off the hands of the Reds who would remove him. "Don't you dare to think of the other!"

Traevis scoffed and turned to pace to the *nichevault* when his body seized, jet eyes rolling back as he collapsed.

"Sir!" Lothan shouted.

Traevis ignored his man's cry and leaped as he had never done; up past the six stained glass windows where the renown Airlights reached out to guide him, their hands glowing with a

white/red aura about their glazed flesh. Traevis vaulted within their upward thrust to surge toward the steel, gilded brass and red-patina bronze starburst crowning the Grand Hall.

Traevis emerged above Airlight Manor's great brazier where he hovered, his Tyree brilliant silver in his hand, the brazier a wild clash of reds and golds, purples and steels that shot white sparks into the night.

"*Dispel him, my son,*" called a choir of voices, mostly male though Traevis detected strong female overtones.

"*Dispel who...?*" Traevis' mental voice trailed as he looked up; and against the last traces of cloud he saw what he never could have imagined seeing - Kanalian himself, so fair of face, graceful and golden with smoked-aqua eyes that pierced the soul.

Traevis' breath drew up but the geas took command of his senses to the extent that he became his blood's curse personified as he leveled the Tyree and launched himself in arrow flight, the brazier flames taken up in his wake.

Kanalian withdrew to the perimeter of Airlight Manor where Traevis felt his power diminish the further he rose from the brazier. Kanalian was drawing him off even as Traevis felt him

call down enough remnant lightning to cast out another mortal shock.

"The ocean, Trae," a woman called.

Ghislaine! Traevis sensed her reaching out in her father's absence - and his mind nearly fractured as Kanalian turned to look in the Hedm's direction. Holding wide his arms to create a vacuum, Traevis called the Eastern Ocean to raise a cyclone which he found he could master with the unseen hands of elder Airlights aiding him; and with a hurl to strain every ounce of soul, Traevis launched the cyclone at his blood's bane so that it caught Kanalian within its pull and forced him through its tail to send him into the vast unknown, hopefully back to his Kalison Quey tomb though in all honesty Traevis had no idea where Kanalian had gone.

He only knew the *geas* ebbed, allowing him to hover freely. He threw power toward the sky to dissipate the clouds so that he might see more clearly by the two moons, the larger - Lady's Light - at its apex and the smaller - Lady's Tear - preparing to set. Neither illuminated Ghislaine. *Where was she?!*

"Traevis," called a distant voice. It sounded rather like his father's, although when Traevis turned to find him, Naethan was not at hand. He looked side to side, but saw no one and only when he looked below did he find himself hovering over the

Manor's brazier!

Traevis attempted to leap to the turret, but a force took hold of him, coiling tightly to heft him and Traevis lost himself in the panic of old Taemal's captivity as the force locked his Tyree his side and pressed his ankles together boot to boot.

Every muscle straining, Traevis watched a silver cord shoot from his solar plexus to cast a line down through the brazier's flames which tightened to jolt his sternum and pull him down.

Falling fast, Traevis was certain he was about to slam against the stone, but he felt no impact as he passed cleanly through to the bloodwood timbers topping the Grand Hall and shot for the Valley Rose carpets four stories below where his father and Adair knelt beside a body, a significant number of Reds standing close. The man lying amid that company bore jet hair just as he did, wore gray clothes just as he did. Great Mother, it was his own body they tended. He was dead!

Traevis slammed into his flesh so hard he lurched.

Adair strengthened his hold as Naethan shouted, "Traevis!"

Traevis lay still. There was little else he could do given that his flesh felt cast of lead. Ice blasted his innards, an

after-feeling of the realm into which he'd ventured for Traevis realized Airlight Manor had just pulled him *outside*.

"*Don't ever do that!*" he demanded mentally. Indeed, he had ventured *out* under his brothe Caerl's supervision and later with Ghislaine to guard her spirit work, he could not do so by himself - and moreover he hated *coming back*.

Traevis managed to collect what he could of the Rhue's essence in his palms, and though he could not lift rock-heavy arms to place hands over his mid-section, he could send the land's power up to his shoulders and down to his chest to lighten his body and thaw his frigid soul.

Hands pressed against his torso and Traevis realized a good portion of his boys were offering their own psyches to prime his reserves via a *soul tap*. He siphoned their anxiety, but nothing more least he drain them to the point where they'd be no use, thankful that the Great Mother had seen fit to give him such a company and slowly he felt his stone body begin to move as his eyelids somehow lifted.

"Easy, son," his father cautioned.

"Laine..." Traevis trailed. Why hadn't he been able to see her? Traevis looked up at the Reds touching him and pawed their hands away. "Ghislaine."

"She's in The Hedm, son," Naethan answered. "All is well

with her."

"No, it isn't," Traevis said as he sat upright, steadying himself with a hand on Adair's arm while noticing his desk behind Lothan. "Bring me my case."

Lothan obeyed, and Traevis took hold of the desk to flick back the clasps, open an ink bottle and dip in a quill nib while readying a piece of paper watermarked with his T-N-A monogram set before the Airlight falcon.

"Boys, *he's* on the move." Traevis scribbled a note to Lataurance, glanced up to find Mathis, one of his Core Nine who happened to be a Rhuethalan native, and passed him the dispatch.

"For my cousin. Take Jale and Bartlow and three others. I don't think the Guiding Star has the strength to send you through the Hedm's *portal*, so head west as fast as you can. I'll try to let Lataurance know you're coming."

"Yes sir," the Mathis said with a salute before selecting his team and leaving.

"Traevis," Naethan said. "What do you mean Jolain does not have the strength?"

"Ghislaine reached out in his place," Traevis muttered as he began to pen a note to Rhuelady Liva, mistress of his network.

"Son, what are you talking about? You lost consciousness."

"No, I didn't," Traevis said as he locked sight on two of

his faster riders. "Teyzer and Laul, fly to the Hedm and amend Skott and Malin's orders. Tell Kassur to secure Ghislaine and Jolain and tell them I'll be right behind with father."

"Yes, sir," the two said as they saluted and left.

"You did lose consciousness, son."

"No, I didn't," Traevis repeated as he stood with the case as he finished the letter, which he passed to Adair. "Have Liva gather the network at our hub north of Lady's Bridge. They must call to me immediately so I know their status. I need to know everything that's happened in the Central States now, so ride hard. Take Lothan and 'your four' with you."

"Yes, sir," Adair said as he snapped his company into formation and paced quickly from the Grand Hall.

"Worner," Traevis c to his last Core Nine man given that Skott was already en route to the Hedm. "Prep a mount for my father and make ready to accompany us. There's shouldn't be any *geists*, but you will ride point and I'll ride van just the same."

"Son, I don't want you riding anywhere. Great Mother, boy, you demanded the sword. You were about to go and find it. I saw the look in your face."

"Father, try to understand. Kanalian just reached through the hearth. He nearly touched you again. I was *outside* fighting him when Ghislaine called to me. I've sent him away, but we must

leave for the Hedm. It's the only safe place I can think of, and it Ghislaine needs me, I'm going now."

Naethan stood dumbstruck as Traevis closed the desk and handed it to the closest Red as he paced to one of the Hall's arches, but exhaustion hit him full force and he collapsed to his hands and knees, breathing labored.

"Sir," Worner called, coming round him with a few men to again offer strength.

Traevis fended his boys away as he drew in as much of the Rhue's might as he could readily siphon to force himself back up to his feet where he centered himself and steadied his racing heart.

A hand grabbed his gray-clad arm, and Traevis turned a piercing jet stare on his father's resilient black/steel eyes.

"Traevis Naegil Airlight, you will stop this now!"

The tone was sufficient to touch a boyhood nerve, and Traevis froze, unable to remember that he no longer accepted this type of rebuke.

Naethan stepped in close while moving his hand to his boy's shoulder. "If we must go, so be it for if what you say is true I must see to Jolain - but I will have Hancock bring us the coach and you will sleep as we ride."

"There's no time for that."

"We will make time," Naethan asserted by punctuating each word. He stared until Traevis nodded, at which point he looked at his son's men. "Go, Worner, and get the coach."

"Sir?" Worner asked.

Traevis managed a nod, at which Worner saluted with a touch of his right hand to his left shoulder, the remaining Reds following suit. Worner offered a half-bow to the First Sword and ordered the Reds to fall in as they left the Grand Hall.

Naethan took the Tyree from his son's hand and guided him to a sword red divan to set him down. Traevis' spine lost rigidity, and Naethan lay his son on the plush upholstery before placing a sword red brocade pillow beneath his head. Traevis was already drifting, and Naethan nodded as he watched his boy's jet eyes close.

"You see? You can help save a man from himself."