

SOURCETHIEF

Twinborn Chronicles: Awakening



J. S. MORIN

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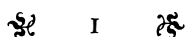
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RENDER UNTO SOMMICK

Kyrus Hinterdale turned the stone over in his hands, inspecting the facets. Among the more interesting observations he had made since he had begun unraveling the makings of various magical constructs around the imperial capitol was that the speaking stones were not precious stones at all, as he had once thought. The glazier had just returned the new stone Kyrus was working on. A new layer of glass had been added, providing Kyrus a fresh palette upon which to carve the next set of runes.

Kyrus's workshop was his former office in the Imperial Army Headquarters, overlooking Kalak Square in Kadrin. The constant demands of the palace and the sorcerers and courtiers that swarmed about it had grown to be too much for him. At least when he ordered one of his officers away, they stayed away.

At that moment, as if to contradict his thought, there was a knocking at his door.

Kyrus rarely bothered to ward the door shut. When he left it unprotected, his men took leave to enter. One of his junior officers, a lieutenant named Shayl, slipped quietly into the room. The thin young man made several adjustments to the

tactical map on Kyrus's desk per a set of notes he carried. As he finished, he looked Kyrus's way.

"That about does it, sir," Shayl said. "Last of the Megrenn cities is garrisoned with our forces."

"Was that Relleth?" Kyrus asked.

"Yes sir, just received word. They surrendered to General Crestvale on condition that the womenfolk be spared."

"Ahh, I gather that our esteemed warlock was not present?" Kyrus asked. Warlock Rashan Solaran had spent half a season inflicting chaos and ruin on the Megrenn people. Nearly half the Kadrin Empire's victories had been won single-handedly by the ancient demon. It was not his habit to take prisoners or to bargain in good faith over surrender terms.

"Right you are, Sir Brannis," Shayl said, using the name Kyrus was known by in Veydrus. The real Brannis Solaran was living in Kyrus's own homeworld of Tellurak after an egregious miscalculation in magical transportation displaced Kyrus and his Veydran twin simultaneously. "The regular army has gotten a lot of surrenders the last tenday since word spread that they accept 'em and the warlock don't."

"Sir Brannis," a new voice called out from the doorway. Kyrus looked past to see a messenger in palace livery. *What now? I set up here to avoid this nonsense.*

"Yes, come in," Kyrus replied, a polite reflex gaining the better of him despite a temptation to shoo the boy away. *Boy?* Kyrus thought with an internal chuckle. *He is probably about my own age, or close enough. I will still only be twenty-three come the first of...*

Kyrus paused a moment. Kadrin's calendar was all based on seasons, ninety days apiece, and was two seasons set apart from Tellurak and their lunar calendar. *Well, I suppose I have the same age-day as Brannis, First of Summer.*

"Sir Brannis, Emperor Sommick the First requests your presence with all practical haste. He is waiting in the main

throne room of the palace." An uncomfortable silence lingered as Kyrus waited for him to continue.

"Is that it? Why does he need to see me so urgently?" Kyrus demanded. He had been looking forward to his work on the new speaking stone, and the whims of Emperor Sommick did not interest him.

"The emperor offered no explanation. He merely instructed me to have you to the palace at once."

Kyrus could tell the messenger was enjoying the little thrill of power he was getting from ordering about the man who oversaw most of Kadrin in the emperor's name.

"As fast as I can get there, is that the idea?"

"Indeed it is, sir," the messenger confirmed.

Kyrus pursed his lips. He glanced down at the hemispherical crystal in his hands, set it down on his work bench, and walked out toward the balcony.

"Would not want to disobey such an unambiguous order," Kyrus called back. As he passed through the doorway, he began to lift into the air, borne aloft by a bit of levitation magic. He used no word or gesture, and though he still often muttered the words in the solitude of his own head, he thought he was getting better at doing entirely without. For his next spell, a mental recitation was in order.

Doxlo intuvae menep gabalixviu junumar tequalix ferendak uzganmanni dekdardon vesvata eho. Kyrus knew that the two aether-blind young men in his office were oblivious to the amount of aether he had to draw in to enact the transference spell. They had no idea the risks, the potential for disaster, or the complexities of navigation. Kyrus suspected that their jaws gaped as he was surrounded in mid-air by an opaque sphere. When it vanished, he was gone.



Several sorcerers were at court when Kyrus's magic deposited

him a few feet up in the air in the middle of Emperor Sommick's throne room. In crossing the city of Kadris, Kyrus had caused a sizeable disturbance in the aether. Some who were not normally sensitive to the aether perceived it as well, much the way that it is said a deaf man can hear a dragon's roar in the soles of his feet.

"Ah, Sir Brannis!" Emperor Sommick called out, a delighted smile on his lips. If he was awed by the spectacle, he didn't show it. "My, but you are prompt."

"Your message instructed me to come with all haste. This was as fast as I was able. What do you require of me?" Kyrus asked. He found himself in the middle of open court as he settled gently onto the floor of the throne room. All around the periphery of the room, gaudily dressed courtiers loitered, vying for the emperor's attention. Aside from the few conservatively dressed members of the Imperial Circle, they were largely of the idle nobility, with a few well-connected merchants mixed in for flavor. Kyrus, clad in a Solaran-crested tabard over practical military garb, a common longsword dangling from his sword belt, might well have been a squire or a messenger.

"Well, if you take a look at the board, Sir Dorrin seems to have placed me at a decided disadvantage." Emperor Sommick gestured to the side of the dais where someone had fashioned a large chessboard from aether for the emperor's amusement. It was all solid and opaque, as usable as any real board with knee-high pieces, but Kyrus's aether-vision saw that they were simple constructs. A crowd was gathered about the base of the dais to watch emperor and knight contest a battle of imaginary warriors. "I seem to have taken too long for his liking, and he has suggested that I resign, as my position is untenable."

"Oh..."

"I was hoping that, as a noted devotee of the game, you could arbitrate and tell me whether I ought to be allowed to continue pondering my next move in peace, or whether Sir Dorrin is *not* full of wind and I ought to give up."

"Of course, Your Highness," Kyrus said, proud of himself for neither sighing aloud nor transferring himself right back to his workshop. As Kyrus ascended the dais, one of the halberd-toting guards behind the emperor edged back.

"Sir Dorrin certainly has the upper hand, but no, it is not certain that he would be victorious," Kyrus concluded after a moment's inspection. The board was a garbled mess of pieces, with even exchanges to be had in a number of places, though none were taken. Kyrus saw the influence of the Academy of Arms in the conservative style of play, with only a single pawn for each side having been captured. For all that though, there was nothing resembling a competent defense.

"You see, Sir Dorrin? You have yet to best me. I will fight you to the bitter end!" Emperor Sommick stated with flourishing hands. "Now, if you all will clear the audience chamber, I have matters I wish to discuss with Sir Brannis." With that, the two guards thumped the hafts of their halberds against the stone dais and began herding the courtiers from the throne room. It made for a colorful pageant; the human peacocks strutted even as they were being evicted from the emperor's presence.

"I hope this means you have something more substantial to discuss now that the room is cleared," Kyrus said, dropping the formal, polite tone he took with the emperor when others were around.

"Yes, and for more than to congratulate you on the conquest of Megrenn. I heard the news of Relleth's fall after I had already dispatched the messenger. The conquest was all a result of Warlock Rashan's efforts, even if that particular victory was not personally his doing. It does pose the interesting question of the possible elevation of noble families by the granting of holdings in the former Megrenn lands, but that is something to mull over for now and discuss later." The emperor's tone changed from frivolous to scheming. He was neither the fool the Inner Circle had taken him for, nor the great conqueror the

commoners saw him as. Unleashing Rashan immediately after his coronation, he had caused such misconceptions to spread like a plague among peasants.

"What then?" Kyrus asked.

"I had an epiphany. I find myself buffeted along by sorcerers on all sides. Rashan and Caladris would have me believe that there is a rival faction among the Inner Circle that opposes me; they dictate my actions in the name of solidifying my standing and keeping that faction in check. My daily responsibilities have been handed to you, and you act in my name whether I agree with your decisions or not. General Chadreisson commands my army—one thing I am thankful for, since sixteen white soldiers vex me enough as it stands. Sorcerer Dolvaen oversees the affairs of the Imperial Circle. And yet, when Warlock Rashan is not out burning cities and obliterating armies, he takes up each of those mantles and hangs them about his own shoulders. Does that not sum up my current predicament?"

"I suppose it does. I am glad you understand the circumstance."

"And yet, my one and only duty is to find an empress and father an heir. Any nobleman with an eligible girl among their brood parades them in front of me, from spinster crones to girls three winters shy of their moonflow. I will admit that I am in no hurry to choose one, as the attentions of the flowering beauties between those two extremes has been quite diverting, but to what end?" Emperor Sommick asked.

"Re-establishing a healthy imperial line," Kyrus answered. "That alone is worth all the combined efforts of the rest of us. Had Rashan not been the one to expose the puppet emperor, there would have been a civil war. Two factions or more would have fought for control. Continuous, stable succession is what the empire needs now."

"All well and good for when I die. What of now? What of ten summers from now, or thirty? Am I to watch my heirs

groomed into docile lackeys of the Inner Circle? The other nobles seek to curry favor, to ally themselves with me, because this is where they see their paths to power and influence," Emperor Sommick reasoned.

"Close ties to the imperial royal family have always been a benefit to any house. You have more to consider in your decision than merely the charms of a potential empress," Kryus said. He hoped he was making his impression on the emperor, for the consequences of his decision might play out over generations.

"Aha! And that was the very seed of my epiphany. You see, I wondered that it might perhaps work both ways. Perhaps I can glean some benefit by marriage that might last past my own generation."

"You are thinking to choose a bride based on what her house can bring the imperial family?"

"Yes. I intend to find my empress from the sorcerous bloodlines," Emperor Sommick said, his face spreading in a dragon's grin. Kryus's eyes widened.

"No."

"Why not? I will have aether-strong heirs, and in a few generations my line will not be subject to the whim of the Circle," Sommick reasoned.

"It may sound nice for a hundred summers from now, but in the meantime you have a great many people with those powers you propose to take on, and they will not give up their monopoly on magic lightly. Beyond *that* had you decided who you would seek as your empress?" Kryus asked the last as a growing knot in his stomach warned him of one name that Sommick was best to keep off his lips.

"Well, you see, you and I find ourselves in similar predicaments. The Imperial Circle wants you married off to sprout a new generation of little Brannises with freakish Sources. They want me breeding out a litter of heirs so that, if the dagger-in-

the-back faction gets their way, at least they will have the next emperor sorted out ahead of time."

"I can see the similarity in circumstance. Go on..." Kyrus allowed.

"But you see, there are only a certain number of available sorceresses. The blood scholars do an efficient job of pairing them off young. The best of them are promised by thirteen or fourteen summers, and much as I was told I could choose whomever I liked, I think I would prefer not to anger the Circle more than this plan will already," Sommick explained. He hesitated a moment when he noticed Kyrus's unblinking stare boring into him. "Of course, there is one girl, Zoula Gardarus, who the blood scholars hinted is being kept aside for your uncle Caladris as his next wife. She is only fifteen springtimes old, but seeming more a girl than a woman, if you catch my meaning."

"My Aunt Faeranna is still alive," Kyrus observed in a grim tone.

"Well, it is not *my* conjecture about your uncle's contingencies; blame the blood scholars or your uncle. In any event, aside from the Gardarus girl or deciding to knock the scion of some other bloodline into the mud to take his betrothed, that would leave...widows," Emperor Sommick said.

Kyrus barely thought. It sort of just happened. One moment the emperor was outlining an ambitious but perhaps ill-conceived plot to marry into the sorcerous bloodlines from the comfort of his throne, the next moment, the ruffled collar of his doublet was bunched up in Kyrus's fist, his toes the only thing keeping him from being held up entirely by his royal accoutrements.

"Ah, you...you see," the emperor stammered, "this is why I wanted to speak with you first. I...I would not want there to be...to be a misunderstanding between us. If...if you would just see fit to...to you know...put me down, I can explain." Kyrus looked into the emperor's eyes for a moment, seeing fear in the dilated pupils, the sweat forming at his brow; he could feel the

emperor trembling and dared not look down for fear of finding that the emperor had wet himself.

"Explain," Kyrus ordered, letting out a deep breath to regain control of his temper. He loosened his grasp and floated the emperor back to his throne as gently as he was able. "I apologize. You seem to have found a sensitive subject for me." Kyrus turned aside to allow both of them to compose themselves with a bit of dignity.

"Brannis, I am new to much of this whole business, but if I have learned one thing in my life it is to judge men—and women—by more than just their words. I see a lot more pass between people than they intend to reveal. Your own courtship of Sorceress Celia, for example, seems to be rather...dutiful. Her affections seem genuine, if I am any judge, but you, my friend, seem to be playing at it for the audience."

Kyrus turned to look at Emperor Sommick, wondering just how much he might have underestimated the man.

"You seem to have confirmed my suspicions," the emperor continued, "which makes me glad of having noticed. My thought would have been to take the warlock's widowed oath-daughter as my empress, but now I see that you still think to pursue Sorceress Juliana yourself."

"I would advise against it," Kyrus cautioned.

"Indeed. I need allies, and you are much more valuable as such than any possible alliance by marriage. I have had the blood scholars go through their archives and find the best matches with *me* in mind, and she was foremost among eligible sorceresses. However, I did not restrict them to those that were available in the traditional sense."

"You are not considering Celia Mistfield as your alternative, then? I had assumed that was the choice you implied when you mentioned 'widows' and not merely 'a widow.'"

"No, too lowborn. The Mistfields are barely a scrawled note in the margins of the blood scholars' records. That was fine for *you*, who truth be told, I think they feel could use his own blood

thinned a bit in future generations. But I seek to start a blood-line from noble stock on one side."

"Who then? I have been shown the same records and can think of none who could be made to fit your criteria."

"Of course not," Sommick said with a nervous chuckle. "I think I would like to marry Aloisha Solaran."

"My *sister*?" Kyrus shouted in reply. He was amazed how quickly his outrage came, despite her being of Brannis's blood and not his own. "She is married already."

"Yes, and not happily. Arranged marriages often are not, but hers is a rather vexing case for the blood scholars. Eleven winters and no child, nor the pretense of real effort. She maintains her birth name. They do not share a home together —"

"Juran lives in Naran Port and is the senior Circle member there," Kyrus sought to excuse his oathbrother. Juran Destrier was a good sort, by Kyrus's measure—or rather, had been by Brannis's.

"Yes, and Aloisha could have easily joined him there if she chose. As I told you, Sir Brannis, I consider myself a keen observer of people; sorcerers are not so different in that regard. Your sister may one day relent and bear him a child or two, but it would not be eagerly. She is ambitious, covetous of her new position in the Inner Circle. I think she might like the chance to become empress."

"What about Juran? I do not see him as the sort to stand idle for such an affront. Fenris Destrier is Inner Circle as well, and I cannot envision him taking his grandson's cuckolding in stride, which is what this would amount to."

"Oh come now, this is why I need your aid. You have played it masterfully thus far, but your plan to remove Iridan from your path has not fooled me. I need that same ingenuity for my own plan. Find a way to clear the path between me and your sister."

"I had nothing to do with that," Kyrus objected. He wished he believed it, but as much as he placed the blame for his

friend's death on the hands of Warlock Rashan, he could not acquit himself so easily of failing to send aid.

"Of course." Emperor Sommick's smile was sly and condescending. Kyrus realized no argument would convince the emperor that his guess was mistaken.

"Why her? If you do not limit yourself to unwed sorceresses, why not pick an easier target?"

"Think a while on that one, Sir Brannis. The answer should be easy enough for you to figure out."

"Shall I take that as a dismissal?" Kyrus asked.

"You may take it as you choose. Everyone else around here seems to treat my words that way." Emperor Sommick sighed, giving the ceiling a melodramatic look. Kyrus decided to ignore the emperor's theatrics and nodded his acknowledgement. He took his leave, watching as the eager throngs in the corridors filed back into the audience chamber to resume whatever waste they put their days to. Kyrus was glad of the wards that protected the throne room from eavesdropping. Despite a reasonable understanding of their workings, he always wondered who might be capable of peering through them.



The *Starlit Marauder* hung in the sky over the lightly forested region east of Munne. The ship drifted along, not obeying the current of the springtime breezes. At the helm, Juliana Archon guided their way, using the runes on the ship's wheel to steer and propel them. The whole arrangement was a masterwork of aethersmithing. Until the coming of Kyrus Hinterdale, there had been no one with a Source strong enough to activate so large and intricate a device since the early days of the empire.

Men lined both railings, looking below for signs of Megrenn forces that had scattered after the recapturing of Munne. There had been reports of raiders in the area and the *Darkstorm* had been lost after being dispatched to investigate, with no word of

any survivors. Thus it was with some trepidation that the *Starlit Marauder* and her crew now combed over the same bit of woodlands.

"No sign of anyone, captain." The call came from the crew on the left railing. It was echoed by the crew on the right railing. Juliana had rules about airships; they were not boats. There were no ports and starboards on the *Starlit Marauder*, by her decree. The ship had a left and a right, a nose—which could also be properly called the front—and an arse end, or back. The bottom of the ship was the belly, inside and out. The top was, regrettably, still called a deck, since all other terms seemed to fit it poorly.

"Keep looking. The *Darkstorm* might have crashed of its own accord, but my guess is someone had a hand in helping it. They can't have disappeared. They're down in those woods somewhere," Juliana shouted. The ship's runes parroted her voice down to the lower decks.

It would have been an easier search to conduct in the barren seasons. The stretch below them was deciduous forest, sparse but in full foliage. They were hoping to catch enemy soldiers as they moved about. Were they to remain undercover, there was little they would be able to see from the air. Juliana considered using her aether-vision to aid the search, but with so many Sources in the wilderness, her aether-sight was not keen enough to make out humans unless they drew dangerously close to the treetops.

"Captain, I think I've got them!" one spotter yelled from the right-arse end of the railing.

"Where?" Juliana shouted back. Her hands were already moving at the controls of the viewing panel, its glass surface magically displaying images of the forest below.

"Just behind us, a couple of dung-eaters. Prob'ly more of 'em somewhere down there, too."

Juliana gritted her teeth, reminding herself that it was not the time to be tossing her own men overboard. She hated that

epithet for the Safschan people. It was jingoistic nonsense that the army encouraged. It was hard to demonize the Megrenn as a people, since many of them had as much Kadrin blood in them as the soldiers of the empire. The Safschan though, with their dark skin making them stand apart, were far easier targets.

"Prepare the grapples!" Juliana ordered. She began lowering the *Starlit Marauder* in among the trees where she could find room. It was not large by sea-ship standards, but it was still a snug fit for a forest. She found something close enough to a clearing for her purposes and brought them to within twice the height of a man off the ground.

With the touch of another rune, the sides of the ship opened down into ramps. Grappling hooks flew from the sides of the ship, snagging tree branches to all sides of the *Starlit Marauder* and anchoring her in mid-air. Ropes dropped down to ground level as well, allowing the soldiers on deck to disembark without having to jump down and risk an ankle injury or worse.

Her men poured into the forest in pursuit of the Safschan troops they had spotted. Her first instinct told her to go with them, but she had her plan already set and kept to it. She remained on board the *Starlit Marauder*, rendering the grapples a needless precaution; so long as she was at the helm, the ship would not drift off.

She bided her time, panning the scene in the view-glass for signs of returning soldiers. After a time, Juliana grew bored of her vigil and went down to the belly for something to eat while she waited.

"Surrender!" a voice shouted from outside the ship. It was Kadrin being spoken but with a hint of a Safschan accent to it. Juliana rushed up to the main deck to see who was awaiting her. The voice sounded familiar. It seemed that twenty of her men had not been enough to hinder him.

"Surrender yourself, Tiiba, or I'll just cut the lines and fly off without you!" she shouted down once she saw who it was. For over a week, Rakashi had been hinting to Juliana's twin, Soria

Coinblade, that his twin was hiding in the Kadrin countryside, too proud to ask for rescue. The dark-skinned Safschan blade-priest with mismatched eyes—one brown, one milky white—stood below the railing of the *Starlit Marauder* with three Safschan soldiers. "Will you vouch for those three?"

"I will. Please, allow us to board."

Juliana lowered one of the ramps to the ship and threw down a rope. Tiiba came up first, his lean, hard body well suited to climbing. He, embraced Juliana briefly before any of his men arrived in the hold to see them.

"We'll talk in private," Juliana assured him in a whisper.

Tiiba informed her of her crew's demise. With Tiiba's magic and skill with the blade, Juliana knew her men stood no chance. Had it been just any rabble among the Safschan army hiding out in those woods, she would have liked her men's odds against them, whether she joined them or not. If it was Tiiba...well she could not very well lend aid to a blade-priest over her men's objections. There would have been a mutiny, and she likely would have had to kill them herself. The thought of *not* helping Tiiba was not even considered among her options.

Juliana took the ship above the scattered clouds and guided them north as fast as she dared fly it. By nightfall they had gotten out to sea, putting the Aliani beneath them as protection against being spotted by the forces of either the scattered Megrenn Alliance or the Kadrin Empire. She left the ship as stationary as the winds allowed—its magic resisting much of such motion on its own—and went below to see about her guests.

The Safschan soldiers had taken over one of the crew quarters, preferring to bunk together in the unfamiliar surroundings. They seemed wary of her but were polite enough when she inquired about their comfort. She found Tiiba waiting when she returned to her own cabin.

"Thank you," Tiiba stated simply. From the proud, self-sufficient warrior, it spoke volumes.

"These eyes of mine have never seen you before, yet I'd know you anywhere, Rakashi," Juliana said, preferring to call him by his more familiar Telluraki name. "You're most welcome."

"I am sorry it had to cost you your crew to save me—to save us. Will you be able to return to Kadrin after this?"

"After what? I lost my crew in battle. I survived and escaped with the ship. Merciful One, even without lying I can claim that. Besides, I think you underestimate my alliances in Kadrin. There are a half dozen or so who I could flatly tell what I've done and who wouldn't think worse of me for it," Juliana said. She noticed that Tiiba was looking her over with an amused smirk on his face. "What?" she demanded.

"You. Look at you! It is as if Soria played dress-up instead of becoming a warrior. Soria claims to hate long hair, preferring illusions when her disguises call for it, yet yours falls halfway to your backside. You are thinner too, obviously not as used to real work as Soria, and you've plumped yourself up a bit as well," Tiiba said, cupping his hands below his own chest. Juliana felt her cheeks flush.

"Just a bit," she admitted. "I never had to worry about them getting in the way fighting until rather recently, and I had no armor to worry about fitting." It occurred to her that Rakashi's wanderer's oath might not apply in Veydrus. In Tellurak he was honor-bound not to father any children while away from home, so Soria felt at ease around him. She had always suspected that might be all that held him back from pursuing her romantically, but it *had* held him back and that was enough.

"Well, your Source certainly looks stronger than hers, so maybe the extra armor is not so necessary."

"Really? That much stronger? I had always thought maybe a little..."

Tiiba laughed.

"Listen to you...you know no one in both worlds as qualified

to make such a judgment. It is nothing like the difference between mine and Rakashi's, but the difference is notable.

"If I might delve into another difference between you and Soria, you seem to be more erudite," Tiiba said, gesturing to the book on Juliana's desk, whose title proclaimed it to be *The Peace of Tallax*.

"It was left for me, I think to give to Kyrus. There were two books, this one and a book of amateur prophecies that Rashan Solaran wrote. I gave Kyrus the other one, and he's studied it half to death. This one..."

"I have read it," Tiiba said. "It is a very old story and traveled far beyond the borders of the Kadrin Empire, if indeed it even originated within what would become its borders. I know the story."

"Then you know why I hesitate to give it to him."

"Yes," Tiiba said. "If he is as strong as you claim, then I can see why."



Kyrus had a standing invitation to the emperor's table each night for dinner. Initially he had indulged Emperor Sommick and attended the pretentious, crowded, drawn-out feast that was offered in the main dining hall. Once he discovered that he could get his dinner from the same cooks, delivered to any room in the palace he chose, he rarely bothered with the emperor and his sycophantic courtiers. The palace servants were deferential to the emperor and his guests, but they feared "Brannis" enough that they would not deny his request to be served separately. Once they accepted the duty though, they found that Sir Brannis was far more forgiving, personable, and patient than Emperor Sommick, and he paid the staff a bit extra for the convenience of personal service.

While he would occasionally work through his dinnertime—his plates of rare delicacies surrounded by notes, books and

reports—this night he shared his dinner with Sorceress Celia. The emperor's comment earlier in the day about their relationship made him feel the need to be more diligent about the attention he paid her. Rumors of the two of them being anything other than shy lovers wending their way down the road toward betrothal would work against him.

Ever since the death of his friend Iridan—Rashan Solaran's son and heir apparent as warlock—Kyrus had been playing the long game, working toward the day where he saw a weakness he could use to throw down the demon warlock and end the destruction his mere presence in the empire seemed to cause. His uncle, Caladris Solaran, had warned him that Celia was being used to ensure his restraint when Rashan was around. His uncle and the warlock had gone to some length to trick Kyrus into believing that Celia was twinborn and Kyrus's object of affection from Tellurak. Kyrus's belief in that lie was Rashan's protection. The warlock trusted that Kyrus would keep his careless use of magic in check if his beloved was nearby—or her twin.

Kyrus could not be sure what would happen if the warlock discovered that his ruse had failed. The warlock was brilliant, devious, and manipulative. He was also a madman, a view shared by a growing number of people in the empire as more of them got to know him. Kyrus had learned both by experience and by reading about him in history books that Rashan had long struggled to rein in his bloodlust. He also abided by a personal tenet to never allow an enemy who had shown him violence to live. Kyrus was not sure how he would react to being deceived. There was the chance that the moment Rashan discovered that Kyrus knew of the ruse, he would attempt to kill Kyrus on the spot.

Kyrus looked across the small, intimate table, into the eyes of Celia, who smiled at him. *There are worse ways to protect myself, I suppose.* Despite knowing that she thought she was deceiving him, Kyrus managed to put the thought behind him well

enough to enjoy her company for stretches. She had a sharp wit and a mischievous sense of humor, traits she shared with Juliana—a secret he preferred to keep from the latter. She was a survivor, he reminded himself, a victim of circumstances thrust upon her by his uncle and the warlock. Had they met under other circumstances, he might have fallen in love with her. As it was, he had to keep the conversation away from Tellurak, dreams, and the name "Abbiley," lest he forget himself in anger.

"You seem distant tonight. I mean, more than usual," Celia said. "Normally there are whole little work-crews of tiny grem-lins working in that head of yours all day, but they seem to have the monopoly on your attention tonight."

"More conspiracies. The better the war seems to go, the more attention folks around here seem to shift to their own advancement," Kyrus said. He picked at his pheasant. It had been cooked in a sauce made from exotic fruits that had been plundered from Megrenn trade cities. But pheasant-au-plunder was not to his liking. The cooks had tried their best with it, but did not know quite what to do with the unfamiliar ingredients. Celia seemed to have enjoyed hers though, so Kyrus suspected his mood was to blame.

"Who this time?" Celia asked. She treated it as court gossip, of no more or less import than who was courting whom among the nobles. It was an odd preoccupation, but Kyrus had come to realize that it was a pastime not relegated entirely to the courtiers and servants.

"Do you *really* want to know, or are you just making conversation?" Kyrus asked. It would not be the first time she had gotten more information than she had bargained for when Kyrus had opted for candor in his responses with her.

"Really," Celia confirmed. Kyrus shrugged, figuring that it was harmless enough if either Caladris or Rashan found out—his uncle was the more likely, as the warlock returned infrequently. If the information came back to him, he would at least get a better idea how far he could trust her.

"Emperor Sommick, this time. He is thinking that he might prefer to choose his empress from the sorcerous bloodlines," Kyrus told her.

"Ooh, does he have a sorceress in mind?" Celia asked, eyes wide. Kyrus usually had poor luck at determining what would be deemed salacious enough to garner her interest, but he had suspected that this particular tidbit would be like a jewel to a magpie.

"A few. I let him know there were limits though," Kyrus said over his glass as he brought it to his lips. He raised his eyebrows to make her think that he had forbidden the emperor from considering her.

"Oh? You are in the business of telling emperors who they can marry?" Celia teased.

"Yes. If you thought to find yourself a better suitor, I am afraid you will have to look elsewhere," Kyrus joked.

"Brannis...I mean, you cannot *tell* him so, but I would not consider empress an improvement in station," Celia said, a dreamy, sappy look in her eyes. Kyrus took another drink, lest his expression betray his skepticism.

As Kyrus drifted off to sleep that night, Celia's head pillowed on his chest, all he could think was that his ruse was still effective. It crossed his sleep-heavy mind briefly, just before he lost consciousness.



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