

# **SHATTERING DREAMS - PREVIEW CHAPTERS**

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THE BEING OF DREAMS BOOK 1

CATHERINE M WALKER



## PROLOGUE

**T**he small boy giggled gleefully as he ran scrambling over a fallen tree trunk, ducking around trees. Little legs pumping, he glanced back at the person pursuing him. She laughed too.

Mother had abandoned her traditional formality to play with him. Those moments were rare, and he cherished them.

He burst into the clearing, running toward a large boulder beside the stream. Hands grabbed him and hoisted him into the air as his mother caught up to him, holding him close, spinning him around.

He wrapped his arms about Mother's neck as she climbed the sloping rock at the edge of the river. They sat on a large boulder overlooking the stream, the dense forest continuing on the distant bank, comfortable with each other's company. Near to where they sat, Mother's people set up rugs and cushions, laying out food and drink in the centre with two places. As the servants as stood back to admire their work from a discreet distance, Mother took his hand and they moved to the rug and pillows.

The ever-present servants walked forward showing one dish at a time, pulling covers off once he and his mother had settled on the blanket.

He smiled, seeing his favourites set before him: a mug of water, nutty bread with tangy cheese (which he had only enjoyed eating when he realised it was his mother's favourite) and a mixture of berries he loved. Lessons on etiquette from his nanny running through his brain, he looked at his mother with contained impatience as she laughed and took a small bite out of her sandwich. His mother taking that first morsel signalled that he could start his meal. The boy grabbed his food using both hands, not wanting his cheese to fall off onto the ground as it had last time they'd gone on an excursion. Nanny warned him if he wanted to eat with his mother and father along with his brother and sister in the big main hall, Mother had to see him showing his best manners—proving he was a grownup.

He took a mouthful, taking a moment to enjoy the taste he was familiar with, grinning at his mother after he'd swallowed. Mother liked it too, he could tell. Mirroring her moves, spilling nothing, he placed his bread on the plate; grabbing his mug, he gulped the water it held. With equal care, he settled the mug on the picnic blanket then smiled, thanking the servant who filled up his cup.

His meal progressed in much the same fashion, sitting there in quiet companionship with his mother, mirroring everything she did. He caught her smile of approval as he managed his whole lunch, spilling none of it, although he missed the amused glances of the servants and guards.

His mother rose, signalling the end of their meal, holding her hand out to him as he stood, helping him to his feet. She laughed again as they picked their course off the rock, careful not to lose their footing, across the clearing and toward the horses. He knew

what that indicated. It meant their day out was ending. Still, he didn't voice his disappointment. For Mother to trust him outside of the nursery more, his tutors had advised him he needed to show he could behave.

A faint whistling noise followed by a pained grunt drew his attention and he looked over toward the sound. A guard fell to the ground, his half-drawn blade slipping from the sheath. He lay in a crumpled heap. Another guard, unmoving, slumped over as if he was sleeping; he had never, in the times he'd been out with his mother, seen any of the guards do that. Bewildered, the boy spun around, wide-eyed as more of the escort fell.

His mother's gasp caused him to look back up. He stumbled as she thrust him backwards.

"Run, hide ..."

She stopped, frozen for a moment. The boy recognised fear on her face as a tall, dark figure loomed over her. Her head wrenched to one side, then he saw a large hunting blade slice across her throat. The man screamed and shoved his mother aside. She crumpled, reminding him of his sister's rag dolls—dropped, left broken and forgotten by her attackers on the ground.

The boy remembered his lessons; he'd overheard guards talking often enough, knew they watched out for them. He knew, even though this was the first time he'd seen one, that the dark, looming figure was one of the Sundered.

He struggled as strong hands picked him up and he heard the cruel laughter of his captor. "Foolish child. Do you think you can escape me? You'll join your mother before long."

Then the figure stopped and looked at him, before throwing his

head back. A harsh bark of laughter erupted from him. The boy fell to the ground as the Sundered dropped him.

“Live for now, boy. You’ll join our ranks soon enough, brother.”

The Sundered faded from sight, causing the boy to wonder if the monster had even been there. The boy realised he was alone in the glade with the fallen. His lips trembled as he scrambled over to his mother. Grabbing her shoulder, he shook her, trying to get her to wake, not understanding why she didn’t. As darkness fell, he looked around. He sobbed, muffling the sound by pressing the fabric of his vest against his mouth in case the Sundered came back. Curled near his mother’s side, not knowing what else to do, he finally fell asleep.

He woke to the noise of horses and bright, glaring light, in the strong arms of a man he recognised as one his father’s guards. He clung to the guard, not willing to let go.

“It’s ok, Alex. We’ll take you home,” the guard choked.

Guards slipped a blanket over his mother’s unmoving form and the boy saw, with shock, a tear trail from the eye of the normally impassive guard.

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**REBELLION**

**A**lex smiled. Outwardly, he appeared relaxed, accepting the compliments and praise, basking in the adoration of his peers. He swallowed the last of his wine, not even noticing as a hovering servant refilled his glass. Alex let his eyes roam over the ballroom, settling for a moment on the dais where the King sat on his throne, presiding over the proceedings attended by William, playing the dutiful Crown Prince.

Prince William looked in his direction and frowned, as he did whenever he looked away from his conversation with the King long enough to peer at him. Alex raised his glass to the perfect one in the court, the noble Prince—the King’s favourite child—and drank the contents of his glass, laughing as William sighed and turned away.

Alex let his eyes rake over his contemporaries, the younger sons and daughters of the court’s high lords and ladies as they fought for a position near him. He smiled bitterly and wondered if the sycophants would still try to gain his favour if they knew one of his father’s closest guarded secrets. That if he’d been born to a typical family instead of a ruling family, it would have seen him

killed at birth or as soon as the healers confirmed he bore the Taint. Alex laughed, his presence a ticking time bomb in the court, surrounded by the Elite in the Realm, waiting for the moment his father's guards deemed it prudent to end his life. Still, that possibility was a future concern.

Alex wished not for the first time that he lived in that long ago era where, so legend had it, being able to wield the power of the veil wasn't a bad thing. Those with the power were highly regarded and valued. Thinking of the folklore regarding the use of the veil in those days nearly made him laugh. Vaunted fighters, augmenting their strength and normal abilities, able to travel great distances, being able to control the very elements ... immortals. Until his Great, Uncle Edward's day. Something had started going wrong. Those with access to the veil had started turning, going mad and killing people. Ordinary people who couldn't defend themselves, events that began the Sundered War.

Alex caught himself before he slipped and rolled his eyes, drawn out of his introspection. He noticed Lord Minor Rathan Cartwright trying to insinuate himself into the group surrounding Lady Jessalan. Rathan was an irritating little Lordling who kept trying to gain not only his attention, but that of his friends. The only one who didn't realise he didn't have a chance was Rathan himself.

Alex caught Jess's eye. *You've got incoming.*

It was times like this being Tainted was handy. He may not be immortal or be able to control the elements but he could communicate with others who bore the Taint—Lady Jessalan Elena Barraclough was one of them. She was one of his closest friends, even though she was the daughter of a low-ranking lord who attained his rank due to the King's favour rather than through hereditary lines. She came to the Royal Court as a small girl, placed in the care of her Aunt and Uncle. Her Aunt had been

a beauty in her time; she even overcame the challenge of her low birth to marry the second most powerful lord in the Realm.

They had been firm friends since childhood. Jess had grown up, and was now regarded as one of the most desired and beautiful ladies of the court. Her blonde hair was held in an intricate design by combs and pins, with a trail of hair running down one side as if it had wilfully escaped its bindings. With pale skin, startling green eyes and a slim waist, Jess appeared to be, on the surface, almost delicate.

Appearances can deceive. Alex knew she was athletic and an incredible swordsman. Well-known as one of the best hunters in the court and comfortable not only in wielding blades, but knives, bows—any weapon that came to hand. Jess rode with the royal party in the Royal Hunt, and when Elizabeth, William's twin, ventured from the palace, Jess was always in her entourage. Unknown to anyone else, Jess was one of the last forms of defence should anyone try to harm the Princess. The only reason most lords of their set let her be—other than light courting—was her association with Alex and Kyle. That is, other than Rathen, who had been trying to gain her attention of late, it seemed.

He chuckled as Jess rolled her eyes, her voice replying in kind in his mind. *Oh, save me. Is anyone in this court more irritating?*

*Oh, I don't know. His sister, Janice, is right up there.* Kyle's exasperated mind-voice filtered across to them both.

Alex glanced across at his friend, Lord Kyle Xavier Strafford who looked as if he was devoting his entire attention to Lady Minor Janice Cartwright. As the son of the most influential and the richest lord in the Realm, Kyle was a favourite amongst the ladies of the court. Just as their fathers had been friends from childhood, Alex and Kyle had been friends from the nursery, since they were often thrown together while their fathers talked

matters of state. Kyle had a well-earned reputation as a ladies' man. Rumour had it he had been working his way through the ladies of the court—young and old—since he'd reached his majority. Kyle was tall with an athletic build, with black hair, olive skin and deep brown eyes that almost seemed black depending on his mood.

He was also one of the best swordsmen in the Realm, having been trained by the best since he'd been old enough to hold a sword. Most of the courtiers were unaware of that. Still, some were catching on. They had been giving him a clear path; if they thought he was ill-tempered.

*Shall we stage an exit from this party? I'm bored anyway.*

Alex smiled, receiving their replies, and excused himself from the group surrounding him. He made his way across the ballroom toward Jessalan with a trail of people following behind.

Alex's eyes scanned the ballroom as he walked, his eyes narrowing as he caught sight of Lady Amelia, Kyle's sister, her smile fixed as she deflected the attentions of one of the lords in her circle of admirers. Alex diverted, making his way across the crowded room to join her circle. Amelia's lips parted in a smile when she saw him and Alex took her hand and brushed his lips in a light kiss on her fingers.

"Amelia, you look lovely tonight."

Alex kept his eyes firmly on hers but knew that others in the court had tracked his movement and were watching the byplay avidly. He also knew that the King had noticed and had halted his conversation with Lord Strafford, Amelia's father. The minor lord that Amelia had discouraged paled, realising he had made a mistake.

Amelia blushed, glancing down before looking back up into his eyes. “Thank you, Alex.”

“I trust there won’t be any trouble tonight?” Alex let his eyes track across the men surrounding Amelia.

The miscreant that Amelia had pushed aside paled and took a step back subconsciously, trying to put some distance between him and Alex. Alex smiled at the hasty denials from all the men, realising that his hand had strayed to his sword hilt. Then, pulling Amelia closer, he kissed her on her forehead in a brotherly fashion.

“Have a good evening, Amelia. If you need anything, approach the guard; I’m sure they will be happy to help.” Alex’s eyes flicked up to the nearby guardsman on duty who nodded discreetly before transferring his attention to the Lordling, who by this stage looked like he was about to faint.

“I’ll withdraw, with your permission My Lady?” Alex gave a half bow, grinning at Amelia impudently as he backed up; she laughed and flipped her hands at him.

With one final glare toward the men surrounding Amelia, he turned and made his way across the crowded ballroom, which magically cleared in front of him as he walked toward Jessalan. He moved through the group surrounding Jess; they moved aside good-naturedly as soon as they realised it was him. Slipping in next to Jess, he slid his arm around her waist. He kissed her on the cheek and in one practised motion he slipped his empty glass to a passing servant. Alex laughed outright as Jess placed her hand on the back of his head and pulled him closer to kiss him on the lips.

*Come on, let's get out of here. There must be a party more entertaining than this courtroom somewhere in this kingdom!*

Alex wrapped one arm around Lady Jessalan's slender waist, throwing his other arm around the shoulders of Kyle, who had divested himself of his followers and arrived at Alex's other side. Alex dragged them toward the doors, oblivious to the obvious consternation of the courtiers in the ballroom, since the King had not left the hall yet.

Kyle exchanged glances with Jessalan, who sighed as Alex turned and hauled them both toward the doors. Kyle risked a glance over his shoulder toward the dais, catching the discreet nod from the Crowned Prince just as they exited the ballroom.

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Alex knew that behind the scenes there was mad scrambling—runners heading off to alert guards they were on the move, looking likely to leave the palace. He threw back his head and laughed, knowing the mandatory entourage would swear and run to get ready. They hated it when he ran off and much preferred advance notice so they could get ready to go with him in a more orderly manner. Alex, however, much preferred to leave the guards behind. There were times when the press of people became stifling. He and his friends had much more fun relaxing away from the ever-prying eyes of the assorted lords, ladies, guards and servants, away from the stifling confines of the palace.

Still, despite the suddenness of his decision to leave, the palace servants would scramble, their horses saddled, waiting in the courtyard with attentive grooms holding them. Palace servants were, by now, well used to his ways. He wouldn't be surprised if they saddled his and his friends' horses every night, just in case. He hadn't been left standing impatiently on the stairs in the minor courtyard of the Royal Palace waiting for his horse for quite some time.

The three of them sped up their pace. Jess, hiking up her skirts, kept pace until they reached the large double doors to the courtyard. Alex always marvelled at how Jess' servants managed the transformation; somehow, they swarmed around her, taking her to a small room off the side of the hallway. He didn't know the room's original purpose, but now it was a small private dressing room. Alex and Kyle continued out the doors that swung open ahead of them and their own servants appeared with cloaks and blades. Both of them divested of their court weapons, their ceremonial vests peeled off them and replaced with vests that were, while still well-made and expensive, far more suitable for the night's entertainment—it would take trained eyes to spot them.

They continued down into the courtyard with a barely noticeable pause to change. Alex traded glances with Kyle, laughing. He'd been right. The servants had brought their saddled mounts out to the courtyard ahead of them. Both swung up onto their mounts with a practised ease, then turned as, only moments after, Jess came running down the stairs. Taking them two at a time, no longer attired in her gown and expensive jewellery, she wore attire much like their own, more suited to leaving the palace. Without pause, Jess mounted with an ease that spoke of someone well used to riding.

Seeing they were all ready, Alex laughed, spurring his horse into a gallop across the small courtyard. The guards on duty at the main gate to the palace complex struggled with the doors, only getting them open at the last minute. He shared glances with Kyle and Jessalan riding on either side of him and, in a manner that spoke of long association, the three of them guided their horses off the main road. They rode to one side, down a narrow path through the forest that was a shortcut into town, the guards left behind, cursing, still trying to mount in the courtyard.

Familiar with the small winding trail (they had ridden this path too many times to count), Alex slowed down as they approached the small gate that would allow them to gain access from the Royal Forest into the town. Alex smiled as the guards on the gate jumped up from their position resting against a nearby tree to sprint to the gate, staring in their direction as they cleared the tree line. Alex looked to Kyle and gestured with his head toward the gate and guards.

Kyle spurred his horse forward. Without comment, he threw back the hood to his cloak as he approached the guards and, when close enough, spoke calmly.

“Open the gates.”

Alex didn't even bother to slow down the pace of his mount as he approached the gate. He saw the junior guardsman's eyes widen as he recognised Kyle. He and his fellow guard hauled the chains to open the portal to the outskirts of the town. Alex chuckled. Kyle had a growing reputation, well known not only to the lords and ladies of the court but also the guards.

As they passed through the gates, Alex, Kyle and Jess slowed their horses to a walk. The gates closed behind them with a soft thump. Alex grinned. The portal had been well kept since the first time they had used it—on that occasion, creaks and groans from the gate could be heard halfway across the residential section of town, announcing to all that a member of the court had passed from the palace grounds to the city proper.

Alex noted that Kyle drew the hood of his cloak up to obscure his face again and, without thought, spurred his horse up to a ground-devouring trot. They made their way through the town, drawing little attention as people went about their business

without pause. The group moved from the more wealthy sections of town and crossed through the areas belonging to the middle class. Here was the domain of the tradesmen, merchants and stall owners—all of them still at work, plying their trades. Alex smiled and relaxed, the bustle of people going about their daily lives obscuring their movement through the streets effectively.

Slowing his horse to a walk, Alex led them down a side alley that opened out into a series of gated yards and stables. Alex slid from his horse as Kyle took the lead once more, passing coins to the stable keeper, who was eyeing off their mounts with an appreciative eye.

“We’ll be back later to pick them up.” Kyle passed his horse’s reins to the man, commenting in a dry tone, “I expect them to be here still.”

That provoked laughter from the portly stable keeper. “My Lord. I wouldn’t dream of selling off your horses. I have a funny feeling you’d take it personally, which would be detrimental to my health.” The man turned and bellowed toward the scruffy boy filling up a trough with water.

“Eddie, get your lazy rear end over here and help bed down these horses.”

Alex passed over his reins without comment, noting that Jess had done the same. He turned and led them from the stockyards, down winding alleys, toward the rougher parts of the old town. During the day, it was sleepy and almost deserted. At night, as the markets and businesses closed, the old town moved from sluggishness, waking up to heave with activity. Strains of music filtered to the streets, flowing from bars with lights burning brightly from their windows.

The pleasure houses were open for business. Lower-end houses had their men and women out the front, calling out to the people

passing, inviting them to come in and spend a night of pleasure with them. Unlike the lower-end houses, the better places were discreet. They didn't need to put their people out the front; their patronage knew where to find them and knew they were open for business—the lights burning from the front parlour of their premises gave that away.

It looked like a wild night already, with patrons stumbling from bars, or some being thrown out. One unlucky drunk came out of a bar and stumbled into Jess. She pushed him and, drawing her dagger, hit him on the side of the head. The man, who by the state of him had probably been drinking all day, slumped to the ground, unconscious, as Jess looked down at him disdainfully and stepped over his unmoving form.

She smiled. "Looks like a fun night."

All three of them laughed as they approached one of their favourite haunts—a three-storey establishment, a wooden sign hung just above the double doors with a frothing tankard burned into it, the image and plain script above proclaiming it *The Tankard*. It was a bustling bar on the lower floor, with rooms for hire above. Not that any of them stayed here. At least, not if they could help it. Alex pushed the doors open and the three of them walked inside.

## THE KILLIAM ORDER'S RECRUIT

Scholar Clements stood looking out the windows over the serene mountains. The sprawling old fort and village, protected by stone walls that surrounded Yalleska, had stood undefeated for hundreds of years. This fort and village were the stronghold of the Killiam Order, which had been granted autonomy from the Crown generations ago.

A scream of pain rang through the citadel. At the anguished pleading, a cold smile spread across the Scholar's lips. It was always a pleasure when they had a victory over the monsters. The knowledge they gained, the endemic perversion of the healer ranks, caused great concern amongst the Order. Learning that the filth hiding in the healer ranks could be controlled with the medication gave them renewed hope.

If they survived under the medication's influence, they used their healer's gifts to gain a mental hold of their own kind. It had been a long laborious process of trial and error. In the early days, when they first discovered the medication, they thought they would win. Most of the monsters they dosed died, yet a few survived. Those that did, with mental manipulation from the healers, were

being used to build a fighting force to use against the darkness. For the first time since the Order came into inception, they might just be on the brink of winning this war. How better to fight against the monsters than to pit their own kind against them?

He didn't have long to wait—once the pleading started they never lasted long. He grinned as the door opened behind him.

“So, how is our latest recruit going?”

“You heard, I take it?”

There wasn't a hint of emotion in Kevin's voice or expression; he'd been one of their first success stories.

Clements nodded, his satisfaction evident. “She's finally taking the medication willingly?”

“Yes. She is young and not resistant to the drug at all. As I predicted, she is an ideal candidate to enter the program.” Kevin smiled. “Even though she is a little older than we prefer to start treatment, she doesn't possess the will to resist.”

Clements turned his head to look at Kevin as he stood next to him, looking out the large windows. Kevin had come to him, to the Order, almost fifteen years earlier, a broken man. A healer, he'd returned to his home after his rounds in the village, only to discover his young family dead. They were lying on the ground in the backyard to his small property. Broken, discarded, slaughtered by a monster. Kevin knew about the Killiam Order, revealing, after he turned to them, that the healers had been keeping track of their presence. It was Kevin who had admitted that the healing order had been protecting and hiding the monsters in society, that many healers used the Taint. He'd been their first success story, helping them to distil and perfect the medication.

Clements had felt no need at all to mention that the monster that

had killed Kevin's family had been one of the Order's failed experiments.

"Will she be ready for her task?"

He saw a smile spread on the face of the man who, against all odds, had become his friend. "She will be; she is skilled and her target will be drawn to her. With my guidance, she will be powerful enough to control his mind."

Scholar Clements laughed, clapping Kevin on the back. "Well done. I wish we had the time to instruct and train her properly. But we cannot wait, with these targets. We need to take them soon. Our friends will hopefully have achieved the first stage of the task before we get there."

The two men lapsed into silence, watching the sun set across the mountains. The sky was lit with orange and a baleful deep red, with shadows casting darkness as the sun sank. The screams and cries of agony from the medication cells beyond were oddly soothing.



## A NIGHT AT THE TANKARD

**A**lex laughed as the serving maid slipped from his grasp, winding her way through the crowded tavern back toward the bar.

Kyle's eyes flicked up to the door and tracked someone as they entered, causing Alex to smile. Without looking, he recognised from that brief look and the fact that his friend had relaxed that the guards had caught up with them. He shook his head. Their keepers should realise if the three of them meant to lose them, they certainly would not have come to The Tankard for their night of entertainment. Since this was one of their favourite haunts, their guards always checked here first.

Alex raised his goblet in silent salute and caught his friends' eyes. *Tainted we might be, but let's live this life while we have it.*

Hearing the musicians strike up his favourite song, Alex grinned. A mischievous expression on his face, he looked at Kyle and Jess and threw back the rest of his drink. He saw more than heard them groan. They knew what that meant before they followed

suit. Alex stood and, catching sight of a familiar figure to one side of the bar, groaned himself.

*What the hell is he doing here? Jess, watch out, your paramour has tracked us down.*

Alex snorted as Jess looked up and spotted Rathan Cartwright standing awkwardly at the bar. If looks could kill, Lord Minor would be dead.

*The idiot didn't even change out of his court clothes. As much as I like this place, we should find a new establishment for our night's entertainment if that fool can track us here.*

Jess looked up as a serving maid refilled her goblet. She held up her hand to ask the maid to wait and threw back the contents before holding it out once more. Another benefit of being Tainted—they could wash away the sometimes-negative effects of alcohol if they chose to, negating the hangover regular people often suffered from. Still, tonight it seemed they were all determined to feel the after effects. At least, for now. The morning might be a different story entirely.

*I'll speak to the guard. If they must follow us everywhere, they can be useful and dissuade unwanted attention. Alex's lips quirked in a half smile. I'm sure his Royal Highness, Prince William, would be most displeased if he found out you have a stalker who goes to these lengths.*

Alex grinned at Jess, then turned and made his way through the packed bar toward the small island of space before the musicians. A blonde attached herself to him and before too much longer was joined by a redhead and a brunette. Alex threw back his head and laughed, moving rhythmically with the women in time to the music. The blonde ran her palm up his chest, biting her lip she looked down, feigning shyness before grinning and raising a bottle to his mouth.

He raised one hand, pushing the wine away, and turned to the redhead, who was demanding his attention most directly. He kissed her, causing the blonde to pout, drawing her busy hands away from his pants and up to his chest. He almost groaned as the brunette started in, then Kyle was there, peeling the brunette from him. At some stage, amidst the jostling, the bottle of wine the blonde had been trying to get him to drink smashed on the floor. The woman looked down, appearing way more upset than she should be over a smashed bottle of wine.

“Come on Alex, you can’t show the proper attention to all three lovely ladies!” Kyle looked down at the smashed bottle on the ground and winced. “Sorry, here, it’s okay have this one, I appropriated it from a table on the way.”

Kyle clamped his mouth on the brunette’s, sliding his tongue through her parted lips. He pulled her away, thrusting a bottle of wine he’d swiped off a table into Alex’s empty hand.

Alex glimpsed several unhappy looking men at the edge of the dance floor with their knuckles going white from gripping their belt knives. He dismissed the men, turning to the ladies as he saw familiar guards moving across the bar toward them. They would sort the men out.

Alex tossed his head back, laughing, and took a long swallow from the bottle of wine before returning his attention to the serving maid, pulling her into his body, not noticing as yet another of his female companions was dragged off him by Kyle.

Alex didn’t care. His world had narrowed, and revolved entirely around him and the blonde serving maid.

Jess laughed, watching Kyle and Alex on the dance floor, and contemplated joining them. She glanced around the bar; there were several likely candidates that she felt she could persuade to get up and dance with her. That, or she could throw a pretend tantrum and haul the women off Alex and Kyle. The thought amused her for a moment, then she discarded it. They were determined to forget the world existed—she didn't want to spoil their fun. Scanning the room once more, she noticed that Lord Rathan Cartwright had stood up from his seat at the bar. He stood, tugging at his tunic, before walking in her direction, his intent clear.

“Oh, hell no.” Jess muttered under her breath.

Jess stood, determined to head toward the dance floor. Creating a scene was more desirable than being stuck with Rathan. When she turned, she found herself face to face with the brightest blue eyes she had ever seen.

“I'd be honoured if you'd have a drink with me.” He held a drink out to her.

Jess couldn't help but smile back and, nodding her thanks, accepted the goblet. “Why, thank you. Care to take a seat? I don't imagine my friends will need one for some time.” Jess nodded toward the dance floor, where both Alex and Kyle remained otherwise entertained.

“I noticed they look distracted at the moment, so I thought it couldn't hurt, seeing if I could tempt you. I'm Damien.” Damien grinned at her and held out his hand.

Jess hesitated for a moment then held out her hand. Damien grasped it and kissed her on the fingers, a simple act which caused Jess to blush. She sat back down at the table, breathing a

sigh of relief as she saw Rathan. He stood, frozen, halfway between the bar and her, his confusion obvious. Briefly catching her eye, he retreated to his corner in the bar.

“Nice to meet you, Damien. Thanks for the drink. I’m Jess.” She added, “It’s not common for someone to behave like a gentleman here.” Jess probed for information, suspecting that Damien was not a commoner, although she didn’t recognise him at all.

Damien laughed and nodded his head, conceding that she made a point.

“The Royal Court begins the progress to the Summer Palace soon. Everyone who is anyone is here, so accommodation options are limited. I’m not sure I am anyone important, but I can hunt well. That many court-bound aristocrats riding together in one group, they need fresh food along the way—or, at the very least, we need to make sure the Royal Family don’t get stinted. The rest can look after themselves.” Damien grinned at her as she laughed.

“Ah, so you work for a living, unlike the self-entitled idiots who clutter the court with egos bigger than they are.”

Jess took a sip of her wine and raised her eyebrow at her companion. She glanced at the goblet, swirling the deep red liquid in the glass as she closed her eyes and breathed in the aroma of the wine. She took another sip and decided the wine was as good as the company. He’d obviously splurged on one of the better quality wines The Tankard offered, rather than just the house wine. Still, the family that ran the establishment owned several bars in Vallantia and Callenhain, the location of the Summer Palace, a few of them catering to the more well-to-do clientele, as well as others, like this one, for the working class.

“Their egos find people like me useful during this time of the

year and for the hunts that follow, that is about it.” Damien shrugged, grinning to show he wasn’t concerned at all. “Tell me, what do you think of the wine, Jess?”

“The wine is excellent, I don’t believe I’ve drunk it before. Which one is it?”

Jess took another sip, savouring the flavour; it was more than good. Jess was certain her companion didn’t realise it was strange she hadn’t encountered it before, given that she lived in the palace and mixed with the Royal Family.

“A small shipment came from the Heights. There is a delegation visiting at the moment—they brought trade samples with them. This was one of them. The owners have an agreement with them. I’m surprised they are stocking it here though.” Damien nodded toward the bar absently, savouring the last of the wine.

Jess grinned. Seeing that he’d finished his, she swallowed the last mouthful of her own wine. She stood, grabbed his hand and hauled him toward the dance floor, winding through the tables, pushing aside patrons who laughed as the pair made their way past.

Damien laughed along with her and gathered her in his arms to dance. Jess decided there were worse ways to spend her night.

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Jess groaned, pulling a pillow over her head, trying to drown out the insistent pounding at the door. Growling inarticulately, she pulled the pillow off her head, knowing they wouldn’t go away. She also knew that if she didn’t answer shortly they would come in, regardless. She looked at Damien, who suddenly woke up due to the pounding on the door, and sat

bolt upright. Before she could stop him, he'd rolled out of the bed stark naked, grabbing his long hunting knife and turning toward the door as it opened.

“No, Damien don't ...”

Jess groaned, sinking back onto the bed, one hand over her eyes as the guards entered the room. Damien was disarmed and taken to the ground as even more guards entered, cluttering the small room.

“My Lady? Is everything alright?”

“Yes, Megan, I'm fine, or I was until you all barged in here. Please let Damien up, he's not a threat. Damien calm down, I'm sorry, they won't hurt you.”

Jess hauled herself out of the bed dragging the sheet with her since she didn't have any more clothes on than Damien did—not that it bothered her much, having grown up living in the palace, surrounded by and tended to by servants. She guessed from experience that Damien, like any other man, would be more likely to calm down if she wasn't standing there naked in front of men he perceived as a threat.

“Damien, calm down and they will let you up.”

Her face impassive, Megan picked up Jess's shirt and handed it to her, then moved to shield her from the view of the male guards, although they were all studiously not looking at her. Jess smiled and thanked the guard despite herself. Pulling the shirt on, she then reached for her pants, passing the sheet to Damien, who was finally standing, under the watchful eye of the guards.

Jess looked at Megan and frowned. “I suppose it is useless asking you guys to wait outside?”

“Sorry, My Lady, he had a weapon.”

Jess noticed that Megan didn't look at all sorry. Still, she couldn't be angry; the guard was only doing her job and if anything happened to her while the guards had their backs turned it would likely cost them their job.

“In case you hadn't noticed, so do I.” Jess shook her head, knowing the futility of arguing with any of them.

She ran her hand through her hair, which wasn't tied up in its habitual braid or a sophisticated pile on her head held in place with an assortment of pins and combs. Left to its own devices, her hair was thick and fell halfway down her back. She pushed it back in annoyance as she crossed the short distance between her and Damien.

Jess paused, her eyes narrowing as the guards tried to put themselves between her and Damien. “Move. Now. If Damien intended any harm, then he's had plenty of opportunity to do it.” Jess tried to suppress her irritation and flicked her gaze across to Megan, knowing she was the senior ranking guard among them.

“Megan, you can stay in the room, but don't test my patience.”

Megan looked at the other guards and jerked her head toward the door. One of them opened his mouth, intending to protest, but closed it again without a word, filing out the door as Megan's gaze turned deadly. The guard then moved her position—not so incidentally—giving her a straight line to Damien if she needed it. Jess noticed that the positioning wasn't lost on Damien, who seemed to be trying to regain some of his usual humour.

“Mad husband?” Damien smiled a little and shook his head.

Jess bit her lip and closed the distance between them. She raised one hand and ran her fingers down his cheek, pulling him down to kiss him on the lips.

“Not quite. I’m sorry, it’s a little complicated. They’ve come to drag my friends back, I’m nobody important; from the point of view of the guards, it’s a package deal.”

Hearing a snort of laughter that was quickly suppressed behind her, Jess turned to glance at Megan, her eyebrow raised.

“Sorry, My Lady.”

Unfortunately, the guard didn’t look all at that sorry.

Jess sighed and turned back to Damien. Pulling his head down, she kissed him. “Thank you for an enjoyable night, Damien, I’m sure we will run into each other again.”

Jess backed away, a little reluctant for the night to be over, then turned and walked out the door, sighing again as she walked into the hallway. She grinned, seeing both Alex and Kyle leaning against the wall at the end of the hallway near the stairs.

“Well, at least father can’t complain about the guard hauling us out of one of the pleasure houses this time.” Alex grinned at them all and trotted down the stairs, with Kyle and Jess following.

Kyle chuckled. “I’m not sure he’ll find the upper rooms here at The Tankard much better.”

Jess followed them across the deserted common room of the bar to the door being held open for them by a sleepy looking barkeep.

“Thanks.” Jess smiled as he nodded acknowledgement and let them out on the street.

It wasn’t the first time the guard had hauled the three of them out of the establishment in the early hours of the morning. Seeing their horses waiting for them in the cobbled street outside the bar, held by more guardsmen, she shared a grin with Alex and Kyle. At least the guards were useful for something. Mounting

their horses, they walked them through the empty streets of the early dawn back toward the palace.

## THE SUNDERED, KIN AND ELDER

Alex's last conscious thought as he merged between the waking world and blissful sleep was a jumble of confusion. He half hoped that he would sleep the night through this time, as he'd heard others did regularly. The other part of him hoped that he would return to his other self, the self that was competent and capable of being the hero he wished he would be. He slipped into a deep, restless sleep.

Alex groaned, trying to ignore the constant shaking and pretend he was still asleep. Unfortunately, the person doing the constant shaking had other ideas.

“Come on, boy. Get your lazy carcass out of bed.”

The voice was familiar. A curious mix of refinement that spoke volumes, as if the speaker was brought up in the King's Court—yet there was an unusual roughness, as if the owner of the voice had known tough times. Alex groaned again. He was familiar with that voice.

“Great Uncle, please. I need to sleep just this once. Please?” Alex was astounded by the hint of pleading in his voice.

He cracked open one eye and looked up at his great uncle—not the old rotting corpse he knew his great uncle must be by now, but the dashing figure from the family portrait. The later one, after he'd made his name and saved the Kingdom. Not the earlier, callow youth he'd been before the war had struck. Alex had seen that portrait too, even though he was never meant to. It had been hidden away in the attic, but he'd found it anyway. That picture revealed way too much about what his great uncle's peers had thought of him.

"I'm sorry, son. I wish I could let you sleep, but you don't have time." Great Uncle Edward Rathadon smiled slightly. "Get up. It's time to train."

Alex groaned again and hauled himself out of bed. His eyes swept across the empty bottle of wine on the floor, and he spared a moment to glare at his uncle. He wondered, not for the first time, why his great uncle was favouring him and not either of his brothers, who were much more capable for the task at hand, or his sister. When it came down to it, even Elizabeth was stronger. Then he snorted. He needed to wake up. His siblings didn't possess as much of the Taint as he did.

"So you keep saying, Uncle. Yet the world I live in does not change. I am still the useless fourth child: I stagger from one drunken party to another and get dragged out of some of the most disreputable establishments. The other half of my time I spend waiting to see if I'm going to go mad and kill everyone." Alex heard the bitterness in his own voice. The self-pity.

Alex hauled himself out of bed, noting that while he felt exhausted, he felt it draining away as he pulled in power, almost automatically, to wash away his fatigue. If he had to name one of the positives of being Tainted, one was certainly that he did not have to suffer through the hangover he knew he should have after the night's depravity and excess.

“Ok, Uncle. I’m sorry. I’ll stop whining now. It’s been months since you’ve paid a visit.”

Alex caught a perplexed look flash across his uncle’s face and smiled. Not expecting an answer, he looked around and saw his boots, flung off to the side of the room, right where he knew Kyle had left them. From what he remembered of the night before, he was in no state to take off his boots when he collapsed into bed, let alone fling them across the room. While it was hard for the three of them to get drunk, dedicated practise had made it possible. They had learned it was a matter of volume. Picking up his boots, he pulled them on, then walked to his weapons rack, arming himself before turning back to Edward.

“So, Uncle, what do you have prepared for tonight?”

Alex smiled and followed his uncle, the cold assaulting him as he merged between this world and the next—that place that all Tainted who were strong enough could access. A part of the real world, yet not a part of it; and time, as far as he could work out, moved differently. His sessions under his uncle’s tender mercies seemed to go on for way longer than he was away from his bed.

Feeling the power vibrate and swirl around him, he knew another approached. Grinning, he turned and watched as Kyle appeared, walking toward them with Lady Leanna Katrina Shaddin, another figure from legend who, like his uncle, was reduced to so much dust in her tomb. He’d stopped asking exactly what they were now since they all routinely avoided answering.

*My Lady, it’s nice to see you again.* Alex nodded to her. While she was always polite to him, she had a fierce legend surrounding her exploits.

*Ah, always polite, Alex, it’s refreshing.* Kat grinned at him and nodded a greeting to his uncle.

They weren't waiting too long before Jess joined them with the taciturn Lord Callum Barraclough—yet another figure of legend; although, unlike his uncle and Kat, Lord Barraclough had retreated back out to his remote country estate not long after the end of the war. It was said he became a hermit, withdrawing from the court and society, dying on his county estate. Still, given they could all travel around readily using the veiled paths, where they actually resided had less meaning than most people today figured.

*Now that we're all here, let's go.* Edward tilted his head to one side, as if listening to something. *There is something you must all see and understand. You will not engage. That is not why I am taking you to see this.* Edward turned his gaze to each of them in turn until they nodded compliance.

Alex, Jess and Kyle traded glances as they followed Edward down the veiled paths. Before too long, they stood looking out from the veil toward a small farm house. He felt the strong surge of the Taint and the madness of one overwhelmed by the power. Alex felt himself restrained by his uncle as he automatically lunged to help those in trouble.

*No, Alex, it's too late, just watch and learn.* Alex glared at his uncle, but subsided and watched the scene unfold at the small remote farmhouse.

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Smoke rose in plumbs from the farmhouse, a red glow coming from inside as it burned. Three bodies were still visible in the fading light, lying broken on the ground in the yard—telling all who might come by later on that whatever tragedy occurred was not an accident.

Devon Connor stood at the forest edge looking back at the

farmhouse he had called home his entire life, at the dead bodies of his mother, father and sister. He was calm, dispassionate, despite the horror before him, that even a week ago would have horrified and sickened him. Then the dispassion faded. Confusion came; the overwhelming pain Devon realised he should feel, yet somehow multiplied, worse. Devon threw back his head and screamed his pain out into the void—that place with the whispering voices, the voices that made him think for the longest time he was going mad.

In a small part of his brain, right back in its depths, he realised he was mad from the Taint, even though he'd tried his best to hide and push down. The treatments he'd been given by the healer hadn't worked. Overwhelmed by the emotions that ran through him, as if he could no longer tolerate them the way he used to, power surged through him which he didn't understand how to control, causing more pain. Causing inexplicable things to occur that he had no explanation for—except that even if he didn't understand how he'd done it, he knew that he had. The world around him would fade in and out; he would end up in places that he hadn't even known existed, with no notion of how he'd got there. Then home again, just as inexplicably. He'd suffered from blackouts, with time gone. Blood on his hands with only flashes of memory, which suggested he'd killed people he didn't recognise.

Confused, in pain, Devon retreated into the forest, leaving behind the only family he had ever known. The family he had once loved. He had killed his family in agony, in a rage-filled frenzy. He didn't even comprehend why—just that, from the flashes of memory that came back to him and the evidence of blood on his hands, clothes and hunting knife, he had slaughtered them all.

Devon perceived the Taint surge through him. The fatigue disappeared, as it always did, and he picked up his pace, running

through the forest. He didn't know where he was running to, except that it was toward the place where the whispering voices seemed stronger, toward the throb of energy that seemed like his own; it called him, leading him, like a beacon, toward his goal. He paused briefly, turning, sensing another like him nearby, watching. Devon dismissed them. Whoever it was wasn't a threat or of any interest to him right now. He turned and continued back on his path.

As he moved unerringly toward his goal, driven, he killed anyone he encountered. They were humans, so killing them appeared an ugly part of him. It fed the anger that bubbled inside and never truly went away.

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Alex sensed the other's power, his pain and rage. He knew that the newly Sundered one's name was Devon, Devon Conner. He'd been the child of a farmer who bore the Taint as they all did, until today, when the Taint had consumed him.

Alex saw what was once a man cut down the three members of his own family before setting the farmhouse alight. He'd paused and looked in their direction. Alex realised that Devon sensed their presence, yet after what seemed only a moment, Devon dismissed them and continued on his way.

*Uncle, I could have helped that family. They might still be alive if you'd let me intervene.* Alex tried to push against his uncle's restraint, to no avail.

While Edward might be a shade from the past, he was still stronger than Alex was right now, or perhaps just had more knowledge of the Taint and how to use it. As Alex's anger drained, to be replaced by futility and loss, he felt the pressure which had kept him at bay release him.

Alex closed his eyes, the fragmented memory of the slaughter of his mother playing over in his mind. He took a shuddering breath and pushed the memory of that childhood trauma aside. Alex emerged from the Veiled World followed by Jess and Kyle, who looked just as shaken, and walked toward the bodies sprawled on the ground, cut to pieces moments before.

“No, Alex, you couldn’t have. He was killing them as we arrived, they were already dead.”

Kat’s voice was soft, and he felt her hand on his shoulder. His uncle and Cal stood not far away, looking over the destruction at the small remote farm with haunted looks in their eyes. Alex understood they all would have seen such things and worse during the Sundered War.

Kyle paused his pacing around the small farmyard, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. “He knew we were here. He sensed us. Why didn’t he try to kill us?”

Cal’s mood was grim, assessing him before answering. “The Sundered are not truly mad—well, some of them are; they die early on, killed off by their kind—but they sense others with the Taint, even from the first moment they are born into their new life.”

Jess contemplated what Cal told them and, as the implication sunk in, she looked, horrified, from Alex to Kyle, then back to the slaughtered family. She shook her head in disbelief and took an inadvertent step back. She looked around at the dead people and the burning house.

“Will we become like him? Will I do this, Uncle?” Jess heard the catch in her voice but, for once, didn’t care. She was genuinely horrified by what she’d seen.

“Not necessarily like him, Jess, but you are in transition; you grow

stronger in your powers every day that goes by. You have nothing to fear—Edward, Kat and I all went through transition. I doubt that you will break entirely and become one of the Sundered.” Cal’s tone was calm and even.

Alex watched as Jess shook her head, not comprehending what she was being told—or rather, trying not to understand it.

“It is a carefully guarded and kept secret in this day and age. All of us had access to the power of the veiled world and, as with our people, we went through the transition, although not as that poor man did. And we were just as capable of killing everyone around us. We found another target, though. Some of our kin were trying to destroy the human world, or so we thought. While you’ve been told details of the Sundered War, there is much of it you do not understand.”

Jess turned and took a few steps away, her face in her hands as she fought off tears.

“I don’t understand, Uncle Cal. I don’t want to understand.” Even as she said the words, she realised it was a lie. Unfortunately, she knew and believed every word her uncle had uttered.

Alex continued to walk toward the butchered bodies on the ground; while he did not doubt they were dead, he felt compelled to check on them before they left, a part of his mind noticing that Jess and Kyle were doing the same.

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Jess traded a worried glance with Kyle. Alex had withdrawn and barely said a word since the incident at the farm. He walked along a grey pathway of the veil on automatic, lost in his own world. She knew he was thinking of his mother—seeing the slaughtered family would have

reminded him of the circumstances of her death, she was sure of it.

Jess saw a flicker of anger on Kyle's face as he turned his gaze from Alex to their mentors.

*So was there a point to all this? Trust me when I tell you we are all very aware that we could end up being overwhelmed by the Taint, our minds breaking under the onslaught and going mad.*

Kyle stopped, frowning. Then, grabbing Alex's shoulder, he transitioned them both back to the real world. Jess felt her eyes widen then. She glanced at her uncle, Kat and Edward, then shrugged and followed Kyle. Following his path with her mind, she could see the faintly glowing trail they had taken, with Kyle's signature all over it. She didn't quite know how to explain it but they all left different patterns in the veil as they manipulated it to their will.

Jess walked from the mist, making her way down a cobbled street a few paces behind Kyle and Alex. Glancing around, she didn't recognise where they were. It was a small village, likely on one of the trade routes since the village, although small, still had a bar. Pulling up her hood in a move that mirrored Kyle's, she watched Alex do the same, with a little prompting, as they walked into a bar, *Trail's Rest*.

Taking only a moment to assess the dim interior of the bar, she wasn't surprised to see a few people inside—traders breaking their fast early before heading out onto the road to continue their journey. Places like this were open late, only to reopen early to cater to those who lived much of their lives on the road. After a brief pause, Jess followed Kyle to the back of the room, where he took a corner booth. Before long, two serving boys deposited standard morning fare on their table: steaming bowls of oats, mugs of coffee, bread, cheese and some mixed berries. She slid onto the

bench, picked up her mug and sipped the steaming contents. She didn't have to wait long. Edward, Kat and Cal walked into the establishment and took their place in the booth opposite them.

“We didn't show you that to upset you all.”

Cal was the first to speak, looking troubled, and traded glances with both Kat and Edward. He sighed and, catching the eye of the serving boy, indicated that they wanted three more servings. The breakfast platters were delivered with such promptness that Jess gathered they were already set up in the kitchen.

Cal paused and turned to look at her, his expression bland and unreadable. He waited until the serving boys left before he spoke, his voice calm, unconcerned, but with obvious censure.

“Tell me what you know of the Sundered ones.”

Jess's eyes widened at the request, and she looked up from her coffee to glance at her uncle, who revealed nothing to her. His face was carefully guarded against giving away what he was thinking. It was unusual for anyone today to talk about the Sundered, although she knew that in her uncle's day it had been a common topic. She had no doubt he knew much more than she did. How could he not? He had been one of the pivotal people involved in the Sundered War.

Still, Jess considered his question, then spoke, her voice low. “They are spawned from those who have too much of the veil running through them—or the Taint, as people call it today.” Jess licked her lips nervously; this was not a topic she liked considering all that much.

Kyle took over.

“Healers say when a person controls too much of the Taint, it drives that person to madness. The madness consumes them, and

they break, becoming the Sundered. They feel no common bonds with anyone around them. They kill—without thought or compassion—anyone or anything in their path.” Kyle’s voice was low so as not to carry to the surrounding tables. “You, Prince Edward and Lord Callum led the then-Kingsmen against the hordes of Sundered who had descended on the Realm, killing them all and saving the Realm.”

Jess saw Edward nod as he contemplated their words. He smiled. “In a way that is correct, although those with the veil running through their blood were not considered the Tainted in our day. All humans who can manipulate the veil, like us, go through a transition period.” Edward paused, trading a glance with Cal and Kat. “As they come into their power, some of those unfortunate souls’ minds break; they descend into madness and become what you know as the Sundered. Not all those with power were killed off in the Sundered War—many of them weren’t even Sundered. Some were bad, not mad. They still continue to exist. Not all Sundered are what you think them to be. You are not what you think you are.”

Edward paused, but Jess could tell that he was not finished, there was more information he wanted to pass onto them. He was letting them process what he had already said.

Jess took a deep breath and asked the next question she knew he was waiting for. “What do you mean? What are the Sundered? What are we?”

“Tell me what you know of the Kin and the Elder.” She felt more than saw Kat’s smile.

Jess almost laughed, both from surprise at the question and because it was standard for Cal, Kat and Edward to answer a question with a probing question to see what they already knew.

Trading incredulous looks with Kyle, she answered as best she could, trying to take the question seriously.

“Ancient beings of power, never to be crossed. Depending on which legends you follow, they are unpredictable—pranksters, powerful. They could just as easily take your life as save it.” Jess glanced at her uncle but could get nothing from his expression, so she continued, knowing she would not get any more information from him or the others until she had finished answering. “Some legends state that the Kin were the offspring of a liaison between the Elder and a human, so half-breeds. Some even say this is where the Taint has come from in family lines. Kin blood corrupting the human blood, which isn’t capable of handling the Taint, turning those with the power into the Sundered.”

The silence stretched between them for such a long time that Jess became uncomfortable. She gathered her thoughts, about to say more, when Kat responded.

“The Elder are real; they have been real for a long time—longer, perhaps, than any but the Elder know. They have great power in this world. Some humans who can access the Taint, as you call it, who survive transition, become the Kin. The Kin, if they survive long enough, are powerful enough to become the Elder. The Sundered, Kin, the Elder—they are the same people.”

Jess felt her mind spinning in disbelief as she listened to everything their three mentors passed onto them. The Taint, Kin, Elder—all real, all linked—yet she struggled to believe in them. She’d known about the Taint; how could she not, since she bore it and the risk of becoming one of the Sundered? She’d heard stories about the Kin and the Elder when she was a little girl. Those folks out in the villages away from the Royal Court were a superstitious lot and held to the old beliefs.

Her introspection was shattered by Alex's harsh bark of laughter.

"Seriously? That is the fable you are all spinning? We're all going to become mad, kill everyone around us, but it's okay because somehow we'll turn into the fabled Elder?"

Alex laughed again, shook his head and stood, heading toward the door without saying another word. Jess watched as Kyle stood to follow Alex, throwing money on the bar from his belt pouch for their unfinished breakfast before heading out.

Jess shook her head and stood. "I'm not sure I believe you, although I don't know why you'd make it up. I'll speak with them when we are all a little calmer. Stuff like the slaughter of a family always unsettles Alex; you should know that by now." Jess then turned and followed in the wake of her friends, knowing without having to think about it that they were heading back to their beds at the palace. All of them had had enough for the night.

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**E**d sighed, watching the three leave the bar, and shook his head as he felt the surge of them entering the veil. He didn't have to follow their power trail long to know they were returning to the palace. Done for the night. He looked across the table at his lifelong friends and companions.

"I'm not sure how we could have gotten our message to them better, yet I know we should have been able to."

"They have grown up in a different world to the one we knew, Ed." Cal shook his head, looking troubled.

"Until they come into their powers fully it will be hard for them to understand."

Ed looked at Kat and had to concede the point—both hers and

Cal's. In their day, those with power had been commonplace. However, where there was great power there was also corruption and betrayal. Ed stirred and shook his head.

"We need to keep a closer eye on them. Alex commented that it had been months since he'd seen me." Ed smiled depreciatingly. "I hadn't realised that much time had passed."

Kat's eyes widened as she looked at them. "No, surely it hasn't been that long?"

"What is time to us?" Cal's eyebrow disappeared in his hairline as he laughed at his shocked friends, who finally began to laugh with him.

"You have a point. Should we come clean and tell them everything?"

"Ed, we just tried that. They didn't believe us." Kat shook her head and looked at Cal for support.

"They won't believe us until they transition. They can barely sense the power right now, let alone control it. We wait. Wait until they transition, until they can wield their powers better and sense the world around them." A frown creased Cal's forehead.

Ed groaned softly. "I don't like this. So much could go wrong, like us thinking a couple of days has passed where in their world it's been a year."

Kat's mouth firmed, her eyes narrowing. "We'll just have to be more conscientious. We used to understand how humans accounted time."

Ed couldn't help himself; he laughed at her consternation.

Alex collapsed onto his bed, one hand reaching for the sheets before he lapsed back down into an exhausted, restless slumber, plagued by nightmares. Seeing his mother's death repeatedly, the harsh voice of her killer calling him a brother and letting him live. It was a nightmare he'd had since he was a child.

Edward appeared in the room, less substantial than during the training sessions now that Alex was asleep. He looked down at Alex, a tear welling in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, my nephew. I wish I could spare you the pain. You must learn control or you will become what you fear."

Edward sighed and dissipated, his job for the night done.



**THANK YOU!**

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