

Dawnstar Of Entia

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For Drew
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Chapter 1

For Drew

Zeal day was the most celebrated of all public holidays in Entia. The entire city drank, feasted, sang and danced in honour of their most revered hero, Zeal Dawnstar. A huge stone statue of Zeal stood in the Market Square and gifts of wine, flowers and fruits were stacked against its base. Lance Baron, a Captain in the Entian Army and Guard, scanned over the donated tributes and marked out at least five bottles of quality wine that he'd make use of later.

"Hey! Stop! Thief!" A fat faced merchant tried to cover his stall of scrolls and verses with his arms, and his boxes of trinkets with his belly. Captain Baron looked in the direction of the disturbance and saw a nimble figure with corn-blond hair, skip over the boxes and crates before vanishing along a side-street. There was no chance of anyone catching him, so the Captain didn't even try.

Comet Galeraven whistled brightly as he wandered out of one of Entia's many trading shops. The baubles and poems had brought a decent price, as had the bundle of silks before that. Zeal Day was a haven for a quick thief. A disturbance broke out and got Comet's attention. Disturbances mean crowds and Comet liked crowds, especially if they entailed full pockets. The ale had been flowing steadily all day and along with it, peoples' imaginations. The Guard had been called to investigate a gang of self proclaimed magic users who were paying tribute to their hero, Zeal. Of course, they were nothing of the sort. Even the most ale soaked of individuals wouldn't dare assert a genuine claim to such a power. It would result in them losing both hands, a long jail sentence in exile and decapitation if they managed to survive the first two. Comet swiftly relieved a few bystanders of their coin purses while the Guard bundled the charlatan mages into a locked cart. Good Fortune seemed to have smiled on Comet as a Gleeman decided to capitalise on a ready made crowd and began his tale of Zeal Dawnstar.

Forty years ago, Entia had been quite a different place and magic was at the heart of Entian life. Those born with the Art, practiced it for the good of Entia. Men and women used magic as commonplace in their everyday lives, and the Entian Army had Mages in its ranks. It was a beautiful balance of harmony. The men drew from the Forces of Air and Fire, the women from Earth and Water.

Thirty years ago, the Royal Princess Honor Griffon ascended to the throne of Entia,

becoming its Queen. The Queen had been born without the Art and resented it deeply. Her insistence that she could be taught magic had led to the exile of many Mages, both men and women. In time, Queen Honor had to accept that she was not, and never could be, a Mage. At first the Queen sought to outlaw magic in its entirety, but her Council pointed out a huge flaw in this. The Army would be without its Mages. Queen Honor compromised and outlawed the use of magic to her fellow females, allowing it only usable by men who served in her military.

Honor was thirty years old and had been on the throne for ten years when Entia came under threat from the Barbarians of the North Harshlands. They were a savage breed of people who lived in vicious clans and bloodthirsty marauding gangs. The majority of the Entian Army had been sent North to protect the border, but Entia had underestimated the Harshlanders' organisation. The city found itself under attack suddenly, and at very close range, from the west. With the Army in the Northern Territories, Entia was left defenceless. The citizens armed themselves with whatever they could and prepared to make a stand for their city.

Among the citizens were Lore Dawnstar and his wife, Zeal. Zeal had given birth to Lore's son, Clash, only six months ago and she wasn't prepared to have her family overrun by Barbarians. The young twenty year old stood with her man who was only five years her senior, and prepared to take on the Harshland Barbarians. While Queen Honor and her Court were making preparations to flee Entia, the Entian people were making preparations to face death trying to defend it.

Zeal's husband, Lore, gave the official account of what happened out on the West Cliffs, outside of the city walls. The citizens were pathetically outnumbered and hopelessly armed. They stood in path of an unstoppable death, and stood proudly. Zeal Dawnstar broke away from her people and clambered atop a cliff rock. She held out her arms and implored the Mystical Forces to assist them. Suddenly, the ground shook with such force that Barbarians and Entians alike, stumbled to their knees. The stone and clay split into a giant chasm directly beneath the enemy Harshlanders and the earth itself swallowed them up. Still the Barbarians came, leaping over and stepping upon their dead comrades in order to breach the chasm. The sky darkened and mirrored the earth as it was rendered in two. The clouds released a deluge of water on a scale that was incomprehensible to the usual mind. The downpour engulfed the Harshlanders and washed them into the yawning chasm, and still it came. Water filled the rift until it began to spill over its rim and massive mudslides followed. Any previously surviving Barbarians were buried under tons of earth, thus ending their lives.

Zeal Dawnstar had disappeared.

Queen Honor let the People have their hero, while actively damning and reviling the evil forces that had taken Zeal. They had taken advantage of a glorious beacon and ripped a young mother from her family. The Queen outlawed the use of magic by

men too, and received very little opposition.

Over the next twenty years, and to the present day, Zeal Dawnstar became the icon of Entia. She represented an ordinary woman who had had been sacrificed for Entia to survive.

Comet paused by Zeal Dawnstar's statue in the Market Square. The artists hadn't quite got the hang of getting the stone to retain colours, but the faded hues were still distinguishable. He wondered how much this iconic tribute had been exaggerated. Obviously the woman hadn't been twelve feet tall, so what else had they embellished? Comet wondered just how red her hair really had been, and if it really had cascaded down her back like that. Clash Dawnstar was as dark as his father so he was no indicator. Had Zeal's eyes really been green? Green eyes were quite rare in Entia. Maybe the artists thought that green eyes were more in line with mysticism than the usual blue or brown. The statue depicted her wearing a simple black robe, as she'd been reported wearing on that day twenty years ago. Would she really have worn black under the hot Entian sun? Above all, could any mortal girl be so perfectly beautiful? Her stone features were serene and exquisite and classically breathtaking. Zeal had been Comet's age when she'd vanished and Comet considered himself an authority on the appreciation of beauty in peers of the opposite sex. He found it difficult to associate this twenty year old legend with the forty five year old Court Advisor, Lore Dawnstar. He found it all but impossible to associate her with Lore's twenty year old son, Clash, also a Court Advisor.

"Oi! Away from those tributes!" Captain Baron's loud voice barked. "Yes you! I'll run you through with this sword, you little shit!" Comet took this as his cue to leave.

Ruby Galeraven kept books for anyone too busy, too dim-witted, or too illegal to keep their own. Her largest contract was keeping books of many sorts for The Web. The Web was Entia's very extensive, very covert and very illegal underground movement. People from all walks of life were associated with The Web, some through choice and many through coercion. For people like Comet who were brought up in the slum quarter, it was a necessity. Running errands for The Web paid well, as did selling commodities to traders in its behalf. The whole show was ran by Shadow who, as his name suggested, was unknown, dark but very powerful. A common thief like Comet had no direct dealings with the sinister Shadow, and he was glad of it. Ruby squinted in the dim lamplight as her son entered the shop. The ramshackle structure of wood and stone was more of a hut than a shop, and it also served as Ruby's home. Comet's own home was another hut next door.

"Write these up for me please." Comet said, handing over his day's takings. Ruby shrugged her thin shoulders and began counting Comet's coins.

"You keeping anything back for food? Don't expect me to keep you." Ruby said flatly.

"No. Write it all up." Comet said and his mother sneered at him. Comet had often wondered how such an unmaternal woman had ever given birth in the first place. She'd been sour-faced and shrew-like ever since Comet could remember. He'd tried to hold his patience with her, telling himself that it can't have been easy for his mother raising twin boys on her own. Comet's father had perished out on the West Cliffs.

"Anything else? I'm waiting to lock up." Ruby heaved a sigh in Comet's direction.

"How much have I got?" Comet peered at the book page dedicated to him.

"More than enough for a decent meal and a warmer room." Ruby turned the book round so Comet could see it.

"You know what it's for." Comet glared at his mother, then tried not to look too disappointed at the sum of his savings. This was his fund for Brand, his twin. Brand had been weak and sickly all of his life. Ruby had only just survived the birth with the intervention of a male mage who had somehow eased her bones so she could pass Brand. By then, Comet had already taken his first, healthy breaths. Comet has saved since he was seven years old and his goal was to take Brand to Tegridd to be healed. Tegridd had herbalists and pure water and it had healing ores and minerals that simply washed up on its shores. Anyone who was anyone went to Tegridd to be cured. For now, Brand was in the Infirmary in Entia, and not recovering at all. Comet closed the book and Ruby locked it in a drawer.

"You leaving now?" She asked wearily.

"Have you been to see Brand today?" Comet asked accusingly.

"No. Zeal Day is a busy day."

"Yesterday? Last week? Month? When was the last time you saw him?" Comet pressed.

"What's the point? He doesn't even know I'm there." Ruby began extinguishing the lamps.

"What's the point? Mother it's Brand! Remember him? How can you just ignore him?" Comet shot angrily. Ruby just shook her head and stood in front of the counter with her keys. "Fine. I'm leaving. I'm going to see him tomorrow. Do I tell him you'll be going later on in the week?"

"Whatever you think best." Ruby opened the door.

"Your heart is as cold as the stone that bears your name. Good night mother." Comet

left and walked the few feet to his own gloomy hut. A beggar stumbled out from the shadow of his doorway and startled him.

"Honor." The beggar looked all around its tattered self, then peered into the darkness of the lane.

"What? Go home, wench. It's late." Comet tried to sidestep her without touching her. She was filthy and even scrawnier than Ruby.

"Home. Home?" The beggar looked all around in bewilderment. "There's no magic."

"Oh you're one of those crackpots. You really should get on home before the Guard finds you." Comet waved his hand at the shabby mess of rags and unlocked his battered front door.

"The Queen. I must see the Queen."

"Oh yes? I'm sure you must. The Palace is that way, through the Market Square, past the barracks. You can't miss it. Have a nice night." Comet closed the door on the remainder of the day.

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Chapter 2

Lance Baron tripped over something as he rounded the corner to the barracks. He swore loudly and picked himself up. He was furious to see he'd fallen over a drunken hag who'd fallen asleep right there in the street! He hefted his boot into her ribs and she struggled in vain to get to her feet.

"You rancid little slut!" He roared. "Move it or I'll riddle you with my blade!"

"Why?" The beggar just blinked at the soldier. "I can't understand. It's all wrong."

"Clear off!" Lance bellowed and the beggar flinched. "Are you simple? Deaf?"

"I have to see the Queen. I don't know why. Where is the magic?" The beggar asked in bewilderment.

"Right! I've had enough of you lot today. You can spend the night in the lock-up with the other drunks." Captain Baron dragged the howling beggar along by the hair then once inside the yard, he flung open the lock-up door and threw her down half a dozen stone steps into the cellar. He dusted off his hands and went for some sleep.

Captain Hunter Bane was on duty the next day. The day after Zeal Day was known as the hangover shift, and that applied to soldiers and delinquents alike. He unlocked the cellar and the stench of stale beer, urine, vomit and sweat drifted out along with wails and groans of self inflicted discomfort.

"Come on you lot, out!" Hunter rattled a metal baton against the barred window of the door. "Ugh! Go and find a horse trough to clean yourselves and think yourselves lucky that buffoonery isn't a crime." The hungover miscreants shambled, blinking, into the daylight. "Ashamed of yourselves? good. Clear off, the lot of you!" He peered into the fetid darkness and could see the outline of a figure crouched against the wall. "Oi! Come on! It's time to leave!" The figure shuffled closer to the wall.

"Must you shout?" Lance Baron felt utterly foul and had a head that was threatening to burst. "What's the problem?"

"We have a lodger. Maybe injured, I don't know."

"It will be if I have to go in there for it. OK you shit! Two seconds to get out of there,

or I'll kick you to death!" Lance shouted and Hunter rolled his eyes.

"I'll do it shall I?" he walked down the steps to the remaining prisoner. He'd been down there a full two minutes and Lance was just about to intervene. "Lance? Hand me a torch down here."

"What's wrong?" Lance descended the steps, unhooking a lantern from the outside of the door as he did so. "Oh I remember her. Drunken whore in a stupor outside the gates."

"Take a good look at her. Don't you recognise her?" Hunter moved aside.

"Recognise her? I'd not go within ten feet of the rancid little bitch." Lance said in disgust.

"Lance she looks *alot* like Zeal Dawnstar." Hunter said.

"What?" Lance laughed. "Oh belt up. Half the city looks like Zeal Dawnstar on Zeal Day." He had a closer look. "Passing resemblance, I suppose."

"We'd better get her to the barracks sick-room. If she's some sort of family descendant of Zeal Dawnstar's, then I'm not getting my balls chewed off for neglecting her." Hunter lifted the beggar off the floor and Lance kept the lamp. "She's battered and emaciated. Shit I can feel every bone in her spine." Hunter carried her to the sick-room and Lance sent for Mistress Bess. Bess was as close as they had to a herbalist and she had the ear of the Infirmary Tenders if their skills were needed.

Once Hunter saw the girl in daylight, he was even more convinced she was kin to Zeal Dawnstar and even Lance looked slightly uncertain. Mistress Bess looked quizzically at the soldiers when she saw her unconscious patient.

"No broken bones, Mistress, But a plenty of cuts and bruises. Oh and she stinks from here to the Stars, sorry about that." Hunter said.

"Who is she? She looks familiar." Bess rubbed a tuft of tattered hair between her fingers. "No cosmetic colouring there, just dirt."

"Lance presumed her to be drunk and unconscious last night. She's been in the cells. We don't know who she is." Hunter said.

"OK away with you. I'll clean her up first." Bess shoo'd the soldiers out of the room.

"She's a Dawnstar." Hunter said to Lance as they stood outside the sick-room.

"No. Lore is a Dawnstar. Clash is a Dawnstar. That in there is a beggar." Lance said

flatly.

"Even Bess recognised her." Hunter pointed out.

"Hunter, I'm sure any kin of Zeal Dawnstar would have come forward before now. It's a coincidence." Lance said flatly.

"Can someone send for Jasper Icevale please?" Bess came out of the sickroom drying her hands on her apron.

"He hasn't been a Tender for years Bess." Hunter said.

"Icevale Tended Zeal Dawnstar when she got sick whilst pregnant. He used Air magic to draw a fever from her settled the unborn baby." Bess said seriously.

"You silly woman." Lance heaved a sigh. "Bess that is not Zeal Dawnstar. How in the realm could it be?"

"I don't know the ins and outs of magic." Bess shrugged. "Icevale's biggest self claim to fame is his treatment of the pregnant Zeal. His Air magic left a mark on her and I've just found a golden crescent on her belly. Icevale will know if it's his handywork. Pretentious old duffer leaving his autograph on the girl." Bess rolled her eyes.

"Crescent or not, it is not possible for that girl of no more than two decades, to be Zeal dawnstar. She won't have even been born when Zeal defeated the Harshlanders." Lance said in exasperation. "Use your heads the pair of you. Even if Zeal had survived out on the West Cliffs, she'd be forty years old now. Is she? No."

"I'm just a herb grower. I'm not here to offer explanations." Bess shrugged.

Jasper Icevale was in the sick-room less than sixty seconds and he was visibly shaken when he came back out. He could only manage a nod.

"Sacred shit." Hunter said in astonishment. "Zeal? Zeal herself?"

"Horseshit!" Lance snapped. "There's something not right here and I don't like it. That is not Zeal Dawnstar!"

"Her husband would know." Jasper shrugged. "I'm going to tell the Queen." He grinned suddenly.

"I think not, you old loon." Lance glared at him. "She'll be told, don't worry. Merciful Gods she'll think we're all mad. OK get her to the Infirmary."

"She is Zeal, you know." Jasper nodded. "What will the Queen say about you shoving

the saviour of Entia all over the place. Pfft Infirmary."

"Do as you see fit. I'm not committing myself further." Lance said stiffly.

Comet was shown into the Infirmary and then into a cold, bare room with a hard wooden cot against one wall. Brand was asleep on the cot and looked so very frail. He was horribly pale, right down to his lips and his fair hair was thin and dull. Comet was by no means a big man, but he was at least twice the weight of his sick twin. Brand's muscles had wasted away and his bones were right below his dry skin. Comet had been active all his life and opportunist thieves all had athletic muscles.

"Hey you!" Brand was watching Comet with watery blue eyes and a thin smile on his lips. "You should have woke me."

"I just got here." Comet sat on the stone floor by Brand's bed. "I made a small fortune yesterday! You'll be in Tegrin in no time."

"Zeal Day always was lucrative." Brand tried to laugh and fell into a coughing fit instead. "I'm OK. I'm feeling a bit better today, believe it or not." He lied.

"You look it too." Comet lied back. "Hey you'll never guess what's going on out there."

"Everyone's hungover and as sick as hounds." Brand guessed.

"Good guess!" Comet laughed. "Apart from that. The soldiers have picked up some beggar girl claiming to be Zeal Dawnstar."

"Oh Comet they pick up dozens of Zeal Dawnstars every year." Brand was tiring rapidly.

"No listen. They even got the old Tender who saw to her when she was pregnant with Duke Clash and they've even gone to the Queen so they can get Lord Dawnstar to go and verify it." comet said eagerly.

"That's amazing!" Brand was astonished. "How?"

"No one knows. There's more, Brand. They're saying she hasn't aged a single day!"

"Really? How can that be?" Brand was intrigued, as he was by all of Comet's tales.

"Who knows? She was a Mage though, so she still will be. Great Mother, Brand think of it!" Comet loved giving his brother fuel for his imagination, as well as news of Entia.

"Oh I am!" Brand nodded. "Ah I wish I could go with you right now Comet. You see so much and do so many things."

"We can see and do everything together once you're well."

"I'd like that. I remember when we were about six years old playing down by the River Zeal. Remember? I could do little more than sit on the grass and that was tiring. Do you remember it, Comet?" Brand's voice was becoming strained. "You climbed all the trees to get enough acorns for two crowns so we could be the Kings of Entia. You wanted to be a soldier and I wanted to be you." Comet felt the tears pricking his eyes. He couldn't recall the incident but it had meant a lot to Brand.

"You need to rest, Brand." Comet moved a clump of hair away from his twin's forehead. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Yes? I'll find out what's going on with all this Zeal Dawnstar business and come and let you know."

"Yes you must." Brand smiled weakly. "Thank you Comet."

"What for? I love you. You're my brother." Comet smiled and left Brand to rest.

The barracks were surrounded by guards. Lore Dawnstar and his son, Clash, had an armed escort, just to stop the enthusiastic people of Entia from crushing them. The two Court Advisors were shown into an office while the sickroom was cleared of any other wounded except the beggar girl.

Bess had bathed the girl and treated her cuts. She'd even attempted to untangle her matted red hair.

"See?" Bess thumbed open one of the girl's eyelids and Hunter leant over. "Green as a spring lawn."

"You don't have to convince me, Mistress. Now she's cleaned up anyone could recognise her from the statue in the Square." Hunter said.

"We don't want anyone to recognise her. We want Lore Dawnstar to recognise her." Bess began tidying away her wash bowls.

Lore Dawnstar was hiding his shock very well in front of his son. His first reaction to all this was to laugh, presuming it to be some Zeal Day prank. When he heard that three quite respectable people had recognised his wife, including the Tender who'd left his healing mark on her pregnant belly, he laughed no more. Even without the wizard's crescent, Zeal was very recognisable, and very memorable. No one in Entia had hair as red as Zeal's, or eyes that were as sparkling green. Lore had often wondered how none of these striking features had been passed on to Clash. Clash was absolutely his father's son. The only physical difference between the two dark

skinned and dark haired men was that Clash was six feet five, two inches taller than Lore, and Clash wore his black hair fashionably short. Lore's was unfashionably long and pony-tailed.

"This is going to complicate things." Clash commented.

"Without a doubt." Lore agreed. "Keep your composure, Clash, and trust me. I've always provided for you and I'll continue to do just that."

"Yes but The Queen ..."

"Shh. One step at a time, son." Lore scowled.

"Why don't you just say it isn't her? You'd know better than some ancient old Tender." Clash said irritably.

"I shall, if that's the case. It's not that simple. You saw those people out there Clash, they adore her. I doubt they'd just accept even my word without question. Anyway, have a bit of respect. without her sacrifice we wouldn't have the life we have today." Lore reminded him.

"And you wouldn't have The Queen's ... attention." Clash sighed.

"It's because I have The Queen's attention that you're in line for the throne. Remember that." Lore said sharply. Clash nodded.

"Gentlemen? They're ready for you." Captain Lance Baron escorted the Dawnstars from the office.

"What are your views on this, Captain Baron?" Lore asked.

"I prefer not to have views without viable substance, sir." Lance replied.

"A foot in both camps eh Captain?" Clash laughed and Lance didn't reply.

Even though Lore thought himself prepared, his colour drained and the breath caught in his throat when he saw Zeal. She was painfully thin and worn out, but still unmistakably his wife of twenty years ago. Bess lifted the sheet slightly so Lore could see the crescent marking and he had to sit down heavily on a chair. Clash couldn't take his eyes off Zeal, his mother. The mother he'd only ever known through statues and stories. He visibly jumped when her head moved and her eyelids flickered.

"Lore?" Zeal whispered. "The magic, Lore. I can't remember! Why can't I remember?" She clutched at Clash's hand and he was panic stricken.

"Zeal." Lore stood up and Zeal looked from one man to the other in complete confusion. "Zeal it's me, Lore. This is Clash."

"C ... C ... Clash? My Clash?" Zeal's green eyes were wide open in shock. "Yes I remember you. You were a baby."

"We all were at one time." Clash backed away uncertainly.

"Zeal what happened to you? Where have you been for twenty years?" Lore asked in a daze.

"I don't know." Zeal said weakly. "What is twenty years?"

"Excuse me Lord Dawnstar." Bess said quietly. "She really does need to rest. Excuse my boldness."

"I want to go home. I'm tired." Zeal looked completely overwhelmed. Lore and Clash looked at each other, then Bess, then Hunter.

"Obviously the barracks isn't the place for Lady Dawnstar, but she still needs care." Hunter pointed out.

"We can't put her in the Infirmary, father. The place is a pit." Clash spoke up.

"If I can make a suggestion?" Bess said. "It would be an honor for me to stay here right next to Lady Zeal until a suitable Tender can be appointed to her in your home."

"Excellent idea." Lore agreed. "Can I suggest someone other than Jasper Icevale? I think his enthusiasm may be a bit much for Lady Zeal."

"He'd herald every pot of ointment with a fanfare." Clash agreed.

"I'm sure Mistress Bess' expertise can be trusted." Lore nodded.

Comet reaped the benefits of the Zeal crowd outside the barracks, then the ones outside the Dawnstar's walled and gated house. He'd just cashed in his third collection of pickings, and was on his way back down the street, when he heard someone calling his name. Comet recognised Violet Veil as a respectable shop keeper specialising in oils and perfumes. He also recognised her as an associate of The Web.

"Share a jug of ale, Comet." Violet turned into a side street and entered the Blue Drum Tavern. Comet had little choice but to follow her.

"Miss Veil." Comet sat at a table with Violet and eyed her warily, an uncomfortable feeling creeping up his spine.

"You're to report to Tender Antal Redsong at the Infirmary. Don't use the front door, go round the side of the building. Antal will meet you there." Violet told him.

"W ... what? The Infirmary?" Comet blinked in surprise.

"That was the order." Violet said meaningfully. Comet's head was reeling. Order from where? Shadow? It had to be!

"Do you know what I'm to do?" Comet asked.

"No. I merely pass on the message. Go. Antal will instruct you further." Violet nodded towards the door and Comet stumbled through it. Why had Shadow chosen him for a job? He was only a petty thief, a pickpocket, a rat. Comet could scarcely believe that Shadow would even know of his existence, let alone select him for a purpose. No one ever saw these selections as an honour, the price of failure was a sure death.

Antal Redsong was waiting for Comet in the Infirmary grounds. He was immediately ushered into a square building that stood by itself and was obviously a wash room and laundry building. It was empty apart from the two men.

"Through there is a bath tub and clothes." Antal nodded towards a side room.

"What's going on, Antal? I've been told nothing." Comet asked cautiously.

"I'd rather alk to someone who wasn't covered in dust, sweat and dressed in rags. Bath tub." Antal busied himself with a shelf full of bandages. Comet sighed and went to the side room.

"Antal! Clothes? There are only Tenders' tunics and leggings in here."

"They are clothes, are they not?" Antal said casually. Comet walked out of the room dressed in his under britches.

"You want me to masquerade as a Tender?" Comet asked in disbelief. "Are you off your stump?"

"You think this is my idea?" Antal scowled. Comet grimaced and went back into the bath room.

Thirty minutes later, Comet emerged clean and groomed and dressed in the pale blue garb of the Tenders.

"How do I look?" He grinned, plucking at the hem of his tunic.

"Like a twenty year old thug in Tenders' dress. I have two days to shape you up." Antal said.

"So what am I being shaped up for? Don't say it's running drugs, Antal, please." Comet asked in dread. He'd done a few illegal things in his life, but that wasn't one of them.

"You aren't staying here. You're to be Zeal Dawnstar's personal Tender." Antal frowned and clearly had misgivings about all this.

"You know, for a minute I thought you said Zeal Dawnstar's personal Tender." Comet felt the hysterics rising. "Zeal Dawnstar? *The* Zeal Dawnstar? Fifteen thousand Barbarians single handedly? Returned from the dead after twenty years? Are we on the same one here?" He babbled.

"Are you finished?" Antal snapped.

"No!" Comet flung up his hands. "Antal I'm not a Tender! I wouldn't know a poultice from a pill!"

"As far as her injuries go, they're quite light. A few cuts and bruises. I'm sure you can manage a washcloth and some ointment. The only thing of concern is two cracked ribs. They should heal naturally but you're to report to me if you see any problems."

"This is insane!" Comet objected. "I'll be found out in hours! Minutes! Seconds! Why not send a real Tender?"

"Shadow sent you." Antal said flatly. "I'm sure you'd think twice about asking these questions of him in person."

"So the job's complete when Lady Zeal is fully recovered? I'm missing something here. I'm sure Shadow didn't contract me to smear ointment on Lady Zeal." Comet looked evenly at Antal.

"I was warned that you'd question this." Antal said in irritation. "I was told to reveal your full instruction if you insisted. I would have preferred to tutor you for a few days first."

"Unlucky. I'm inststing." Comet sat on a pile of bed linen.

"Very well. You're to glean information from Lady Dawnstar. Her disappearance was magical, her return was magical and her physical appearance is magical. Shadow wants reasons and he wants them first." Antal said.

"Insane, as I said. Antal, what in the realm makes you think she'll talk to me? Even as a Tender I won't be considered close or important enough." Comet said desperately.

"That's your department." Antal shrugged. "It's my guess you were chosen because of your bouyant and charismatic nature. Seduce her if you have to."

"Seduce her!" Comet exploded in sheer shock. "Aren't you forgetting her six foot three husband and six foot five son? I can't do this. I don't mean unwilling, although I am, I mean not able. I'm just not qualified for such a big undertaking. You'll have to tell Shadow I'm not up to this, Antal."

"Comet, Shadow predicted this reaction." Antal chewed his lip and looked very uncomfortable indeed. "As a mark of his appreciation to you for accepting this job, he's made provisions for Brand in his own Keep." Comet's blood turned to ice in his veins. They were holding Brand as leverage to force Comet to do this impossible task. Comet sprang towards the door and sprinted over the Infirmary grounds before Antal had even got to his feet. "Comet! Damn you man. Comet he's gone!" Antal followed as quickly as he could. Comet knocked over anyone in his way, Tenders and patients alike. He kicked open the door to Brand's room and it was totally empty. Even the cot had been stripped of its linen. "Comet come on." Antal tried to catch his breath. "Are you trying to uncover yourself before you even start? Come on lad. You have to think of Brand." Comet could think of nothing else as he followed Antal in a numb daze.

Zeal gradually became more coherent and for longer lengths of time.

"Why am I still here?" She asked in irritaion. "Where's Lore? Are you keeping him from me?"

"Lord Dawnstar is preparing your home for your convalescence, Lady Dawnstar." Hunter Bane explained, again.

"Oh yes, I see." Zeal muttered. "I have ... things ... in my head."

"Give yourself time. Once you've rested, you'll remember everything." Hunter reassured her.

"No not those things." Zeal tugged at a tuft of her tattered hair. "Things! Things! They sparkle my skin." She gave her scalp a scratch and Bess went to investigate.

"Bugs."

"Bugs." Zeal agreed in annoyance.

"I'll heat some water and wash that for you." Bess offered and Zeal nodded. Bess filled a jug of water and walked by Zeal to get to the stove to heat it. Zeal yawned and waved her hand towards the jug. Within seconds, steam began to rise from the water and Bess put the jug down quickly. Both Bess and Hunter were rooted to the spot in shock.

"Do you have a brush, Bess?" Zeal asked. Bess nodded and hurried through the door. Hunter eventually unfroze and darted over to Zeal's bedside.

"Lady Zeal! No one does that anymore." He nodded towards the jug.

"Don't they? Why?" Zeal peered into the jug.

"It's not necessary now-a-days and it's ... well it's against the law." Hunter said awkwardly.

"Oh. Well that can't be right. That makes no sense." Zeal frowned.

"I believe that magic for ladies was illegal even in your day, Lady Zeal." Hunter reminded her.

"Umm ... is that so? I broke the law?"

"I think they made an exception that time." Hunter smiled. "Here's Bess with your hairbrush. I'll leave."

"Leave for where?" Zeal asked as Bess tackled her hair.

"No. Leave the room."

"Why?"

"Well because you'll be attending to your personal needs." Hunter said awkwardly.

"The bugs. Yes?"

"Partly, yes. I'm sure you'd like to change your clothes too." Hunter edged towards the door.

"You's stop me doing so?" Zeal asked in confusion.

"No, I wouldn't stop you." Hunter couldn't help but smile at the absurdity of the conversation. "I think Bess is more suited to this than I am. Excuse me please." He made his escape and left Bess with a bit of explaining to do, regarding who not to undress in front of.

Comet was introduced to his employers, the Dawnstars, and given a room that was palatial compared to his shed. It had two windows, a proper bed and a carpet! Comet stood in front of a mirror and tried to force his brain to work sensibly. Had Antal been serious about seducing Lady Zeal? Comet had always been vainly pleased about his physical appearance. At five feet ten he could get away with being slightly underweight because the weight he had was muscle. He had a healthy, tanned complexion due to his outdoor life and Comet thought that brought out the best in his blue eyes and his blonde hair. If he could make one wish, it would be for a bit more beef on his ribs. His diet often consisted of scraps and hope, sometimes minus the former. Even with his own opinions of himself, Comet seriously doubted he would have a feather in a gale's chance with the magnificent Zeal Dawnstar. He'd also just been standing within feet of her spouse and son and that confirmed the impossibility of that notion.

"The Lady is here." Bracken, the footman, said from Comet's door. Comet nodded and grabbed his bag of medicines. "Nervous?"

"Very." Comet admitted.

"It's quite miraculous isn't it?" Bracken lead him to the lounge. "Lord Dawnstar, the Tender's here." Comet stepped into the room where Lady Zeal was sitting on a couch. He had to do a serious double take when he saw her and when he did, he wanted to run and jump into the nearest well. It was the beggar girl who'd stumbled out of his doorway! He tried and better tried to recall if he'd said anything vulgar or insulting to her. Had he called her a wench? Or was it a hag?

"Zeal this is the Tender from the Infirmary. Comet Galewind."

"Galeraven. It's an honour to meet you, Lady Dawnstar." Comet bobbed his head in a bow. She looked frighteningly pale and weak, but endlessly more civilised than she'd done the last time they'd met.

"Why do I need a Tender?" Zeal asked Lore.

"Zeal I've just told you." Lore said patiently. "We need you to recover your strength and the Infirmary and the barracks weren't suitable. Remember?"

"Oh yes, you told me." Zeal scratched her scalp, despite Bess' efforts. Lore grimaced slightly. "I have to see the Queen. Umm ... I think I do, anyway. Where's Lore?"

"I'm Lore. I just told you that too. Clash is your son and he's seeing to business. He's not me." Lore explained, again.

"He's like you." Zeal commented.

"Yes I know." Lore turned his attention to Comet. "As you can see, Lady Zeal gets myself and Clash confused. If she mentions, or asks for either of us, clarify who she means."

"Yes of course." Comet nodded. Zeal yawned and rubbed her eyes, then sagged down on the couch, sticking her legs out akimbo in front of her, making a very un-ladylike spectacle. Comet felt a giggle stirring and had to look at his feet.

"Zeal!" Lore darted at her. "Er ... yes. You must be tired. I'll get Serai to take you to your room." He helped her to her feet.

"Do I undress with the Serai in the room?"

"She's your serving girl." Lore seered Zeal in Serai's direction. "Comet will check you after you've slept."

"Absolutely." Comet tried not to sound too full of dread.

"Apart from the physical scratches and bruises, she's also quite confused." Lore said, closing the door. "She seems to have forgotten how to behave in company. I'm sure you know what I mean by the way she just slumped down to sleep."

"I'm a Tender sir. Lady Dawnstar's standards of etiquette aren't paramount for now." Comet said, sagely, and felt quite pleased with himself.

"Good. Just be aware of it and make allowances for it. Serai's always at hand, so is Bracken. We also have a cook called Delph and a serving girl named Mittin. You'll see alot of Clash, although he has his own rooms near the Palace. Obviously he has the run of the house, as I do. You'll take your meals in the kitchen unless otherwise invited by myself, Lady Zeal, or Duke Clash. I think that about covers it."

"Thank you, Lord Dawnstar." Comet said politely.

"We've already had lunch, but go and ask Delph to feed you." Lore dismissed Comet.

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Chapter 3

Comet's natural charm worked wonders on Delph, who was soon fussing over him like a mother hen. He ate the biggest meal he'd had in years and felt quite guilty about it afterwards.

"I'll take that." Comet nodded towards the tray of food for Lady Zeal.

"You are a sweetie." Delph smiled widely and handed the tray to Comet. There was no reply when Comet tapped gently on the bedroom door. Maybe he should leave her resting. Comet was just about to tip-toe away when Lady Zeal opened the door. The tray nearly ended up on the floor. Zeal was wearing Lore's official dress uniform. Black trousers, red silk shirt and a black cape complete with royal insignia clasp. Obviously the ensemble was far too big for her and looked totally ridiculous.

"I've brought your lunch." Comet said needlessly. Zeal looked at Comet, then at the food. "The ham and cheese is wonderful. I've just had some." Zeal nodded and picked up a slice of ham that was the size of the plate. She began biting chunks out of it, then wandered back into the room. Comet shrugged his shoulders and followed her. "Have you slept?" He asked.

"Slept." Zeal considered this with a mouth full of ham. "Oh yes. Yes I've slept." She tossed the ham on the bed and grabbed a lump of cheese. "Will you tell me about Entia? I don't remember some of this. I saw the statue in the Square."

"Well a lot has changed in twenty years, Lady Zeal." Comet handed Zeal a knife and fork. She held the cutlery in one hand and continued eating her food with her free hand.

"I don't understand this twenty years." She shook her head.

"Well you know you mistook Clash for Lore? That's because Lore was around Clash's age when you last saw him. Clash would have been a baby." Comet explained.

"So Clash looks like Lore because of twenty years. Yes?" Zeal wiped her mouth on Lore's very expensive shirt.

"Yes. Clash has aged twenty years, so has Lore and so has everyone else, apart from you."

"Even you?"

"Yes, even me. I'm only slightly younger than Clash. I'm twenty too."

"More twenty? OK so Clash is twenty. What is Lore?" Zeal asked.

"I believe he's forty five." Comet replied and Zeal looked very confused indeed. "Two twenties and ... a bit."

"And I'm twenty too, just like Clash."

"Yes but that's because you haven't aged for some reason. Perhaps you can recall why?" Comet asked hopefully.

"No." Zeal said simply.

"Great." Comet muttered. "Maybe you shouldn't eat so fast, Lady Zeal." Zeal was still cramming food into her mouth.

"I like it."

"I can tell." Comet winced at the state of Lord Dawnstar's uniform. "You'll make yourself sick. Take your time. Here look." He took the cutlery from Zeal, cut off a small piece of meat, then handed it back to her.

"Yes. Thank you." Zeal ate that, then tried to copy Comet. "I went ... somewhere."

"Yes you did, for twenty years. You can't remember where?"

"No." Zeal frowned and shook her head, before having another go with the cutlery. "I have to do something ... or something. Damn, blast and shite to it! Why can't I remember anything?" Comet almost fell off his seat in shock at the colourful outburst from Lady Dawnstar. "I'm no good at that either." She threw the knife and fork on the bed.

"Of course you can, you just need time." Comet smiled. "Umm ... I'm not sure if this is part of my job but maybe you should drop the language when you're in company."

"What?" Zeal grabbed her fork again.

"Swearing. The language you used just then when you got frustrated. Don't get me wrong, I can handle it and I understand. Maybe others could be a bit surprised." Comet tried to explain.

"No one was surprised at Captain Baron."

"Ah yes, you were in the barracks, I forgot. I'm absolutely certain that Captain Baron wouldn't have sworn if he'd known you could hear him. It's incredibly rude and disrespectful to swear in front of ladies, especially one such as yourself." Comet said.

"So I don't swear in front of ladies. Yes OK." Zeal eventually mastered the cutlery.

"No you don't swear at all. You *are* a lady. In fact you're *the* Lady." Comet tried so hard not to laugh.

"This is complicated." Zeal sighed. "I need to go."

"Go where?" Comet asked in panic.

"Go. You know? Serai said I had to shut myself in the small room out there if I needed to go." Zeal explained.

"Oh! Oh go? Er yes. You'd better go." Comet opened the door. "Over there, see? Small room."

"Thank you." Zeal minced past Comet.

"I can't do this." He muttered to himself. "I'll have to ask to see Shadow in person." He set about tidying up the mess Zeal had made with the food.

"Much better." Zeal breezed back in and Comet didn't know if to laugh or cry when he saw the Lord's cape was sodden wet at the hem.

"Lady Zeal? Wouldn't you prefer to wear something else?" Comet asked.

"Does it matter? Serai took my other things. She said Bess' taste in clothes was horrible." Zeal told him.

"Well those clothes are Lord Dawnstar's and they're far too big for you."

"I found them in that hole in the wall."

"The cupboard, yes. Is there nothing in there a bit more suitable?" Comet made a note to grab Serai to address this. This was her job, not his!

"I'll look. Bess said not to undress in front of ogling perverts. You'll have to leave." Zeal began ransacking the cupboard that seemed to contain only Lore's clothes.

"I'll take this tray back down and return later to check on your wounds." Comet said.

Zeal just nodded and continued hunting. Comet grimaced and left her to it. He returned the tray to Delph, accepted a sweet biscuit, then went to look for Serai. He didn't get far when he heard a cross between a howl and a sob, and it wasn't Zeal. Comet ran up the stairs as fast as he could to find Lord Dawnstar in his room and far from happy.

"It's ruined!" He yelled, holding up the wet cloak. "It's got *what* on it? How dare you!"

"I don't know what that means. Was I not to wear it? I felt cold." Zeal sounded completely baffled by all the fuss.

"No, Zeal, you were not to wear it." Lore said angrily. "Or this, or this, or that! What in the names of the gods are you doing?"

"Dressing. I'm cold!"

"Just get into bed, Zeal. I'll send out for you some clothes of your own." Lore snapped.

"I don't know what I've done to upset you. Maybe I should try Clash's clothes hole. He doesn't have as many twenties."

"No! No you will not, Zeal! Stay in there and stay covered up."

"Yes. OK. What if I need to go?"

"You don't go anywhere until I get you some clothes." Lore said flatly. Comet grimaced and made a very disturbing prediction. "Ah Comet! We have a ... situation. She's to stay in that bed. Understood?"

"Completely." Comet watched Lore stamp down the stairs with an armfull of ruined clothes. Zeal looked absolutely bewildered as she sat in bed with the sheet up to her chin.

"I think I sodded something up but I'm not sure how." She said seriously. Comet tried his best to explain that something like a dress uniform was most probably something that Lore took great pride in.

"I'm sure Lord Dawnstar was more ... surprised ... than angry."

"My arse. He was furious." Zeal said ruefully.

"Barracks talk, Lady Zeal." Comet reminded her.

"Oh yes, sorry. Comet I feel ... heavy earth. Why is that?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure what you mean." Comet replied warily, mindful that Zeal was a wizard.

"It's Lore. I thought about both of them while I was ... wherever I was. I told water all about them and how fantastic my man was. It was important so I didn't get lost." Zeal frowned in concentration.

"Thinking about him kept your spirits up. I can understand that." Comet immediately thought of Brand and it almost set the tears off. "Lore and Clash were your connection to home. Of course you thought about them. You love them both very much."

"Is that what it is? I feel it but I don't recognise it. Does Lore love me?"

"What? Of course he does!" Comet smiled. "He'll tell you that himself."

"But he hasn't. Isn't he supposed to do something? For me especially, I mean?" Zeal asked.

"Ah, I'm not sure you should be asking me this." Comet said awkwardly.

"Probably not. I've gotten everything else wrong. OK so I love Lore, and I always have. Right, I know the feeling now. I feel earth because I feel ... flat. I feel ... heavy. It's because Lore doesn't have feelings." Zeal struggled to get her meaning across.

"Wait." Comet tried to digest this. "You think that Lore doesn't love you? I'm sure he does, Zeal." He felt very sorry for Zeal. Wherever she'd been, it had stripped away her ability to handle her life here. "He was just a bit angry about the clothes, that's all."

"Surprised, you said. No Comet. He never smiles at me. He never tells me he thinks of me even though it's been a twenty for him. Is it my fault? I do realise I have to re-learn a few things."

"I don't think there is a fault. I think you have to give yourself time. You're trying to fill in gaps with the most complicated thing of all. Emotions. As for Lore? You have to remember what a huge shock this is for him. It's a huge shock to all of us, but especially him."

"Yes I understand. I've forgotten how to do things and that upsets Lore. Will you help me?"

"Yes of course I will." Comet nodded. Perhaps getting information wasn't going to be

impossible after all. He felt a huge pang of guilt over all this. He genuinely did feel sorry for Zeal. It was quite pitiful for him to see their great hero in such a state of confusion.

"So I want you with me all of the time to advise me and correct me. Yes?" Zeal nodded eagerly.

"As much as I can. It'll be a pleasure." Comet smiled. Serai came into the room with a few of her own dresses, and a nightgown.

"Sacred Mother, Lord Dawnstar is furious." She said. Zeal looked at the bedsheet and Comet glared at Serai. "That was a very careless thing to do, Lady Zeal."

"Hey, hang on." Comet spoke up when he saw how upset Zeal was. "So it wasn't careless that none of the womenfolk here realised Lady Zeal has no possessions? She's been away for two decades, of course she has no clothes."

"Even so, Lord Dawnstar's uniform?" Serai said challengingly.

"She was trying to keep warm, seeing as no one had left her anything else. Or maybe you're suggesting that someone sick enough to require a Tender, should wander about in a bedsheet buying her own things?" Comet never was one for backing down from an argument. Serai looked away first. "She's not at fault, Serai. I don't want her upset by accusations of carelessness on her part."

"If that's what you think. Excuse me, Lady Dawnstar." Serai walked stiffly from the room.

"Now I've upset Serai." Zeal sighed.

"You haven't." Comet glared at the door. "Really you haven't. She should think before she speaks and she certainly shouldn't speak to you like that. You're the Lady of the house. You pay her wages."

"Thank you. I'm pleased you're staying with me." Zeal smiled.

"As much as I can, as I said." Comet replied, holding the door open for Lore who appeared with stacks of packages and boxes.

"Mittin got these. You'll get some of a better quality when I have someone to advise me on such things." He dumped the packages on the floor.

"I love you." Zeal said bluntly.

"Yes. I'm your husband." Lore said awkwardly, looking at Comet. Comet just smiled

and shrugged his shoulders.

"Comet will sleep in here, Lore. Will we all fit in?" Zeal said. Comet squeaked and almost fainted. Lore looked at Zeal as though she'd sprouted a new head.

"N ... no! Er no!" Comet yelped. "Lady Zeal? What?" If Lore lost his temper here he could throw Comet out of the house. that wouldn't bode well for Brand.

"You said you'd stay with me. Have I said something wrong again?" Zeal looked warily at Lore.

"Lord Dawnstar, I sincerely apologise. This is probably all my fault for not making myself clear." Comet grovelled. "I assured Lady Zeal that I'd stay with her as much as possible to help and advise her. I'm a Tender."

"Tenders sleep too." Zeal said unhelpfully.

"Not in there with you they don't." Lore said flatly. "Comet, explain to Lady Zeal at a later time, why her comment was inappropriate."

"Me?" Comet blurted. "Sir I would never speak on such a level with Lady Zeal!"

"You're a Tender." Lore scowled at him.

"Yes sir. A professional carer. I'm not a close, personal associate of Lady Zeal's and I'm the wrong gender!" Comet pleaded.

"Oh yes, I see. I tend to think of you lot as ... neutral." Lore said in annoyance.

"Thank you sir." Comet said sarcastically. "I was just about to examine Lady Zeal. Will you stay?" Lore nodded and Comet tried to muster up a bit of confidence. He gingerly poked and prodded a few cuts on Zeal's head and arms, then rubbed some foul smelling salve on them. Zeal's ribs caused him to take a deep breath and burrow a tunnel through the sheets to the site of the injury. "Am I on the wrong side? There's no sign of injury. Tender Antal told me you had cracked ribs."

"Where?" Zeal lifted the sheet completely. Comet stood up quickly and looked imploringly at Lore.

"For crying out loud!" Lore dragged the sheet back over Zeal. "Maybe I should engage a female Tender. I didn't foresee any of this at all."

"No!" Comet and Zeal both said together.

"That's all fixed down there." Zeal nodded. "I won't need to do that anymore. I'm

sorry."

"Fixed? You had three cracked ribs." Lore said.

"Is that what it was? Yes it hurt like a bastard." Zeal said seriously and Comet had to turn away to hide a laugh. "Ah barracks again. Sorry! No, I fixed it. It's fine."

"Zeal did you use magic?" Lore frowned at his wife.

"Yes." Zeal sighed. "Earth forces. Lore it isn't wrong! It isn't bad!"

"Oh? The forces that took you to ... gods know where, for two decades? I'd say it was very wrong for anything to separate a mother from her infant." Lore preached and Zeal looked devastated. Comet thought that was an incredibly unfair and very cruel thing to say. Obviously he kept his mouth shut.

"It wasn't like that." Zeal said feebly.

"I won't argue with you, Zeal. You have no argument. I'll send Serai to help you dress for dinner. Comet, you'll join us in the dining room." Lore strode out of the room. Comet smiled reassuringly at Zeal and followed him.

Zeal looked endlessly better dressed in a long blue dress and a shawl. Serai had brushed her lovely hair too, and the bugs seemed to have gone. She sat opposite her husband, Comet was opposite Clash. Zeal glanced at Comet to see which cutlery he'd picked up, the copied him.

"Clash?" Zeal said with her mouth full. Comet pursed his lips so Zeal swallowed before continuing. "Clash? You do know that I didn't leave you on purpose a twenty ago, don't you?"

"The forces took you." Clash replied.

"No. No they didn't. Umm well yes they did." Zeal frowned in frustration. "They needed me for something but I don't know why."

"Clash needed you too, so did I." Lore said flatly.

"Father, please." At least Clash saw the hurt look in his mother's eyes. "We worked out that it was probably some sort of Pact. Does that sound right?"

"Pact?" Zeal considered this. "Yes that does sound right. The forces gave me the magic to defeat the Barbarians."

"And what did you give them?" Clash asked.

"Myself, obviously." Zeal shrugged. "I can't remember why. I went for a purpose." She shook her head in concentration. "Oh arseholes to it. I'll remember some time." She picked up the wine bottle and drank straight from it. Clash snorted a laugh and Zeal looked at him over the bottle. He nodded at Lore, who looked far from impressed. "Swearing or bottle?"

"Both." Lore took the bottle from Zeal. "The Courts and the government want to meet with you, Zeal. Even the Queen herself is keen to see you. Personally I don't think you're up to it. Comet?"

"Maybe waiting a while before public engagements would be for the best." Comet said diplomatically.

"You don't want me to see people? Why?" Zeal asked, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. Comet discretely handed her a napkin, then dabbed at his own mouth with one. Zeal nodded and copied him, then tossed the napkin on the floor.

"That isn't the point." Lore said. "You should wait until you're better ... adjusted, Zeal." Comet thought that a rather strange choice of words and was confused with Lore. Zeal Dawnstar was a hero of epic proportions. If she was Comet's wife, he'd have her dancing in the street with her people. Why wouldn't Lore want to show her off? Comet found himself looking at a painting above the fireplace. It was a painting of the statue in the Square. He also recalled the gifts and tributes left in the Square on Zeal Day. Comet didn't think for one minute that the Dawnstars claimed all these gifts, but they'd certainly done well for themselves over the last twenty years. This was a lifestyle they'd want to sustain and producing Zeal for the Queen and Courts with an affected mind could compromise that. Comet suddenly felt a rather bitter taste in his mouth.

"OK so we wait a while." Zeal shrugged. "You didn't answer my question, Clash. Do you think I abandoned you willingly? I didn't."

"No of course not." Clash said awkwardly. Obviously he was unused to such maternal concern, especially from someone his own age.

"Does it matter? You saved Entia." Lore reached for more wine. "Clash, have ..."

"I think it does matter, somehow. I'm just not sure why." Zeal interrupted. "I feel it's important that Clash knows I didn't abandon him. There will be a reason for it."

"I think you're tired." Lore commented. It took every ounce of restraint that Comet had to keep his mouth closed. It was glaringly obvious why it was important! She was his mother! Why didn't one of them just tell her that as an explanation?

"No, not tired." Zeal said simply. "I do know that I've missed something very special, Clash. I've missed you growing."

"Six feet five's worth." Clash smiled and made Zeal laugh.

"You're not like me at all! You're exactly like Lore, isn't he Comet? Your father was the most handsome man in Entia when he asked me to marry him. He was studying history and the law even back then. I knew you'd do well in the government, Lore." Zeal smiled at her husband who, quite frankly, looked bored. Zeal noticed that too. "Yes. Yes well I'm pleased you followed in his footsteps Clash. I think I'll go and sit in the garden while the sun's still up."

"Take Comet with you. Clash and I have business to discuss." Lore said dismissively.

Comet found Zeal sitting by the pool, making tiny fountains spring from its flat surface. She stopped when she saw him approaching.

"Have I done something wrong, Comet? Shock or no shock, I don't understand it. Does he not remember proposing to me? Doesn't he remember our life before the Barbarian attack?"

"Of course he remembers. Why would he not?" Comet replied.

"So why doesn't he like me now? He did then."

"Zeal I'm sure he does still like you." Comet said, although he had a few doubts of his own edging in.

"Why did he never re-marry?"

"Heck Zeal I have no idea." Comet smiled. "Let's face it, you're a pretty hard act to follow. It's just as well eh? I can imagine a realm hero being a very despairing rival." That made Zeal laugh.

"Maybe he'll find me interesting again if I knew where I'd been and why I was back. That's bound to be interesting to the government."

"I think we'd all like to know that." Comet said lightly and thoughts of Brand flooded into his head.

"It's the magic, Comet. It's something important to do with the magic. I wish I could remember." Zeal sighed.

"It'll come to you, don't worry. Have a swear if you like." Comet grinned and Zeal laughed again. "It bound to be to do with magic. Everything about it is magical,

yourself included. Wherever you've been has no time."

"Confusing." Zeal frowned in concentration.

"No passing of time. No twenties. No tens, fives, ones or anything else. You haven't been aged by time." Comet tried to clarify.

"I should be two twenties now. That's ... oh buggery ... don't tell me! ... twenty, twenty, forty!"

"Yep! You'd have been forty if you'd stayed here." Comet said.

"Queen Honor? Oh! She was twenty when she was crowned! Is twenty always such a prevalent ... thing?" Zeal asked.

"Just a coincidence in this case. Queen Honor was thirty when you left. She's fifty now. Can you remember Musit Dure?" Comet smiled.

"He had more twenties than everyone put together, even before I left!" Zeal nodded.

"He's still on the Queen's Council and he's ninety five. That's almost five twenties!" Comet laughed.

"What about Oola and En Greycloud? Do they still have the farm by the River Ent?" Zeal recalled this suddenly.

"River Zeal." Comet corrected and Zeal rolled her eyes. "Oola is still here as far as I know. En passed away about three years ago."

"I see. I used to play on the farm and feed the horses."

"Really? Did you live by the river?"

"Well I was found by the river so I suppose I did for a few hours." Zeal shrugged.

"Mistress Hulu who lived by the Infirmary, found me and raised me with her six sons and four daughters. She'd gone by the time I was married and the children had all left Entia to live in other parts of the realm. So you see, having someone as educated and as refined as Lore taking an interest in me, is probably the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Well you're definitely the best thing that happened to him." Comet said ambiguously. "You gave him a fine son, for one thing."

"Yes he is fine." Zeal agreed. "I feel my memory returning, and along with it, my memory of ... um ... social behaviour. Sort of. Everything stops when I was standing

out on West Ridge. I need to see people, Comet. I need to be reminded of my home. I've no pricks here."

"Pricks?"

"Pricks. Sharp ... things ... to make my memory work. How long do I have to stay here with no people?" Zeal asked in agitation.

"Well I'm your Tender but the final decision is Lore's. I can mention this to him, if you like?"

"Yes please. Thank you Comet." Zeal smiled, then looked serious. "I have a problem."

"OK. Let's hear it."

"Given my new sense of decorum, of sorts, I now know why Lore was a bit ... pointed ... when I outlined the sleeping arrangements." Zeal said sensibly.

"Oh that! Yes it was a bit surprising." Comet laughed.

"I can imagine so. I have vague recollections of the bed being for other things apart from sleeping and going in. I can't remember what to do." Zeal said in irritation.

"This isn't happening." Comet muttered. "Well first off, the bed isn't for going in. Small room remember? I think Lore misunderstood what you meant when he told you not to go. You need to go, you go to the small room."

"I'll remember. And the other?"

"Zeal that's one thing I can't advise you on. I swear I can't." Comet said in amusement and a touch of sympathy. "You're going to ask me why now, I know you are. Remember the decorum stuff? It wouldn't be right at all for me to discuss that with you, for a few reasons. You're a married Lady. The only people who should ever, *ever* mention the subject are you and Lore. No exceptions."

"Not even Clash?"

"Shit no! Er .. pardon me. No, not even Clash. You and your husband. Absolutely no one else." Comet emphasised.

"Understood." Zeal nodded seriously. "What about wind? I almost exploded during dinner because I wasn't sure if to let it out or not." Comet cringed and began another lesson.

Lore and Clash sat in the study, drinking wine.

"You could have at least answered her, father." Clash said.

"Perhaps." Lore rubbed his tired eyes. "It's taken twenty years to get here, Clash. That's twenty years of thinking your mother was never coming back. She stood still, I didn't. What we have now is for you, remember. The throne of Entia is coming to you."

"Yes I understand that, but we can't just pretend she isn't here. Those people out there worship her! She's a ready made successor to Queen Honor." Clash said gloomily.

"There's more to it than that. Stop behaving like a brat. As long as I have Honor between the sheets, the crown is yours. I've never let you down before." Lore snapped.

"I presume you don't want the Courts thinking she's feeble minded?" Clash said sulkily.

"No. People would switch adulation for sympathy. Sympathy doesn't carry the status. Why the shit did she have to come back?" Lore sighed loudly.

"Well she did and she's right here. Maybe leave her with her Tender for now until things stabilise." Clash advised.

"Maybe so, yes. I need sleep. I have a meeting tomorrow while you're in with the Council. Feel free to stay here." Lore said.

"I'll return to my rooms. It's fine." Clash let himself out of the house.

Zeal was brushing her hair at the mirror when Lore entered the bedroom. He had hoped she'd be asleep.

"You look tired." Zeal put down her brush. Lore just nodded and began pulling off his boots. "I'm a bit of a shock, I know." She climbed on the bed behind her husband. "I never expected to have a river and a statue named after me." Zeal rested her head on Lore's shoulder and he edged away. "Lore?"

"I'm tired, Zeal." Lore muttered.

"Haven't you missed me at all? You were the first thing I thought of when I returned. I love you Lore, I always have."

"Zeal, don't." Lore moved out of the way completely. Zeal looked completely bewildered. "What do you expect from me after all these years? Do you think I can

just switch off then back on? What do you want from me?"

"My husband." Zeal said weakly. She was so very hurt, far worse than the pain from her cuts, bruises and ribs. Lore rolled over and turned his back on his wife. Zeal noticed her eyes were seeping water and made a note to ask Comet about it.

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Chapter 4

Comet intended visiting Antal at the Infirmary on the pretence of restocking his supplies. He needed more background information on the Dawnstars as a family. He also needed contact with someone who could help him with some of Zeal's more sensitive questions, preferably a female member of The Web.

Breakfast was a silent affair. Zeal and Lore sat at opposite ends of the table and Comet could almost see the atmosphere between them.

"Lore, about my visitors." Zeal began.

"We went though this yesterday. You're not ready." Lore stated.

"What about here? I wouldn't have to go anywhere." Zeal argued.

"I said no." Lore looked evenly at his wife. "There's no one for you to see right now. the Courts and Council are in session."

"Oh I see." Zeal looked very disappointed. "Do we have any friends?"

"I have to go." Lore stood up. "You'll receive visitors when you're ready to. Good day, Zeal."

"Lore! Well ... when will you be back? Is Clash going too?" Zeal asked pathetically.

"I don't know when I'll be back. Clash is busy. I'm sure Comet will keep you company." Lore nodded and left. So much for Antal. There again Comet doubted he could have left his charge in such a miserable mood.

"He's a busy man." Zeal said weakly.

"They both are." Comet included Clash too. Too busy, it seemed, to be concerned about Zeal. "Thank you for not forcing my opinions about your health in front of Lord Dawnstar. That would have put me in a very awkward position. I promised I'd speak to him and I will."

"Oh don't bother, Comet." Zeal sighed sadly. "The more we mention it, the bigger arse he's going to be."

"I'm sure he's just concerned." Comet said vaguely. "Do you want to go into the garden? I'd love to see those tiny water fountains properly."

"You weren't supposed to see those. It's illegal." Zeal muttered.

"I doubt anyone else noticed." Comet smiled and opened the glass doors that lead to the gardens.

"Do you think it's evil?" Zeal asked as they walked down the path.

"I don't know alot about it. It was banned completely when I was born."

"It was banned for women twenty years ago but it didn't stop me." Zeal shrugged and made a tiny two inch high fountain in the pool. "Positively horrendous isn't it?" She said sarcastically.

"Multiply the size of them by a few thousand and they won't look so pretty." Comet sat on the path while Zeal sat by the pool.

"Even on that scale it's not the magic that's evil, Comet. How can it be? They're natural forces. Earth, Air, Fire, Water. Nature can't be good or evil. It's neither."

"True but that doesn't apply to people. Can you imagine one of those fountains the size of Mount Fogg, in the wrong hands?"

"People are flawed, not the magic." Zeal insisted. "Also, it's only when magic is absent that one display is noticable. When I defeated the Barbarians it was spectacular. The reason it's been remembered for twenty years is because it was noticable. If the Warrior Mages weren't away in the Northern Territories, then it wouldn't have been noticed at all."

"So you don't think it's open to abuse?" Comet asked.

"No more than anything else. Carrying a sword is open to abuse but just about every man in Entia does that. Another thing, anyone at all can pick up a sword whether they can use it properly or not. Magic's selective. If you're not born with it, you can use it. That's the reason the Queen outlawed it. She was as jealous as buggery." Zeal sniffed.

"Not a royal fan then?" Comet laughed and Zeal smiled.

"I wasn't back then. To me, the Queen was like a spoiled child. She took a gift from us because she couldn't have one like it. Having said that, it looks like she's made a good job of ruling Entia. I know there are poor areas and I know there is crime.

Overall though, Entia's been at peace for twenty years. She must be doing something right." Zeal swirled her hand in the pool and made is a deep, azure blue.

"Well I think you deserve most of the credit for that." Comet was surprised at Zeal's ignorance of her own importance. "The main threat was from the Harshlanders and you put them in their place. You prevented a war that would have cost thousands of lives and would have certainly destroyed Entia."

"You make it sound very heroic, Comet." Zeal smiled. "In truth, I never gave Entia a thought. I never gave the Queen a thought, or anyone else except Lore and Clash. I destroyed the Harshlanders for them."

"And the rest of Entia loves you for it." Comet dipped his fingers in the pool just because it was so fascinating.

"Except Lore, the very man I did it for." Zeal hung her head. "He doesn't, Comet. Please don't say words of kindness for my benefit. I don't know why, but he doesn't. As long as he isn't actively repelling me, I'll have to make do with that."

"I don't know why he wouldn't love you." Comet sighed. "I'm out of my depth here, Zeal. I've never been married and I've never witnessed married life of any sort. Maybe it's the age thing? I don't know. His wife is the same age as his son."

"Yes, maybe that's it." Zeal wasn't convinced and Comet wasn't either. "Why aren't you married anyway? Not that you should be, nor is Clash. I was just curious."

"I've never been in a position to support a wife." Comet replied. "I believe such a commitment deserves ones full attention. I'm not in a position to do that." He thought of Brand, and all his savings.

"Your family? You told me your father was no longer here." Zeal said.

"That's right. My brother, mainly. He's sick and he can't work for a living. He's always been sick." Comet smiled sadly.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't know you had a brother, let alone a sick one. I'll speak to Lore and make sure you have all the time off you need. Is he younger than you?"

"He's my twin." Comet said with a touch of pride.

"Really? That's wonderful. It's good that you support him." Zeal smiled.

"I do that naturally." Comet shrugged his shoulders. "He supports me too, in a way. He's far more intelligent than I am. He's read more books than I knew existed and he knows about all the lands, and their people, and their governments. He knows how

things work, even though he can't get out there and work things for himself. He's never given up, no matter how tired he gets. Many people in his state would have given up. Lost their spark. Not Brand. As long as he has his spark, then it's my spark too."

"He's your focus in life. We all need a focus because it gives us our own worth." Zeal said.

"If we knew why you'd returned then you'd have your spark too." Comet said.

"You're right. I thought my spark was Lore, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Purpose and need seem to go together and Lore doesn't need me. I'm not sure about Clash. I think Clash feels something for me, but he doesn't actually need me. It's so hard to explain. If either of them were the reason I'm here, I'd know." Zeal frowned at the lawn feeling very frustrated. "This memory stuff is shite."

"Language, Lady Dawnstar." Comet snickered. "If we knew where you'd been, then we'd have a better idea of why you came back."

"Yes I know. Like I said, shite. All I can seem to do is sit here like a lump. I wish I could heal your twin." Zeal said glumly.

"W ... what?" Comet almost fell in the pool. That simply had not occurred to him at all! Even when he knew that Zeal had healed her own body, he just hadn't made a connection. "Heal Brand?"

"It can't be done. I have no pattern of him. I wouldn't know what to restore him too because I've never had a healthy Brand pattern." Zeal tried to explain.

"There never was a healthy Brand pattern." Comet reminded her. "So if you know what a person was like prior to illness or injury, you could restore them?"

"I'm limited to only two of the natural forces. Water and Earth. If the illness or injury could be fixed by manipulation of those two forces, then yes I think so. The other two of Air and Fire are masculine forces. Anyway it's matterless. Brand has no healthy pattern to recall. I shouldn't have even mentioned it. It was thoughtless. I'm sorry." Zeal said sympathetically.

"No. It wasn't thoughtless at all. It was a lovely thought and I thank you. You don't even know Brand yet you cared enough to spare him a thought." Comet was very touched indeed. "That's more than he's ever had from anyone, except me."

"But I can't do anything. I don't deserve thanks." Zeal said in confusion.

"You do. Not all things that are admirable are physical actions." Comet insisted.

"Magic isn't a physical action. It all comes back to that and my damned memory." Zeal sighed.

"You remember thinking about Lore and Clash while you were away. Can you remember telling me that you told the Water about them? That has to mean something. There was water in the place you were." Comet said. "That's a start."

"Yes that's right." Zeal nodded. "But it's different. I know I do some rather eccentric things, but I wouldn't just wander out here and start talking to the pool, or the River Ent ... Zeal ... whatever. It's very frusrtating."

"I can imagine so." Comet sympathised. He noticed Clash on his way down the garden path. "Clash is here. Would you like me to leave?"

"Clash!" Zeal waved. "No, Comet. I'd rather you stayed incase I stuff up." she added quietly.

"Mother." Clash sat on the wall with her. "I trust you're well?" He asked, looking at Comet. Comet nodded.

"I thought you were with the Council today?" Zeal smiled. She was very happy to see her son.

"I was and I will be later. They can do without me for a while. Too much babbling makes my ears ring." Clash scowled and looked very much like Lore.

"Are they talking about me?" Zeal asked warily.

"Who else?" Clash shrugged. "I don't think they quite know what to do with you, mother."

"Do with me? Why should they have to do something with me?" Zeal asked in surprise.

"Well you can't expect to be just a normal citizen, can you? There's a twelve foot statue of you in the Square for a start." Clash said.

"But I am a normal citizen. I was before the statue was built too." Zeal was confused.

"Huh?" Clash laughed. "I don't think so. Fifteen thousand Harshland Barbarians? Yes?"

"Defeated by magic which was normal at the time. I was ordinary." Zeal nodded. "I was just saying to Comet, if the Warrior Mages had been here inseed of up North, I'd

never have been noticed."

"Well yes you would. They were all men." Clash reminded her.

"So I'd have been in jail. Some hero." Zeal rolled her eyes. "Clash, how is this law enforced? How is it monitored these days?"

"By the Guard. Why?" Clash asked warily.

"Oh don't worry. I'm not going to off and zap them all. I know from experience that only a wizard can spot dormant magic. That means that either Queen Honor has her own legal mage in her employ, or dormant magic can't be detected." Zeal explained.

"Oh they get to know. You'd be surprised at how many informants come forward if there's an advantage to be gained." Clash said.

"What?" Zeal said in alarm. "So people just accuse each other based on suspicion?"

"They report it discretely if they see it." Clash said vaguely.

"With a good few personal grudges thrown in too, I bet." Zeal said angrily. "Clash that is wrong! You bound to see that? How do they prove it? By the gods it shouldn't even be a crime!"

"Witnesses, confessions. It's in hand, mother. The law works." Clash grimaced.

"My skinny mage arse it does!" Zeal shouted. "I've had dealings with the Guard here and I got three cracked ribs out of it. I can imagine how these confessions come about."

"Calm down, mother, please." Clash sighed.

"Do you think it's wrong? You personally, I mean. Do you think magic is evil?" Zeal was far from calm.

"It can be dangerous." Clash deflected.

"So can an unchained dog. Do you think this is dangerous?" Zeal pointed to the pool, which was it's usual colour and fountain-free. "It's water, Clash. The stuff you're breathing, the flame that lights the lamps, the stone you're sitting on. Are they evil?"

"Of course not." Clash said irritably. "If I held Comet under the water, he'd die. If I covered his mouth to stop the air, he'd die. If I struck him with that stone, he'd die. If I set him alight, he'd die. It can be dangerous."

"That would make *you* dangerous and you'd quite rightly go to jail. The forces are useable substances, Clash but they cannot act on their own." Zeal snapped.

"I know I was saved by magic before I was born." Clash said. "That is what you're going to say, isn't it?"

"No, actually it isn't, but yes you were. We were farmers, Clash. Obviously your father had an academic job but I didn't. How do you think I grew the crops? The same way as any other farmer in Entia. If they had no magic themselves, they asked a neighbour. How do you think the water supplies were kept clean? How were the swamp flatlands dried out? What kept the smiths' forges running?" Zeal said.

"Magic isn't essential for any of those things." Clash pointed out.

"A loom isn't essential for making cloth and a fruit press isn't essential for making wine. Why do you use a bath-tub? what's wrong with the river?" Zeal argued.

"That same magic can be used to destroy whole populations." Clash said.

"Yes I know. I did that too. So can flames from a tinderbox or an army armed with blades." Zeal argued.

"This is going nowhere." Clash sighed. "Believe it or not, I'm not against you, mother. I have no first hand experience of magic but I'm one of those who can see its benefits. Those benefits get outnumbered by the potential dangers."

"Horsecrap! The potential danger is with the user. It's that person who is the potential criminal, not the instrument he or she uses. You're speaking as an official and that's obvious. You know what I'm going to do?" Zeal looked at Clash.

"Please don't say magic. Despite your experiences and explanations, Entia isn't ready for that after twenty years of fearing it." Clash told her.

"Fear. That's exactly what it is. I'm going to explain how magic works to everyone in Entia. I'm going to explain how magic isn't an independant entity and can't do anything on its own. People aren't stupid. It'll be clear that there's nothing to fear." Zeal stated. "I need your professional advice, Clash. Would that be against the law?"

"So you wouldn't use magic to demonstrate your point, or to illustrate your explanations?" Clash asked uncertainly.

"No. I'm not a trouble maker, or a rebel. I'm the only person in Entia that hasn't lost my understanding of magic. I haven't been subjected to twenty years of fear and ignorance. It's not my intention to go against the Queen's law, I just want everyone to know that it's people who can be irresponsible, not the forces themselves." Zeal

explained.

"Technically, no, that wouldn't be illegal. However, it could be seen as rabble-rousing, even if you don't intend it to be. You can't just set up on a street corner and start preaching, mother. The place is in a big enough uproar."

"Yes I understand that." Zeal said gloomily. "This is getting on my pissing nerves. I refuse to just sit here like a bloody toadstool! Umm ... language. Sorry."

"Can I make a suggestion, Duke Dawnstar?" Comet spoke up quietly. "Please excuse me if my notions are foolish or unworkable. I'm thinking about Lady Zeal's health and being isolated and feeling redundant isn't helping her at all."

"Go on." Clash nodded.

"As you rightly said, Lady Zeal can't simply rove about the place like a Gleeman and she is Lady Zeal afterall, not a side-show. It may be better if Lady Zeal spoke as part of a legally endorsed plan of education. If her orations took place in proper venues with structured organisation, then she'd technically be speaking alongside the Courts and Councils, not against them. I don't know if that's viable, it was just an idea. Forgive me if I'm talking rubbish." Comet said to Clash.

"Rubbish? Rubbish? It is not at all!" Zeal beamed at Comet. "Clash that's a wonderful idea! Yes, that's what I'll do. I must speak to the Queen."

"Can I make a suggestion of my own?" Clash interrupted. "Give it a few days, please mother. The Courts are in turmoil and so are you. Structure and organisation, remember? Maybe you should use the time learning how not to rant and how not to swear."

"Oh pish, Clash." Zeal sniffed. "Yes I will wait. Your father wishes me to wait until he's satisfied with my health so I respect that."

"I think that would be for the best." Clash nodded. "Shall we go indoors? I'll sneak a pot of tea before I return to the chaos in the Palace."

"I'll go and tell Serai. I'll meet you in the breakfast room." Zeal headed off round the side of the house and Clash and Comet walked up the path towards the glass doors of the breakfast room.

"I'm pleased I have you alone, Comet. What's your honest opinion on her state of mind?" Clash asked and Comet really wished he hadn't.

"Apart from her patchy memory, I think she's fine." Comet replied confidently. "Her frustraion is because she can't fully recollect details yet."

"She can recall enough to swear like a Harshlander." Clash commented.

"That's inaccurate, sir." Comet said with a smile. "She picked it up in the barracks while she was there."

"Oh I see." Clash rolled his eyes. "This education idea is a good one Comet. She needs to be safely occupied."

"She's feeling rather ignored just now. The whole of Entia is bustling because of Lady Zeal, but Lady Zeal herself is apart from it all." Comet contributed.

"You think my father's decision against visitors was wrong?" Clash asked.

"Absolutely not, sir. It's very understandable. Home visits at first is quite a safe option that Lord Dawnstar would have control over. If Lady Zeal tires, he calls a halt to the visit." Comet said.

"You're quite astute for a Tender." Clash nodded and Comet had to look down at his feet.

"I'm good with people, sir." He answered vaguely, but truthfully.

"That's obvious. You seem to be the main connection for my mother. She's linked to you more than anyone else."

"I'm right here in the building, sir. She knows I'm here constantly, that's all."

"I'm not avoiding her, you know." Clash frowned out of the window.

"Of course not. I wasn't suggesting that." Comet said, although he was strongly hinting at it.

"It's difficult. I've never had a mother, or a mother figure. When she does turn up after twenty years, she's the same age as me." Clash turned to face Comet. "I'm not sure of my feelings. I didn't expect to have any."

"She's your mother, Duke Dawnstar, regardless of her age." Comet said simply. "She's also a very remarkable lady. It would be impossible for you *not* to have any feelings." He stopped his praise as Zeal came in with the tea tray.

"We do have serving girls, mother." Clash rolled his eyes.

"I remembered something." Zeal said, putting down the tray. "I used to make dandelion tea for Lore so I thought you may like it too, Clash."

"Tea? You made the tea?" Clash said in surprise.

"Well I did other things too." Zeal smiled. "Yes Clash. If your father wanted a pot of tea, I'd go and make it for him. I can also make a mean pan of broth with a sheep's head."

"Ack! No you can not." Clash almost choked on his tea. Comet found this very amusing. He remembered his mother making broth for himself and Brand, and complaining because she couldn't afford a sheep's head to put in it.

"He used to like cheese bread too." Zeal said sadly. "Does he still like it?"

"Mother, don't." Clash sighed. "Twenty years, remember? Maybe you shouldn't cling to that Lore."

"He's the only one I know." Zeal said simply.

"Circumstances change, I mean." Clash said awkwardly.

"I know. I'm not part of them anymore." Zeal tried to smile.

"No it's not that. Everything is so different now. We've gone twenty years without ... without ..."

"Without me?"

"Without the benefit of your input." Clash corrected weakly. "I must be getting back." He stood up.

"Clash? If I'm not to cling to this Lore, what am I to do with him?" Zeal asked.

"I don't know." Clash sighed heavily. "All I'm saying is that a person's outlook at twenty five can't possibly be the same as his views at forty five. Just let him carry on as he is."

"I'm in a position to stop him carrying on as he is?" Zeal asked in surprise.

"Of course you are. You're Zeal Dawnstar." Clash shrugged his shoulders and left the house.

"He's just told me to keep it low and not get in the way of Lore's business." Zeal said to Comet. Comet didn't know what to say. That was the impression he'd got too. "Does that fit in with going along with the idea of my speeches? If I'm talking to folk out there, I won't be questioning Lore." She said angrily.

"It was my idea, Zeal, not Clash's or Lore's. I think it's a good idea and I'll support you in it." Comet deflected.

"It'll be accepted straight away. You'll see." Zeal said flatly.

"You sound paranoid. My motives are to help you. Maybe theirs are too." Comet suggested. "Come on and give me the recipe for this tea. Brand will love it."

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Chapter 5

Clash sat in an ante room in the Palace, waiting for his father. Lore was speaking to the Queen. Clash had outlined the idea of keeping Zeal occupied, and in the public eye as a positive one. The last thing they needed was a dissatisfied public, and an absent hero would lead to unrest. Lore eventually walked in, ninety minutes later. Clash was, by that time, feeling very irritable. The whole issue had thrown his mind and body into a turmoil and it wasn't a feeling that he was comfortable with.

"Queen Honor thinks that small receptions at first would be better. She's as uncertain as the rest of us." Lore said wearily.

"OK. Then what?" Clash asked.

"Clash this can't be predicted over a few days." Lore said testily. "Gods, I'm being bombarded from every direction with questions about your mother, including those from Honor herself. I'm fed up with hearing about it. I'm still confident it won't affect your succession."

"Well I didn't actually mean that. What about mother?" Clash asked.

"No. I doubt your mother is in the running for the crown. Queen Honor has no heir and you're as close as it gets, thanks to me." Lore replied.

"Father I don't mean the crown! Forget the crown for just one minute, please. Exclude everyone else from the picture. OK? Me, you, mother. What happens?"

"I'm not with you." Lore said.

"For crying out loud!" Clash sighed. "She's your wife and the Queen of Entia is your lover. Leave mother and the population will lynch you. Leave the Queen and you'll be out of the Courts."

"You with me, remember."

"Yes, me with you."

"Your mother won't revolt, Clash. In fact, she'll go to lengths to prevent that. I do know that about her." Lore said.

"So she'll turn a blind eye to you and the Queen? I'm not sure how I feel about that." Clash said uncomfortably.

"What?" Lore looked furious. "I've spent twenty years getting you to where you are now!" He growled.

"I know. I know everything you've done was for me too. Father that was all very well when there was just the two of us. To all purposes you were as single as the Queen. You aren't now."

"So what do you suggest I do? Pretend the last twenty years haven't happened? Turn my back on everything in favour of a woman I barely knew for two years only? Why in hell did she have to come back!" Lore was on his feet. "I expected a bit more sense from you, Clash. You don't know her at all! You had to be wet-nursed by another woman, for shit's sake!"

"OK I didn't need to know that." Clash grimaced. "I just hope you know what you're doing. She loves you because she doesn't understand why she shouldn't. I'm not talking about factual, political sense. I'm talking about basic compassion. I'd better go and organise a company for her for when she goes out into the city." Clash left his father in a very dark mood.

Comet got leave to visit the Infirmary. Zeal was asleep and Lore was in his study, so all was quiet when he left the house.

Antal met Comet in the laundry room. Comet told him all he could about Zeal, her passage to Entia, her magical ability and her opinions on the laws preventing its use.

"That's not alot, Comet." Antal mused.

"It's all I know. It's all she knows too." Comet replied. "Tell me about Brand. Is he OK? Have you seen him?"

"I haven't see him, no. I'll relay your findings to Shadow." Antal said.

"You could also tell him that she's a very admirable woman. If Shadow is expecting her to work for The Web, then he's in for a disappointment." Comet told him.

"That's none of your concern. I'd also advise you to keep your emotional distance from her. You're in there to do a job." Antal said reproachfully.

"Eh?" Comet said in disbelief. "You told me to seduce her! Not that I have, or ever will."

"A tool of the trade. It should be as emotionless as using a lockpick." Antal shrugged.

"It's not a tool I'd use. She's vulnerable and it's bad enough I'm using her as I am, let alone employing those methods." Comet snapped.

"You'll employ whatever methods it takes, Comet. They have Brand." Antal said. Comet snarled and took a step towards him. "Don't be stupid, lad. Focus your investigation on age preservation, Comet. Somehow, Zeal Dawnstar has preserved her age. Shadow is very interested in that."

"Of course. I should have known!" Comet exclaimed. "It could have something to do with her healing skills."

"Healed to the point of immortality. Is it a wonder Shadow wants it?" Antal shrugged his shoulders.

"No wonder at all." Comet said gloomily. Shadow would have Brand forever, and others like him. "Tell Shadow I want to see my brother, Antal. I'm doing as he asks. I want to see Brand."

"I'll pass on your request." Antal nodded. "Good night, Comet."

Comet had only just set foot in the house when Serai ordered him upstairs to Zeal's room. The woman looked upset and rather frightened.

"What's wrong?" Comet asked, taking off his outdoor cloak.

"Lord Dawnstar's temper got the better of him." Serai whispered and Comet's stomach lurched. "He struck her across the face."

"Oh no." Comet groaned. "I'll go and see to her." Comet went upstairs with his bag of bandages. Zeal was sitting up in bed and didn't look as forlorn and woeful as Comet was expecting. She had a faint bruise on her cheek that was fading rapidly. Her eyes were flashing like demons and her jaw was clenched. Zeal was furious.

"I'm going to swear so don't you dare correct me." She shot at Comet.

"Fine by me. What happened?" Comet sat on a stool by the dresser.

"I'm not really sure." Zeal shook her head. "I asked him if Clash had spoken to him. He started ranting on about me trying to claim maternal rights over him! He said I had no right at all to go crawling to Clash to illicit family sympathy!" She said in outrage. "What in black and blue buggery is he on about?"

"I don't know." Comet flinched. "Maybe he'd liked to have had an idea first?"

"Sheep shit! He wasn't here, was he? Maternal claims? Maternal sodding damn and blast claims? I'm not doing anything! I told him to go and fry his testicles."

"Ah right." Comet flinched again. "He didn't like that, I take it?"

"He called me an inconvenience, Comet." Zeal stopped shouting and hung her head. "He said that me coming back to Entia after twenty years of peace, was a bad omen. He told me to stay away from Clash. I didn't ask to be taken away and I don't know if I had a say in coming back. I don't know what's happening and Lore, Clash, and you are all I have here."

"Hey come on. You're getting upset." Comet opened a jar of salve and dabbed some on Zeal's non-existent bruise. "I can't offer an opinion on your domestic life with Lore, you know I can't. I'm a Tender. Where's Lore now?"

"He's gone to the Palace to take it out on the Court. He almost slammed the door off its hinges. He met Clash out in the street and they both went. I think Clash was coming here." Zeal sighed wearily. "I wonder if I'd been here all the time, would Lore still be a huge asshole?"

"Er ... who knows eh?" Comet snorted a laugh then tried to hide it with a cough. "So what are you going to say to your followers out there?" He said, in an attempt to cheer Zeal up.

"Bugger all." Zeal muttered.

"You're sulking."

"Yes."

"A sulking mage just sounds wrong." Comet smirked.

"I'm not a mage because I'm not allowed to use magic." Zeal retorted. "Stupid law. It's as natural as farting."

"Air magic?" Comet snickered and made Zeal laugh. "Much better!"

"I'm just going to tell people how it works. It isn't even complicated, providing you have the Art. Once people know how simple and logical it is, they'll understand it more and fear it less." Zeal nodded.

"So how does it work? Practice on me." Comet smiled.

"A mage is a bridge. We collect elemental forces that are everywhere and all around

us, and we channel them. That's all there is to it. As a female mage, I can feel Water and Earth forces. It's like I can see them as tiny, tiny particles. I simply make myself attractive to them, then focus them into the visible, magical effects we can all see." Zeal smiled happily.

"Attractive to the particles?" Comet asked

"Attractive as in causing an attraction. The forces do not bellow 'Phwor! What a pair!'" Zeal clarified.

"Zeal!" Comet erupted into laughter. "By the gods! Please tell me no one's actually called that to you."

"No of course not. I was earwiggling at the door when Bracken was talking to the man who shoes the horses." Zeal told him.

"Er ... what? Bracken said 'Phwor what a pair' to the farrier?" Comet was officially lost.

"Yes. He was talking about someone called Sally."

"Oh! Yes I see. Well that's vulgar talk, Zeal. Pay it no heed." Comet said aloofly.

"OK, you said a wizard can spot dormant magic in a person. How does that work?"

"It's the attraction thing again. Even if the magic is dormant, it's still open and waiting to attract. A wizard can sense the pull of the forces towards the dormant mage. All it would take is for them to be made aware of it so they recognise it. After that it's consciously developed within the mage, by the mage. It used to be under the instruction of other mages, of course. New wizards are quite weak until they get the hang of focusing and they grow stronger. The usual arguments about accidents isn't valid. A new wizard isn't strong enough to do much damage. Does that make sense?" Zeal felt very pleased with herself.

"You're very good at this." Comet was impressed.

"But it's not as it should be. No one's drawing on the forces. It's ... flat. It's still and stale. Inactive."

"So they have to be active for you to use them?" Comet suggested.

"No. As long as they exist, we can use them." Zeal frowned in concentration. "It's not just for our convenience. That's important. I just can't piece it together."

"So which of the four forces kept you ageless?" Comet asked casually. "I can sort of understand the attraction and channelling stuff, but I can't think of anything that

would produce a halting of age."

"Nothing can. It's impossible." Zeal replied promptly.

"Impossible?" Comet felt like sobbing out loud. "But you're still twenty."

"I won't stay twenty now. I'm home. We aren't meant to be immortal. Who would want to be?" Zeal shrugged her shoulders.

"You'd be surprised." Comet said hopelessly. "But you *were* immortal for twenty years. How?"

"No that's not right." Zeal shook her head slowly. "Immortality applies to mortals, people. I'm a person now. Blast and bugger it! Wherever I've been, they were utter shite at memory, weren't they?" She said in exasperation.

"Wait. Hold up a bit." Comet held up his hands. "So first you were here, a person, a mortal. Then you went to a place where the word 'immortal' doesn't apply, somewhere with no mortals or people."

"I *was* alive. I lived. I communicated so I wasn't alone. I knew Lore and Clash weren't there because they were here. I was needed there and now I'm needed here." Zeal sighed heavily. "I'm rambling."

"No, it's fascinating." And it was something to tell The Web. "Let's leave it for now. You don't want to tire yourself out."

"I already have." Zeal yawned. "If Lore comes home and wakes me up with his roaring, I'm coming to get in with you."

"Oh that'll really make him stop roaring." Comet laughed. "Seriously, Zeal, I wouldn't be surprised if Lore his regretting his actions. He probably feels terrible about it."

"So he should." Zeal was having none of it. "One more thing before you go, Comet?" Comet turned round at the door. Zeal had a pair of Lore's under britches over her face.

"Umm ... other end, Zeal." Comet said warily.

"Huh? Oh! No I don't want to wear them. Here, sniff them." Zeal held out the garment.

"Eh?" Comet recoiled. "That's very nice of you Zeal, but no thanks."

"They smell of ... something. Something nice." Zeal had another sniff.

"I'll take your word for it." Comet said doubtfully.

"It's like pretty faded colours. I want it on my clothes too."

"Oh a perfume!" Comet said in relief. "Lore perfumes his underwear? Each to his own. Here just waft them about a bit. Not too close! Ack!" Zeal flapped the britches around and whipped Comet over the face with them. "It's lavender."

"I'll remember. So how did he lavender his underclothes?"

"I have no idea and no desire to find out. Good night, Zeal." Comet laughed.

"Good night, Comet, and thank you." Zeal tossed the britches on the floor and yawned.

Comet was woken at an absurdly soon hour in the morning by someone hammering on his door. He scrambled out of bed and grabbed for his clothes.

"Just a minute!" He called.

"Make it thirty seconds. Study, Comet." Lore's voice caused Comet to panic enormously. He was going to be sent out. He'd failed. Brand would die! He was formulating grovelling pleas and even a few lies pertaining to Zeal's health, all the way to the study door.

"Lord Dawnstar?" Lore had his back to Comet, facing the unlit fire. "Is everything alright, sir?"

"Not in my opinion, but that doesn't seem to matter." Lore snapped and turned round. Comet got a whiff of lavender and tried so hard not to think of underwear. "The visits to the house have been abandoned, Comet. Queen Honor requests an audience with Zeal this morning."

"Oh!" Comet almost collapsed in relief. "It'll be an honour to escort Lady Zeal to the Palace and ensure that she's well."

"You'll do more than that. You'll go in there with her and Clash. I have to be there already 'in reception.'" Lore said in annoyance. "This is against my better judgement, and therefore yours. If the Queen asks, you back my opinion."

"Of course, sir." Comet nodded. He decided against asking the irate Lord exactly what his opinions were.

"You'd better. Being undermined in my own household is not something I take kindly

to. Go and get Lady Zeal. I have to get back." Lore almost knocked Comet over as he pushed past him.

Zeal and Comet waited in the study for Clash. Comet was a nervous wreck, but Zeal seemed quite composed.

"Remember Zeal, no swearing." Comet paced the room.

"No swearing." Zeal nodded. "And only answer questions. Don't volunteer information. I know."

"Everything will be fine. Clash and Lore will be there too." Comet fretted.

"Ready?" Clash said from the door. Comet couldn't figure out Clash's opinions on all this. He wasn't sure if he was in favour of Zeal socialising or not.

"Yes sir. Lady Zeal says she feels fine and I'm sure she'll say otherwise if she struggles at any time." Comet nodded.

"I will. What's it about, Clash?" Zeal asked as they went outside. "Do I really need an armed guard?" Captains Lance Baron and Hunter Bane were waiting in the street.

"You do." Clash said firmly. "The Queen saw father's display of temper towards you as a bad political move."

"What?" Zeal blinked in shock. "And how did she know? How did you know, come to think of it?" Clash just shrugged his shoulders. "He told you?"

"It came up in discussion."

"A discussion with Queen Honor Griffon of Entia? I think not!" Zeal was horrified, and very embarrassed.

"Obviously it did." Clash said shortly.

"So Lore just strode into the Palace and said 'Hey! I've just slapped Zeal!' How about no!" Zeal said hotly. "Clash! I'm talking to you!" Clash sighed heavily and turned round. "Why was Lore discussing my domestic issues with the Queen? Especially an issue that he can't possibly be proud of."

"Expressing his regrets, maybe? Did you think of that?" Clash preached.

"No I didn't because it's absurd! Expressing his regrets to me, yes. To you, yes. To Queen Honor?" Zeal badgered. Clash grimaced and grit his teeth. "Believe me Clash, I *will* ask her myself."

"A political move." Comet spoke up. "Pardon me. If Lord Dawnstar and the Queen were discussing you as a political asset, then the conversation could have stemmed from there. It was a bad move on more than one level, Zeal."

"Yes I suppose so." Zeal settled down a bit. "I tend to forget that the Queen is a politician. I'm not a political commodity."

"You are, mother, whether you like it or not." Clash said. Zeal snorted and walked on ahead, up the Palace steps. "I owe you one, Comet." Clash muttered.

"Not at all. It's a viable explanation. I can't think of any others. Can you?" Comet shrugged.

"None at all." Clash said quickly. "Shall we get on with it?" Clash and Comet followed Zeal.

The Palace Courtroom held around two dozen of the Court and half as many soldiers. Zeal recognised no one apart from her escort, Lore, and the Queen.

"Your Highness, it's an honour to meet you at last." Zeal said graciously. "This is my Tender, Comet Galeraven." Comet bobbed a bow. Queen Honor stood up and walked across to Zeal. She was a very striking woman and looked every bit as graceful and elegant at fifty, as she had twenty years ago. She still had a slim figure and her hair was still sleek and raven black. Zeal suddenly frowned and leant towards the Queen. Luckily, Comet saw this and immediately knew what had got Zeal's attention. He made eye contact with Zeal, and shook his head slightly.

"Lady Dawnstar." The Queen said loudly, and clearly. "It's an honour to meet you too. Much has changed since your departure. How are you adapting?"

"Quite well, thank you. My health is physically good, and hopefully my memory will fully return, in time."

"That returning memory will stay within the laws of Entia. I forbade magic completely twenty years ago." The Queen said.

"I'm aware of that, Highness."

"Yet you want to speak of it now, to the people of Entia. Why?"

"Speak of it, Highness, not practice it. I believe the people have many misconceptions about magic that leads to fear. The people don't deserve to be frightened when there's nothing to fear. Highness, you can remember it personally. Apart from the Warrior Mages that served in the army, can you recall anyone using magic as a weapon?" Zeal

asked.

"My recollections are not in question." Queen Honor said shortly.

"No, Highness, I wasn't implying that. I was asking a genuine question as advice. Your memory reaches back further than mine, and is more accurate." Zeal only just saved that from being an insult regarding the Queen's age.

"Only you, Lady Dawnstar." The Queen said flatly.

"Obviously I can't deny that, but I doubt anyone can deny the exceptional circumstances surrounding that, or the result. There's a giant statue in the Square." Zeal reminded them all.

"And these talks that you intend. They are to be with the complete understanding of you, and the people, that I endorse them." Queen Honor stated.

"Of course." Zeal replied. "May I also point out that I'm in a position to target my audience. I can sense dormant magic in others. I gather the current method of surveillance is rather vague."

"And you would report this to me?" The Queen asked suspiciously.

"I'd report anything that infringed on the law, Your Highness." Zeal replied. The Queen returned to her seat and pondered this.

"Lord Dawnstar?"

"Your Highness. Obviously Lady Dawnstar is highly qualified in matters mystical. I strongly recommend, if not insist, that she does not do this alone. My reasons are her health and safety." Lore said stiffly. Queen Honor nodded slowly.

"Duke Dawnstar."

"Your Majesty." Clash nodded a bow. "I understand Lord Dawnstar's concerns, and share them. Lady Dawnstar is seldom alone. Her Tender, Comet, is with her constantly. The people of Entia have loved her for twenty years so I think her health is a larger issue than her public safety."

"Captain Bane." The Queen addressed Hunter. "Would you say Lady Dawnstar's contribution to the monitoring for the use of magic, would be an improvement?"

"It would, yes. People don't know what they're looking for so obviously it's very difficult to get facts, if there are any." Hunter replied.

"Captain Baron?"

"Your Highness." Lance said stiffly. "This is a disaster waiting to happen. Playing down the danger involved in magic can only lead to an acceptance of it, and a revival."

"I can explain that in quite a bit of detail. I did so to Comet last night. The danger is at an absolute minimum." Zeal countered.

"The danger is very real." Lance snapped. "Vanishing without trace for two decades is classed as rather hazardous in my books, Lady Dawnstar."

"Unique circumstances." Zeal replied. "I was chosen for a purpose that I've not managed to recall yet. Anyway, Captain Baron, you're talking about the active use of magic. I am not. I've just assured Queen Honor that I don't intend demonstrations of magic. Let's face it, I'd stand out like a wart on a buttock if I did." Clash, Lore, and especially Comet, all cringed and grimaced at the same time. "Pardon the metaphore." Zeal muttered as an apology.

"Highness." Clash spoke up. "If this permission isn't granted to Lady Zeal, then what *is* she to do? She carries massive public support. She saved Entia. The people out there are as grateful to her now, as they were twenty years ago. It can only be seen as good if we're all on the same side here."

"Very well." The Queen looked at Zeal. "Lady Dawnstar I grant you the title of Scholar and Guardian of The Mystic." Zeal looked up at the Queen in surprise. The Guardian of the Mystic title was a complete surprise. In the past, the Guardian would scout the population for wizards to train with the Warrior Mages of the military.

"Your Highness?" Lance recovered first. "If I remember correctly, wouldn't that put Lady Dawnstar at the military rank of General?"

"Hardly applicable, Captain Baron." The Queen raised her perfect eyebrows at Lance. "Her capacity is in the field of mysticism only. There are no mages in the army, nor will there ever be again. I've just explained Lady Dawnstar's role of monitoring the population for the use of magic. She won't need your soldiers for that." Queen Honor said flatly and Lance glared horribly at Zeal. "I'm sure the people of Entia will be satisfied with *my* arrangements. You may leave, Lady Dawnstar."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Zeal bobbed a bow, so did Comet, and they left quickly.

"I wasn't expecting that." Comet whistled as they took a seat outside.

"Me either." Zeal said. "Titles mean very little to me, Comet. If they did, I'd slap you

every time you called me just Zeal." She smiled.

"Just humour me for a while. What would your official title be now?" Comet laughed. "We'll have to get the mason at the statue."

"I'm not sure. In times when a Guardian was needed, it was to spot Warrior Mages. It was a man thing. I vaguely remember Lord General Rhynn Faldor."

"So Lady General?" Comet said enthusiastically.

"Doesn't sound right does it? Lady General Zeal Dawnstar." Zeal laughed.

"So where does the Scholar go?"

"Oh yes, I forgot about that. Lady Scholar General? Buggered if I know. Guardian of The Mystic goes on the end."

"I know! Lady General Zeal Dawnstar Scholar Guardian of The Mystic. Does that cover it?"

"Sounds good to me." Zeal laughed. "Ah Comet, this isn't going to be as simple as it sounds. I have an enemy already in Lance Baron. I'm also under no misconceptions regarding Queen Honor. If it wasn't for my public support, she'd deem me a criminal. She's quite beautiful isn't she?"

"I've never thought about it. She's a bit old for me." Comet shrugged.

"She wears lavender." Zeal said sadly and Comet flinched. "Is it public knowledge, Comet? I have to know for my own dignity."

"I don't think so no. At least it's not common knowledge on the streets. I wouldn't know about the Courts. I'm sorry Zeal. I didn't know." Comet said sympathetically.

"Would you have told me?" Zeal smiled.

"I honestly don't know." Comet sighed. He fully intended having a go at Antal about this. Even if he hadn't known the Queen was having an affair with Lord Dawnstar, Shadow certainly would have. "You must be very upset."

"Not as such, no. He's a very attractive man. It would be stupid and naive to think he'd been by himself for twenty years." Zeal shook her head.

"I suppose so. He was still married though." Comet pointed out.

"I wasn't there and after a while, he stopped imagining I'd come back. I don't see it as

an infidelity, Comet. Lore thought I was lost forever, just like everyone else did. As for now? Well he's been with the Queen ten times as long as he was with me." Zeal tried to smile. "People don't just switch off and on."

"I can't believe you're so understanding. I agree with you, by the way, but even so." Comet said in admiration. "Will you explain it to Lore too? I could lift some of the tension."

"I don't know if he'd want to listen. I understand a bit better now. I was more than a surprise return. I was a personal intrusion too. The resentment was on quite a few levels." Zeal squinted out into the bright sun. "Fire always was the one to lash out. It's nature, you see? It jumps at quick tempered men and those who are backed into desperation. Water often had to swamp it with kindness and Earth had to enforce stability. Air is Fire's companion for its own good, otherwise it would have no direction and no temperament."

"So you women know what's best for us hot headed men eh?" Comet smiled.

"What?" Zeal shook off her daze and looked at Comet.

"You know? Fire and Air are masculine forces. You told me that. If the girlie forces knock them into shape out there, then it stands to reason that the female mages keep the male mages in order here." Comet laughed.

"Out there?" Comet looked across the Market Square. "Comet! Out there!"

"Where? What?" Comet looked around in panic.

"I know how the forces behave and interact because I've been with them Comet! Don't you see?" Zeal grabbed Comet by the arms. "I've been a part of ... of Out There! The forces took me with them to be a part of them!"

"Sacred shit." Comet forgot not to swear. "So you were here all along? Floating about, type of thing?"

"I was part of ... everything! Bugger me." Zeal sat down on the Palace steps. "How can I not remember something so magnificent? Can you think of anything more splendid than being a part of everything in existence?"

"The thought's a bit beyond my grasp, Zeal." Comet sat next to her.

"I want to remember so badly. I was a part of these steps, and of those trees. I was part of the River Ent ... Zeal ... whatever. I was a part of you, Brand and The Queen! I was a part of the food you ate and of the water Clash bathed in. I can't remember any of it."

"Whoa! That's pretty ... huge!" Comet said in awe. "I'm probably talking through water here but do the forces have memories? I doubt it very much. You were the forces."

"Yes but I was taken because I was flesh and blood and capable of thought." Zeal sighed. "I'm doing a piss poor job for them up to now."

"What? How can you say that? Look how far you've come since you first came back. This memory business is obviously flimsy stuff. Yours just got broken into bits in transit, that's all." Comet smiled.

"I'm pleased you're here. To anyone else, I'd sound like a madwoman. Even if I do sound mad to you, you're too nice to say so." Zeal said seriously.

"You're not mad. Any fool can see that." Comet said dismissively. "I wonder what they're talking about in there?" He looked towards the Palace doors.

"Me, of course." Zeal rolled her eyes. "Here's Captain Bane." Hunter was on his way towards them so they stood up.

"Duke Dawnstar sent me to escort you home. They could be a few hours in there." Hunter said.

"Oh we're as well out of it." Zeal commented. "May I clarify a few things with you as we walk home?"

"Most certainly, Lady Zeal." Hunter nodded.

"In times past, the monitors under the Guardian of The Mystic were independent from the army. For obvious reasons, the monitors now are soldiers. They being the only people with a marked authority. If my monitors are all soldiers but I have no military authority, how can I make that work?"

"I thought of that too. It seemed a rather frustrating position for the Queen to put you in." Hunter said and Comet and Zeal exchanged glances. "So what I'll do is let the men know that you're in charge of that aspect of their duties. May I voice an opinion, Lady Zeal?"

"I'd very much appreciate you doing so, yes."

"Drop on them like an avalanche." Hunter said and Zeal looked at him in pleasant surprise. "Seriously. It often borders on persecution based on nothing. I avoided the duty as a Cadet, and I refused the command of it later on. I can't remember the Guardian's Mystics as a separate body, but I believe that's how it should be."

"It's sad that the Queen turns a blind eye to abuse in her own army." Zeal stated.

"I can't say that, Lady Zeal. I've no proof of such a serious allegation." Hunter deflected.

"My Mystical Scholar's arse, you haven't." Zeal sniffed and Hunter almost fell over in shock. "Er ... yes. I believe that's your fault."

"Zeal!" Comet laughed. "It is not his fault. Captain Bane, for some reason the colourful language of the barracks has imprinted on Lady Zeal. It could be because it was the first verbal environment she was in when she returned."

"I'll improve, I promise. I'll make a special effort. I've stopped yawning and scratching my behind in public now." Zeal sneaked a grin and a wink at Comet. Hunter just nodded in a daze.

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Chapter 6

Zeal trailed her fingers through the garden pool and a trail of tiny sparkles followed them through the water. Comet thought it was fascinating and beautiful.

"So you can detect dormant magic, right? Have you yet?" Comet asked.

"No. It's strange. It's like it's past dormant and onto total inertia. Were you hoping to be a potential mage, Comet?" Zeal smiled.

"Me? Gods no." Comet laughed. "Someone like Brand maybe, but not me. So if you do sense anyone, do you report it to the Queen? The Guard?"

"Neither." Zeal shrugged her shoulders. "I said I'd report anything illegal. Active magic is illegal."

"Like the stuff you're doing to the pool?" Comet laughed.

"Well the whole point of this is because the people of Entia support me. I doubt they'd be happy if I was arrested and exiled. That's why the Queen bestowed all the duties and titles. She's unsure of me, Comet. She's also unsure on a personal level. I could tell by her glances towards Lore and Clash. I originally thought it was because of her mistrust of magic. I think there's more to it now."

"It got complicated." Comet stated the obvious.

"I destroyed fifteen thousand men for Lore. Think about it." Zeal smiled.

"She won't be sure whether or not you're going to zap her and reclaim your man." Comet said.

"Something like that, yes." Zeal laughed. "I need an opportune moment to approach Lore with this. We can't live like this. Shall we go in? It's getting cold out here." They made their way to the glass doors that lead to the breakfast room.

Clash and Lore stood on either side of the unlit fire in the breakfast room.

"This is a bad idea, Clash." Lore said darkly.

"It's the only option, father. The people want mother. If the Queen doesn't give her endorsement, then she'll go out there anyway. I think the Queen may come second in a popularity contest." Clash said.

"And raising your mother to semi-deity status is going to help us, how?" Lore rubbed his hands through his hair. "We don't damn well need her here! Entia does not need a living hero."

"So you keep saying. That doesn't change the fact that she *is* a living hero. Look father, she's not a politician, or a Councillor, or a soldier. She's doing what she's specialised in, nothing else. Mother can't do any harm monitoring people. Good luck to her. The only thing magical about the whole thing, is the illusion the Queen has that people still secretly use it." Clash said.

"You're a selfish little shit, Clash." Lore snapped angrily.

"Huh? Well yes, I know I am. For any reason in particular just now?" Clash asked in confusion.

"It must be quite nice for you to know that *both* of your parents hold weight with the Queen. Me for obvious reasons, and your mother because she has the Queen unnerved. If your mother told her to hand over the crown to you, she probably would." Lore stated.

"I think that's a bit of an exaggeration, father, nor do I think mother's actions and motives to be anything at all to do with the Queen and the crown." Clash sighed wearily.

"You aren't listening. All it would take is a bit of pressure from your mother, that's all. It's taken me all your life to get you here yet she could just stroll in and override the lot. It's sickening." Lore spat.

"Father, she won't do that. She isn't trying to outdo you. What's wrong with you? You sound so paranoid." Clash said in surprise.

"You don't get to tell me how to think!" Lore snarled. "You have no idea what's happening to me. You have no idea how it feels to be simply dropped. My say in the Courts is all but none existent because your damned rotten mother has to be taken into account. The Queen is running in rings to try and appease the bitch to save unrest. Where does that leave me? Where does it leave you?" He shouted, pointing at Clash.

"Don't speak about her like that!" Clash shouted back. "That's uncalled for. Do you think your vile name-calling is going to help? I don't want to hear that."

"You don't even know her!" Lore roared. "I don't believe this! For all of your life, your mother has been that stone statue in the Square! You don't know the woman!"

"No but you do. Is she rotten? Is she a bitch? Yes she complicated your plans and spoiled your bed time with the Queen, but that's hardly her fault!" Clash shouted back. Lore struck him so hard across the face with the back of his hand that Clash stumbled into the wall. "Same old discipline methods eh father." Clash wiped the blood from his mouth. "At least one of us was spared this over the last twenty years."

Zeal fled round the side of the house in tears. Comet was shocked to his bones and very upset as he followed her. Luckily there was no one in the kitchen to see the emotional display.

"Zeal! Zeal I'm so sorry." Comet steered Zeal into a chair at the table. "We shouldn't have seen all that. I should have made you come away."

"Then we'd never have known. I'd never have known." Zeal sobbed. "He brutalised my son into obedience. He physically knocked Clash into shape to rule Entia. He purposely bedded the blasted Queen to make sure she named Clash as her heir."

"So it seems. I don't know what to say, Zeal." Comet made a pot of dandelion tea.

"He must have changed so much after I left, Comet. I didn't marry a monster. Clash tried to tell me he'd changed, he tried to warn me. I've a mind to extract every drop of moisture from his body and make him into face powder. The arsehole." Zeal wiped her eyes and drank her tea. Comet pretended to be doing something at the stove to hide his laugh at Zeal's swearing. Now wasn't the time. "So I'm being appeased and placted? I'm being kept usefully but uselessly occupied? Entia doesn't need a living hero? Well that's jus tough testicles. I'm here."

"What are you planning to do?" Comet asked warily.

"Benefit Entia. Horse nuts to the Courts and the Queen, and all that shite. I'm Entian and so is everyone else. We're going to the barracks tomorrow to see the shower I'm in charge of. As far as the mystic monitoring goes, they either do it my way or they can bugger off back to playing soldiers and kicking beggars in the ribs. If they don't like it then that's tough. I'll pick my own monitors." Zeal said angrily.

"This should be good." Comet winced.

"Captain Bane said avalanche. I'm good at those on a few levels." Zeal said firmly. "Should I go and see Clash? I want to know if he's OK."

"He'll be fine, Zeal, probably a bit angry just now. Let him cool off." Comet advised. "What about Lore?"

"Arse to Lore. Any discussions I thought he deserved to have with me have gone. He's an animal. He can go sit on a Maypole."

"Will you be OK tonight?" Comet clarified.

"I think so, yes. He's too afraid of stuffing up the Queen's politics to harm me again. He'll probably stay in his study for the night. Best place for him, the oaf." Zeal stood up and put the cups in the washing bowl. "Come on Comet, let's get some rest."

"I won't argue with you there. I wouldn't dare." Comet held the door open for Zeal.

Zeal's assumption that Lore would stay in his study for the night, proved true. She dressed and went straight to the kitchen, a place Lore never went. She couldn't think of a single meeting with her husband that wouldn't end up in a confrontation. Delph wasn't in the least surprised to see the Lady of the house in the kitchens. Zeal just saw it as another part of her house and the cook had got used to seeing her there whenever she pleased. Serai's facial expression showed that she didn't approve, but she said nothing. She looked positively outraged when Zeal asked her to go and tell Comet of her whereabouts. Serai had developed quite a dislike for Comet ever since he'd spoken out against her in Zeal's rooms over the clothes incident. It wasn't until Zeal heard Lore leaving for the Palace, that she set off with Comet for the barracks.

"Zeal are you sure you won't wait and have Clash in on this? He's the official Court connection that we should have." Comet suggested.

"The official specification was to be in a structured environment with appropriate officials present. The barracks fills all those descriptions." Zeal nodded firmly. "I'm sure Captain Baron will fall over his own feet in his rush to go and tell the Queen I'm there."

Hunter Bane had to look twice when he saw Zeal and Comet walk through the gates.

"Lady Zeal!" He hurried over. "I didn't know you were coming here otherwise I would have arranged you an escort."

"No need, Captain Bane. I have Comet." Zeal said and Comet felt rather smug. "I've come to see the men involved with mystic monitoring."

"I'll have to check the registers and rotas. If I'd known you were coming I'd have prepared it all for you." Hunter apologised.

"Excuse me!" Captain Baron shouted and marched straight towards them. "I was under the impression that your duties were restricted to Scholastic lectures, Lady Zeal. We have no scholars here."

"In that case, you were under the wrong impression." Zeal said flatly. "Guardian of The Mystic, remember? I want *my* men assembled here within the hour." Hunter cringed but Comet smiled and shrugged his shoulders at the Captain.

"With respect, Lady Zeal, you have no men here." Captain Baron said condescendingly.

"That's General Dawnstar and unless you can carve out bodily parts that are involved in monitoring, then yes I have, *Captain* Baron. I'm sure if I began my duties without my staff then Queen Honor would want to know why. You are obstructing me." Zeal glared at Lance Baron.

"In that case, *General* Dawnstar, begin with me." He said arrogantly. I captain the patrols responsible for such monitoring. I also deal with arrests and the handling of prisoners. I'm responsible for *my* men."

"Good a place as any to begin. You are relieved of thosed aspects of your duties."

"You don't have the authority ..."

"Oh yes I do and you know it. You are no longer involved in the monitoring of the population for poential magical activity because I don't want you to be. Have it. Captain Bane? The lists and rotas?" Zeal turned to Hunter.

"Er ... I can have the men assembled in an hour." He said in shock. Lance snarled loudly and pushed by Hunter, then barged out of the gates.

"I've caused an awkward atmosphere. I apologise." Zeal said to Hunter.

"No more awkward than usual. It's just one type of duty among many. If it's one that I do without, why can't Captain Baron? I'll get to it." Hunter cast a swift, impressed smile at Comet, then headed off to his offices.

Hunter had a list of around a hundred men and he was in the process of assembling them in the yard when Clash came charging through the gates at great speed. Zeal and Comet saw him through the office window and went out to meet him.

"Could have been worse." Comet commented.

"Yes it could have been Lore." Zeal agreed. "Clash! Good day!"

"Not for Lance Baron it isn't." Clash said in exasperation.

"Oh pish, Clash." Zeal tutted. "Captain Baron has other, more important duties to

attend to. He has grit in his crack because he's lost control over one, small section."

"Mother you weren't supposed to do this." Clash sighed.

"No I was supposed to be a political mascot with a fancy title who did nothing useful while everything carried on the same." Zeal said.

"The news of Captain Baron's ... displacement ... was a big surprise, mother. There's still time to reconsider this. I'm sure Comet could offer viable explanations."

"I'll ignore that blatant insult, Clash." Zeal said icily, then walked confidently over to Hunter.

"You're all aware of Lady Dawnstar's recently appointed duties." He raised his voice to address the men. "Obviously you men are affected by that. That is why Lady Dawnstar has chosen to speak to you in person." Hunter stepped back to allow Zeal to speak to the soldiers. Zeal glanced nervously at Comet and he nodded his encouragement.

"Captain Bane will have told you that I hold no position in the military. My position here is not that of a military official. I'm not a soldier. Guardian of The Mystic is a civilian position and mystic monitors were traditionally selected from the civilian population. I'm aware of, and I understand the necessity that lead to the monitors being absorbed into the army. Your ability and loyalty as soldiers are not my area at all and I would never presume myself to be in a position to say otherwise. Your suitability as mystical monitors *is* my area. I have no wish to change anything that works and therefore you are all welcome to stay exactly as you are. What you must keep in mind is that a genuinely can sense dormant magic. For every single person that attracts your attention, a viable and credible set of reasons must accompany it. In short, gentlemen, I won't take any shit. If you think you can drag in anyone and everyone that you don't like the look of, then think again. If you think you can persecute and abuse the easy targets of Entia, then think again. If you think you don't have to listen to me, then you're right. If that's your choice, then you're free to drop this aspect of your duties without any adverse reflections on your military records. Those wishing to retain this area of duty will be answerable to me as a representative of the Entian people. I want my mystical monitors to return here tomorrow at noon. That should be ample time for you to consider, and make your decisions." Zeal stepped back and ripples of surprise, apprehension and uncertainty spread through the soldiers. "Comet?"

"Zeal?"

"I have to go. Small room please."

Zeal, Comet and Clash returned home with the knowledge that the news of the

morning's events would spread through Entia like wildfire.

"Predictions please?" Zeal asked, helping herself to Lore's wine cupboard. "Comet? Truthfully please."

"I think that for someone that isn't a politician, you've just pulled off a monumental, political stroke of genius." Comet was genuinely astonished at Zeal's natural grasp of Entia's situation, and her communication skills.

"Clash?" Zeal asked apprehensively.

"Well you've made a dent that can't be taken out." Clash replied.

"A disruptive dent?"

"It depends on your view. One person's disruption is another person's necessary rearrangement."

"Clash can you be a little less ambiguous please?" Zeal sighed. "You were at the Courts, we weren't."

"Zeal can I speak frankly?" Comet spoke up.

"Yes, please do."

"You're forcing sides here, Zeal and it's a bit unfair. Clash is in quite a few middles. He's a royal Councilor for one, and you've just given the Courts quite a bit to think about. No matter what Clash says, he's bound to be in conflict with someone."

"There shouldn't be sides. We're all Entian." Zeal grumbled.

"Mother no one could possibly say that it's wrong to support the people of Entia like you do." Clash said wearily. "The sad fact is, the Courts and Palace aren't part of the Entian people. They never have been. You're seeing everyone as the same, and everyone with the same priorities and values. They haven't."

"I know." Zeal said sadly. "I have to do this, Clash. I have to be active. It's beyond politics, sides and team loyalties. It's more important than that. I didn't mean to pressure you unfairly. I'm sorry. I'm so sure that this is the right way for me that I've become a bit obsessed. I also can't think of a worse thing to do than play one parent off against the other. I didn't stop to think of that. I struggle to think like a parent."

"Well I can't blame you for that." Clash smiled. "It's a good job we have Comet here to throw in a bit of sense, isn't it?" Zeal laughed and nodded.

"I don't have the family ties, that's all." Comet said modestly.

"No but you do have your own family ties. We're being extremely selfish by keeping you from them. You would tell me if there was anything I could do, wouldn't you?"

"Is anything wrong?" Clash asked.

"Comet's twin brother is very sick, Clash." Zeal told him.

"Oh? And is there anything we can do?" Clash asked.

"No." Comet felt terrible. "Brand's been sick all his life, Clash. Thanks for your concern."

"I'm sure mother has told you to take all the time off you need?" Clash asked and Zeal nodded. Comet felt like crawling into the closest hole, like the rat he was, and staying there. There was no way at all that Zeal would ever work for Shadow, yet he was still there spying on her private life. All he was doing was handing over information until Shadow had enough, or something useful, to coerce Zeal in some way. Zeal who had shown Comet and Brand more compassion than their own mother.

"Yes. She told me that a while ago. Thanks." Comet forced a smile.

"And father has other things on his mind so take mother's word as final in that." Clash frowned and looked out of the window. "He wasn't totally in favour of your new position, mother. He's even less in favour now you've thrown your Guardian weight around. Captain Baron is furious and the Queen fears you. Father's 'I told you so' attitude is being ignored because the Queen and Baron are too busy howling over your audacity. As you can imagine, father doesn't take kindly to being ignored."

"Or to being talked about in his absence." Zeal went to sit next to her son. "I know you're risking his displeasure by speaking like this."

"It's not the first time I've risked his displeasure. Don't worry about it." Clash shrugged.

"I have twenty years worth of worrying to catch up on. I wasn't there for you Clash."

"I thought we'd done all this?" Clash smiled at Zeal. "You didn't exactly run away with the Gleeman, did you?"

"I'd have taken you with me if I had. Would King of The Roads have been good enough?" Zeal asked and Clash visibly deflated.

"Is it that obvious what we were doing?" He said weakly.

"Why shouldn't it be? Neither you nor your father did anything wrong. What father wouldn't want a royal crown for his son?" Zeal said.

"Mother there's more." Clash rubbed his tired eyes. "In order to get the crown, Honor would have to appoint me as her legal heir. Father ... father ... well he ..."

"Clash, I know." Zeal held her son's hands. "I swear I don't judge him for that. How could I? Everyone else in Entia thought I was lost forever, so why shouldn't your father?"

"He didn't think you that far gone to disassociate himself completely. Both him and the Queen knew it was more beneficial for him to be Zeal's husband than the Queen's consort. Is this place anything like your farm? I doubt it. We did very well out of your physical absence. Your spiritual presence was played upon by preserving your family exactly as it was twenty years ago. In that respect, we're as ageless as you are." Clash rested back in his chair and looked exhausted. "You know, King of The Roads would have done me just fine."

"Do you want to succeed Queen Honor? I mean your own ambitions, not your father's ambitions." Zeal asked.

"I thought I did. Who wouldn't?" Clash exhaled loudly. "It's all I've been brought up with. It's all I've known to aim for. You still think it's a viable option and that father's frets are misplaced." Zeal just shrugged her shoulders. "I did too. After all I have a famous mother as well as a father in favour. Can you honestly see the Queen handing over her crown to the son of a living, legendary mage? The only mage in Entia and the most powerful one in history? She's spent thirty years irradicating it."

"That's true." Zeal nodded. "You didn't answer me. Do you want to succeed the Queen?"

"No. I want a life." Clash said quietly. "I knew years ago that all the political sniping and backstabbing wasn't for me. You're right about it being father's ambition but I still played my part in it. All the groveling and pandering to the Queen. All the shunning and isolation of anyone who disagreed. I was active in all that." He said. "I was presented to her when I was eight years old. It had been drilled into me for those years that I was a natural successor to the throne because I was Zeal Dawnstar's son. I whispered to father, very loudly as eight year olds do, that 'mummy was far prettier than the Queen.' The Queen walked out in a rage and I got locked in the cellar."

"Oh Clash." Zeal's heart was breaking. "I wish more than anything that I'd been here. Cellar eh? I'll give him cellar. How dare he!"

"Imagine the fun I'd have had watching you putting him in his place." Clash smiled.

"That place being the cellar, and there's time yet." Zeal puffed herself up and Clash laughed.

"Seriously mother, don't aggravate him. Even if he deserves it and he's blatantly out of order, don't confront him, please. Just walk away and leave him brooding."

"Advice from experience?" Zeal asked sadly.

"I'm a six feet five man. You aren't." Clash said.

"He's a six feet three one and he's coming down the path." Comet observed.

"Clash? Where do you want us all to be?"

"Let's see what he has to say first." Clash stood up as Lore entered the study.

"This is cozy." Lore said, heading for the wine cupboard.

"You wanted me to see what mother is up to, so I am. As you can see, she's fine." Clash said to his father.

"Oh yes I can see that." Lore sat down with the wine bottle. "Well, Zeal, you have the entire royal Court talking about you. Well done. The place is in bloody uproar and no one can stop shouting long enough to get a sensible point over. I tried. I tried quite hard. Captain Lance Baron noticed me, eventually. He's such a nice man, you know. He drew Honor's attention to the fact that I may be distressed over all the activity surrounding my wife. He suggested it would be a kindness to grant me time off. Thank you Zeal." He said nastily.

"They dismissed you?" Clash said in shock.

"Of course they bloody didn't!" Lore snapped. "I was deemed to be 'personally involved' and therefore unable to input constructively. Total crap!" He took a drink from his wine bottle. "Anyway how can they dismiss me? I'm married to a bloody legend!"

"Put the bottle down, father. It's clearly not the first one you've had tonight." Clash said.

"Don't you dare preach at me! Go home. Take her with you." Lore snarled. Clash looked like he was about to argue but Zeal touched his elbow and shook her head.

"Good night, father." Clash nodded for Zeal and Comet to leave too.

"His job isn't in danger is it Clash?" Zeal asked. "I know we're on different sides of the wall just now but his job and position are everything to him."

"No his job is fine. It's true, he is married to a legend but he's also an exceptional Advisor as well as the Queen's ... yes well you know about that." Clash said awkwardly. "His presence will make the rest of them feel a bit uncomfortable just now. Now then! My rooms are barely suitable for myself, let alone for my mother and her Tender. It's my guess he'll stay in there all night, but I'll sleep in the guest room anyway."

"This is shite." Zeal said wearily. "Why are we all feeling threatened in our own home? Especially Comet! He shouldn't have to put up with this bilge."

"It's fine, Zeal. My job is to see to your welfare and this is part of it." Comet tried to sound convincing. He was very relieved that Clash was staying. Comet was quite good in a fight, but he was uncertain of Lore and his temper. Apart from anything else, that would be a sure road to his dismissal and a disaster for Brand.

"I'll see you compensated for this, Comet. Good night." Clash went up the stairs.

"Yes, I will too." Zeal smiled.

"No need." Comet repeated. He was already indebted to Zeal and he knew he could never pay that off. He was slowly trading away her life to Shadow, and The Web.

"What's wrong?" Zeal noticed the look of sadness on Comet's face. "Lore's upset you. The big shit-head. I'll go and get Clash and we'll sleep on his floor."

"No! No don't do that." Comet smiled genuinely and Zeal calmed down a bit. "I was thinking about Brand, that's all. I'll go to the Infirmary tomorrow before we go to the barracks, if I may?"

"Bugger me we've just done all this!" Zeal exclaimed. "You don't need my permission, you silly man."

"The realm's full of silly men." Comet grinned.

"Tell me about it." Zeal looked ruefully at the study door, then followed Comet up the stairs.

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Chapter 7

It wasn't long after dawn when Comet arrived at the Infirmary. He automatically went to the laundry room but Antal wasn't in it, however, a pretty female Tender of around Comet's age, was. Comet's sudden appearance startled the Tender at first, then she blushed and batted her eyelashes at him. Advantage to Comet without even doing anything.

"I was supposed to meet Tender Antal Redsong." Comet flashed her a brilliant smile.

"In here? I think you have that wrong. He doesn't come in here. I'm Shining." Shining smiled coyly.

"You certainly are." Comet grinned. "I'm working with a private patient and Tender Antal is my contact for medicines."

"Oh I see. Hold on." Shining frowned at Comet. "Oh! Oh! I know who you are!" She squealed. "Comet Galeraven!"

"Shh! I ... I mean it's still very early. How do you know who I am?" Comet was better known as a pickpocket than a Tender.

"I've seen you with Lady Zeal." Shining said eagerly. "She is so beautiful. My father reckons Lord Dawnstar needs his head examined for appointing her a male Tender." She giggled.

"It's a very remarkable appointment, yes." Comet felt his rather neglected ego begin to swell.

"Is it true he hates her?" Shining asked in horror.

"What? Who?" Comet said in shock.

"Lord Dawnstar! It's said that he's insanely jealous of her because she's so fantastic. He is, isn't he?" Shining nodded eagerly.

"I'm a Tender, not a domestic advisor." Comet said stiffly.

"Oh rubbish! You're bound to hear things. Is it true she's going to overthrow the

Courts? She's already started by throwing out half of the army!"

"Don't be absurd! Of course she isn't. Is that what people think?" Comet asked in surprise.

"Why else would she come back? Some people remember Entia with magic and some of the old ones even used it. Is that why she's here? Is she going to bring it back?" Shining badgered.

"Shining you really shouldn't take all rumours as the truth." Comet said diplomatically. "Now it really is important that I see Antal."

"Comet." Antal himself was at the door. "Leave your duties for now, girl. I'll see to Tender Comet." Shining bobbed her head and retreated from the laundry room. "She has a good grasp of the local gossip. Any truth in any of it?"

"I want to see Brand, Antal." Comet stated.

"Are you trying to bargain with Shadow?" Antal shrugged.

"No of course not. I'm doing exactly what Shadow asks. I want to see my brother. It's not an unreasonable request." Comet insisted.

"I can only pass on your request." Antal nodded.

"Thank you." Comet said. "As for the Court takeover? Well I think you know how absurd that is. Their personal situation is complicated but 'hate' is a very strong word. Zeal's return was a huge shock for Lord Dawnstar. I wasn't asked to pry into their private lives." He said flatly. "Zeal thinks she was part of the elemental forces for twenty years. She thinks she was an actual part of everything in existence. Since elemental forces are timeless, so was she when she was a part of them."

"Fascinating." Antal said in awe. "So how did she travel between the existences? Shadow will surely ask."

"She doesn't know. We theorised that even though people have memories, the forces don't. It's probable that memories aren't transferred in one piece." Comet explained. "She doesn't know how or why she was taken, or how and why she was returned."

"'We', Comet?" Antal smiled and it irritated Comet. "You seem to be in favour."

"It's what I'm supposed to do, isn't it? I have to go." Comet left the laundry room and Antal followed. The men made their way to the front of the Infirmary.

"Overall, you're doing a good job, Comet." Antal said.

"I think not but OK." Comet answered shortly. "Remember, Antal, I want to see my brother."

"Comet!" Both men turned round, then panicked when they saw Zeal and Clash walking towards them.

"Sacred shit! What are they doing here, Comet?" Antal hissed.

"I don't know." Comet hurried forward to meet them. "Is everything OK?"

"Everything's fine! Clash's rooms really are abysmal. We've been ordering drapes and furnishings." Zeal laughed and Clash rolled his eyes. "How is your brother, Comet? Have you seen him?"

"No, not today." Comet glanced at Antal. "He had a bad night, so I'm told. He's resting."

"Oh I see. Maybe I can meet him when he's feeling a bit better?" Zeal looked at Antal.

"I'll see what I can do." Antal muttered. "I have to get back to work. Good day to you all." Comet watched him returning to the Infirmary.

"So! About these drapes. What colour did you go for, Clash?" Comet smiled at the look of dismay on Clash's face.

Hunter Bane had seventy five men assembled in the barracks yard. Out of the hundred that Zeal spoke to the previous day, a massive three quarters had decided to stay. Lance Baron was conspicuously absent. Clash had gone to the Palace, knowing Lore would be there.

"Look at them Comet." Zeal said in admiration. "Those men are the real supporters of Entia."

"You've done a great thing, Zeal. Well done." Comet said in awe.

"Lady Zeal?" Hunter came up beside them. "I have another fifty men who weren't previously assigned to monitoring but they'd all like to volunteer their services now."

"Whoa!" Zeal whooped in delight and grabbed Comet by the elbows. "Isn't that fantastic? What about Captain Baron? I know he's displeased."

"Slightly, yes. He's at the Palace making very loud noises." Hunter informed them.

"I don't understand it." Zeal sighed. "It's the same thing carried out in a different manner, that's all."

"He resents the intrusion, Zeal." Comet said and Hunter just shrugged his shoulders.

"Well he's not alone there is he?" Zeal muttered. "These men already have a rota and patrols. Is that right, Hunter?"

"Yes. It's more of an observation while going about their duties."

"Non intrusive, as it should be. I'll go and have a swear with them." Zeal grinned and headed for the yard. Comet went to follow her when he spotted Violet Veil by the gates. She made eye contact, then stepped out of sight, behind the jailhouse wall.

"Captain Bane?" Comet got Hunter's attention. "I've just remembered something I have to do. Can you stay with Lady Zeal please?"

"Yes of course." Hunter nodded and went to listen to Zeal swearing. Comet found Violet behind the wall.

"Brand is at the Infirmary." She said and Comet almost collapsed in relief. "He won't be there long, so get a move on."

"Now? Lady Zeal will be finished here soon ..."

"Now, Comet. I'll give you a bit of advice too. Shadow doesn't appreciate surprise appearances. Lady Zeal turning up at the Infirmary and asking for Brand could have been awkward." Violet informed him.

"Oh is that so?" Comet felt his temper rise sharply. "It's a public building! She didn't turn up and ask for Brand, she came looking for me and inquired after Brand out of politeness. OK? It wouldn't have been awkward at all if Brand had been in the Infirmary where he's meant to be, so don't give me that shit, Violet!"

"I just pass on the messages." Violet said calmly. "Don't take too long." He glared horribly at Violet then marched back to the yard. He had to wait a few minutes until Zeal finished talking about magic channeling to the men.

"Brand's asking for me, Zeal." He said.

"Oh! Well go on then! Shoo!" Zeal wafted her hands at Comet.

"I have to get word to Clash. He'll skin my alive if I leave his mother in he army barracks."

"I'll see to that. Lady Zeal will be fine." Hunter assured him. Comet nodded his thanks and hurried from the barracks.

Comet was shown to Brand's old room and it was empty.

"Antal? Trust me, I'm in no mood for any shit."

"He's on his way." Antal replied. Suddenly the door opened and Brand was shoved roughly into the room by two men.

"Brand!" Comet jumped forward and caught his weak twin. "Oh shit, Brand." It was very obvious that Brand had been badly neglected and a few visible bruises meant abuse. Comet was furious. "He needs help!" He roared, cradling Brand's head to his chest. "Brand can you hear me?"

"Comet." Brand smiled and his lip cracked. "Is the job almost done? I want to come back here."

"Hang in there Brand. I'm doing really well with it." Comet said through the tears. "The money I get for this one will great. It could even be enough for Tegrid."

"I hope so. I'm dying, Comet." Brand broke into a coughing fit that almost shook his frail body apart.

"Shh. No you're not dying. I won't let you." Comet said.

"They keep me in chains Comet. Why? I can barely move." Brand sobbed.

"Chains?" Comet looked at Antal in pure rage. "They chain him up? Merciful gods, why? Look at him!" Comet yelled. Antal looked at the floor and said nothing. "Can't he stay here? Please Antal! I'll carry on exactly as I am now, I swear it. You have to help him! You're a Tender!"

"I can't do anything, you know that." Antal looked desperately upset at Brand's condition.

"Come on, time's up." One of the men grabbed Brand and Comet rammed his fist under his chin.

"Comet!" Antal jumped forward. "Comet don't, lad."

"Get away from him!" Comet howled, clinging onto his brother. "Come on, Brand. I'll help you up."

"I'll be ... OK." Brand whispered, then started coughing again.

"Don't you hurt him!" Comet shouted as the two men supported Brand. "Just lift him up and carry him! Don't hurt him!" The men ignored Comet and dragged Brand from the room. Comet leant against the wall and cried.

"Comet, maybe it's best if you don't see him for now." Antal said gently.

"Get away from me, Antal. Even if you are a slave to The Web, you're still a Tender and still a person. How can you be a part of that? You make me sick." Comet pushed Antal out of the way and left the Infirmary.

Violet Veil was still wandering about outside the barracks. Comet had never in his life, felt the urge to attack a woman as strongly as he did right then.

"Lady Zeal left with Duke Clash. They've gone home. Get it done quickly, Comet, for Brand's sake."

"Mention him again and I'll tear out your tongue." Comet stormed away from the woman.

Clash and Zeal discussed the education plans but Comet barely heard any of it.

"Comet?" Zeal was speaking to him.

"Sorry, what did you say? Forgive me, I'm just a bit tired."

"You're not the only one." Clash yawned and stood up. "I'll get back to the Palace and catch up with you both later." Zeal nodded and waited for him to leave before speaking.

"Comet, is Brand OK? Zeal asked in concern.

"It's just a bit stressful. I'm sorry, I shouldn't let it affect me here." Comet apologised.

"Comet as though I mind!" Zeal said in exasperation. "How much of my domestic drama have you been subjected to?"

"It's my job."

"It is not your job. Comet it's far more than that and you know it. You've done so much for me, and for Clash, and even for Lore, in a way." Zeal knelt on the floor in front of Comet. "Brand's got worse, hasn't he?"

"Yes and it's my fault." Comet screwed his eyes shut.

"You can't ..."

"I can Zeal. Yes I can. It is my fault. I'm a failure. I've failed Brand, I've failed myself and I've failed you. I can't do this anymore. I have to leave."

"Leave?" Zeal said in alarm. "I don't understand. How have you failed?"

"I ... just have." Comet stood up. "I'm sorry, Zeal. I'll go and pack my things."

"I love you, Comet." Zeal said. Comet froze on the spot, then turned round slowly. "I can't help it."

"I wish you hadn't said that." Comet hung his head and the guilt was almost choking him. "I've loved you for a while now. I'm sorry, I can't stay."

"Is it Lore? Under the circumstances, I'm sure he'd agree to some sort of ... arrangement. He's been at it for years!"

"No it's not Lore." Comet did what he'd dreamt of doing for so long. He put his arms round Lady Zeal Dawnstar. "I'm not a Tender, Zeal. I'm an impostor and a liar."

"I know you're not a Tender."

"You don't ... huh? You know I'm not a Tender?" Comet said in shock.

"That coal bucket has more medical knowledge than you have." Zeal smiled.

"So why *do* you think I'm here?" Comet's head was reeling.

"I'm not sure. Probably to earn money for Brand." Zeal nodded. "Comet I can't think of anything I wouldn't do for Clash. Twenty years ago I destroyed a whole army of men for him and Lore. It's not hard for me to understand that you'd do anything to earn money for your brother, even posing as a Tender."

"I've been using you, Zeal." Comet said in shame. "I'm in an impossible situation here, so I'll just tell it as it is. I either lose Brand or I lose you. The Web sent me to spy on you and they took Brand as insurance. Shadow wants to be magically immortalised and if he doesn't get it, I lose Brand." He said miserably. "I've never been as pissed off in all my life."

"Oh Comet." Zeal was heartbroken. "You never had to spy on me, I have no secrets. You can't blame yourself for this because you had no choice."

"But I lied to you Zeal! I took everything you told me straight back to The Web. I discussed you and your family with a bunch of sneaks and thieves. *I'm* a sneak and a

thief. I'm a pickpocket from the slum quarter." Comet said in despair.

"I'd have done the same, and so would any other decent person. Brand's your brother." Zeal smiled and touched Comet's cheek. "Shadow will have to accept that immortality is impossible. I'm not immortal. I'll tell him myself if I have to. He can't hold Brand over an impossibility."

"Oh yes he can and no you will not tell him yourself. You're to have nothing to do with any of them, Zeal, please. I'll tell him myself."

"Brand can come here with us." Zeal said and Comet couldn't hold back the tears. "We can get him all the proper care he needs and even if we can't cure him, we can make him happy. You'll be together."

"I can't believe you haven't thrown me out on the street." Comet gave her a watery smile. "I can't wait to tell Brand about you. He'll love you too, Zeal."

"Comet? Will you stay with me tonight?" Zeal asked uncertainly. "Lore's staying in rooms at the Palace. I think we all know who's rooms."

"So you've remembered what to do?" Comet smiled and cried at the same time.

"No but you've taught me everything else since I got here. Come on." Zeal lead Comet by the hand and he could hardly think straight. Was this really happening? How had he come out winning when he deserved just the opposite? He had Zeal, the woman he'd fallen in love with, and he had her considerable support to help Brand. He also had no air in his lungs and no strength in his muscles by the time they both fell into an exhausted sleep.

Comet and Zeal were sharing a tender kiss over the breakfast table. Clash stopped dead in his tracks, half way up the path to the glass doors.

"Throw another headache into the mix, why don't you both." He muttered, then began whistling loudly. "Good morning mother, Comet."

"Clash!" Zeal beamed and Comet tried to look 'normal'. "Here have some tea. Do you want ... Clash? Why is your eye bruised?"

"Oh that. It's nothing." Clash sat down.

"What did you refuse to do this time?" Zeal said angrily, touching the bruise on Clash's eye. Comet blinked in surprise as the bruise faded to a blue smudge, then vanished completely.

"Mother! Did you ... "

"Oh blah! So arrest me." Zeal sniffed. "Well?"

"Father's still being excluded from everything, and I do mean everything." Clash said meaningfully. "The Queen spends much of her time talking with Captain Baron and Captain Baron is making as many loud noises as he can. He suggested that because of my newfound connection with you, that you could be angry about the hampering of my succession to the throne."

"Me?" Zeal said in surprise. "How did he get there?"

"He's causing trouble, mother. He's causing rifts that aren't there and exaggerating situations. That one was a tad stupid, however. Father jumped him and beat the living daylights out of him. He went at me for siding with you and exacerbating the issue." Clash sighed and Zeal was completely lost.

"I really don't understand any of it. It's so pointless! They don't have to be in disagreement." Zeal shook her head then frowned at Clash "What did you just do?"

"What? I didn't do anything. Why?"

"Something looked like singing." Zeal looked behind Clash.

"Huh? You don't see singing." Clash looked too.

"I must be over tired." Zeal rubbed her eyes. "I really must speak sensibly to your father, Clash. There are so many personal things we need to discuss. What will he be doing today? Apart from attacking the Councilors."

"I'll go and find a way to get him home. You need to speak alone." Clash looked at Comet. "She'll be fine. I'll stay in the house, out of the way."

"I have a few things to see to." Comet chewed on his lip. He wasn't comfortable about leaving Zeal in the same room as Lore and his violence. "You'll be here the whole time, right?"

"Upstairs. Yes." Clash nodded. Comet smiled at Zeal and left the room. Clash bade farewell to his mother and followed Comet.

"Comet!" Clash called as Comet was trying to hurry out of the front door. Comet grimaced and turned round. "All is well?"

"Everything's fantastic, Clash." Comet replied.

"Good. Good." Clash nodded slowly. "Fantastic, yes."

"Is there something bothering you, Clash?" Comet asked warily.

"Me? No." Clash said casually. "She'll need you Comet. You know what I mean."

"She'll need both of us and yes, I do know what you mean." Comet said seriously. "I love her, Clash."

"That's all I wanted to hear." Clash shrugged and smiled. Comet was rather relieved. "Oh just one more thing Comet?"

"Only one?" Comet asked cautiously.

"Can I call you Dad?" Clash sniggered childishly and Comet gave him a dirty look. "What? You didn't think I'd let you off without a few jibes, did you?"

"OK. Very funny." Comet said sarcastically. "Go away before I cuff your ear."

Clash found his father instructing a group of soldiers on who not to take orders from, namely General Zeal Dawnstar. The soldiers seemed impressed and placated. Clash sighed wearily. His mother was right about this being pointless, and also incredibly childish.

"Shall I recap for you, Clash? Just so you know exactly what to run tittle-tattling to your mother with?" Lore said nastily.

"There's enough tittle-tattle without me adding to it." Clash replied. "You two need to talk. There are personal things you need to sort out sensibly."

"I can't think of anything I want to discuss with your mother." Lore said flatly.

"Your marriage, father." Clash said in exasperation. "Don't glare at me like that. I'm not a go between, not for something like this. She's at home now and she knows there are things that only the two of you can sort out. That's all I'm here to say."

"I'll call in later if I have the time." Lore said irritably. "I'm due to see the Queen shortly. It's a matter of priorities."

"Obviously." Clash left his father before tempers frayed.

Comet walked through the slums and past his old hut and his mother's shop. He made his way through dusty streets and a maze of narrow lanes and back alleys. A plain metal door stood to his right, the type of door that that could lead to any warehouse in any part of Entia. Comet knew it wasn't. It was the entrance to Shadow's Keep, the headquarters of The Web, and its cellars sprawled out beneath half of Entia. Comet

had never been here before and he had a knot in his stomach that refused to move. The door was unlocked and the entrance room seemed unguarded. It was a container room and the guards were well concealed.

"What's your business here, rat?" A man armed with a jagged cleaver stepped out of the shadows.

"Comet Galeraven. I'm here to see Shadow." Comet said confidently.

"Shadow doesn't receive visitors. Be off and think yourself lucky you're alive." The man snarled.

"He'll see me. I have news of Zeal Dawnstar." Comet said.

"Wait there." The guard said after a few seconds. Comet did as he was told. Peering into the murky recesses of the room proved pointless. Comet could only see the door into the street.

"Comet." Comet recognised Violet Veil's voice before she seeped from the shadows. "This isn't convenient."

"I don't care. I have to see Shadow. I'll wait here until it is convenient." Comet said stubbornly.

"Very well. Come this way." Violet walked into an alcove to her right and Comet followed on. The alcove led to a tunnel in the wall that was completely hidden from the entrance room. It was dimly lit by lamps and Comet saw many turnoffs and recesses along its length. They were gradually walking down, below ground level.

"Is Brand here?" Comet asked.

"That isn't my business." Violet replied, nodding at two nasty looking men who were guarding a barred gate. They stood aside and Violet unlocked it. They walked up a steep spiral staircase and Comet tried to figure out where they were. He guessed they must have been outside the city, close to the River Zeal. Judging by the escalation of the stairs, they had to be above ground again but Comet couldn't think of any buildings in that area. All there was out there was Fogg Mountain. The staircase gave way to a huge, circular room with heavily draped walls, no doubt concealing more recesses and corridors. In the middle of the room was a raised dais, housing a long, black and purple couch. Around a dozen men and women stood around the room and they all watched Comet carefully. One of the drapes moved and Comet caught a glimpse of sky and hills. They were *inside* Fogg Mountain! Shadow was hidden from view by three, big guards who walked in front of him and over to the couch. Only when Shadow was settled on this couch, did the guards move aside. He was dressed in a heavy, black robe with its deep hood drawn fully over his head and face. Comet

couldn't define a shape or features due to the billowing cloak, but he did sense an overwhelming radiation of terror. Shadow motioned for Violet to stand by him, then leant closely towards her.

"Shadow wishes you to know that this is highly irregular. You are highly honoured that he has agreed to see you." Violet said.

"I appreciate it, sir." Comet hoped his voice wouldn't crack. "I came to you regarding Lady Zeal. Her transformation into elemental form was beyond her control sir. It was her existence in that form that preserved her age. Sir, there is no magical way to stall aging. Her magic, as in any other magic, is the usage of elemental forces. In her case it's Water and Earth. She can't heal herself to the point of immortality. It's impossible, sir." He felt his heart hammering in his chest. Again, Violet listened to Shadow.

"Shadow expresses his disappointment. He is of the opinion that Lady Zeal found a way to resurrect herself here, at the preserved age of twenty."

"No sir, that's inaccurate. To be resurrected, one has to be dead. Lady Zeal was never dead."

"Shadow says that if she was not here and breathing in this existence, then she was dead to it. He believes she reanimated her body and is in the process of healing her mind."

"It's not my place to contradict Shadow. I can only tell you what I've learned. I truly believe that if Lady Zeal had any powerful regenerative magic, then she'd have used it on Brand."

"Shadow observes that you seem to have Lady Zeal's complete confidence."

"That's what you ordered me to do, wasn't it? Sir I've found out all I can. There is no more to find out. If there was, I'd have delivered it. You have my brother. Sir, keeping him here is pointless." Comet hung his head. Shadow was quiet for a while, then he leaned towards Violet again. "Can you at least speak to me directly, sir? I'm speaking directly to you." Shadow sat forward and Comet took a step back.

"Pointless, as you say." Shadow whispered and Comet's skin crawled. "Maybe you have also served your purpose, Comet."

"To the best of my ability, yes." Comet tried to peer into the depths of the hood. Shadow sat back abruptly and summoned his guards.

"Teach him a lesson." Shadow hissed. Three guard set about Comet and he didn't stand a chance. Violet glanced at Shadow, then back to the floor. "This upsets you, Violet?"

"It's not my place to question Shadow's decisions." Violet replied, quietly.

"I want to see the extent of Lady Dawnstar's healing magic for myself. I also want to send those fools at the Palace a message. I'm still very much a large part of Entia and I own that Palace. It's time they realised that I don't need them to get what I want. OK that's enough." Shadow stood up and the guards stepped away from Comet. He was unconscious, battered to a pulp and covered in his own blood. "Wake him and make him walk out. Spread the word that this was my doing and anyone assisting him will die." Shadow looked at Comet, then vanished behind the drapes.

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Chapter 8

Zeal stopped looking out of the window. Lore wasn't coming home, despite Clash's efforts.

"Do you want me to go to the Palace for him?" Clash said, from the study door.

"No. He'll come when he's ready." Zeal sat by the fire. "I expected Comet home before now. It's getting dark."

"Did he say where he was going?" Clash poured wine for himself and Zeal.

"No." Zeal presumed Comet was going to contact The Web but she had no idea how he'd do that. "I hope he's OK."

"He's a good man, mother." Clash said and Zeal went as red as her hair.

"Yes he is." Zeal stood up and walked back to the window. "Your father and I need to sort ..." She pushed the drape further back. "Clash?" Clash went to look too.

"Too much wine, not enough sense." Clash said. "I'll go and set him on his way." He went to remove the drunkard from the front path. Zeal watched him shake the pile of rags, then he shouted something. Clash stood up and began waving frantically. Zeal immediately ran to the front door.

"Clash! What's wrong?" She grabbed a lantern from the front porch.

"Mother it's ..."

"Comet" Zeal screamed when she saw Comet's battered and bloody face. "Oh merciful gods." She knelt on the path and lifted Comet's head into her lap. "Comet! Comet can you hear me? Please wake up." She sobbed.

"We have to get him indoors. Sacred shit." Clash lifted Comet, then saw his father standing there in shock. "Oh great."

"Lore it's Comet! He's had an accident." Zeal cried hysterically.

"He's been beaten." Clash corrected, carrying Comet indoors.

"Zeal we need to talk." Lore said.

"I have to go to Comet." Zeal ran into the house and the study and knelt by the couch where Comet was unconscious.

"Zeal! I'll get you another Tender. We need to talk." Lore shouted.

"Lore just ... just ... piss off." Zeal said in tears. "Comet needs me."

"It's a matter of priorities." Clash shrugged and Lore stormed out of the house.

"He's a mess Clash." Zeal's tears mingled with Comet's blood. "He's bleeding inside and he has broken bones. My Comet." She sobbed uncontrollably.

"Can you fix him? Stuff the legalities. They won't touch you, they wouldn't dare." Clash knelt next to Zeal.

"I ... I need my Comet. I need a healthy Comet." Zeal screwed her eyes shut. "I need the bleeding inside to stop. The wound has to scab." She held Comet's hands. "I need fire to seal the wound closed. I can't do it!"

"You can! Mother you have to try. Listen to me. You were part of it all, remember? You *have* touched Fire and Air. Remember mother, you know what they feel like." Clash said urgently.

"I can see it! Clash I ... I ... have it! Brother Fire let me use you. Please help me save him!" Sharp flashes pulsated from Zeal's hands, into Comet's body. "Stay back Clash. By the stars that hurts like a bitch. Shit."

"It's working!" Clash said in complete awe. "Sacred shit! Keep going, mother." Zeal's whole body shook and burned as Comet's internal wounds were seared over. She jolted and sobbed when Air joined Fire to cool down his insides.

"Clash. Cl ... ugh." Zeal turned her head and vomited violently into the fire grate.

"Ew! He's going to live. Mother you did it! He's going to live!" Clash was utterly astounded.

"Almost." Zeal panted and wiped the sweat from her eyes. "I don't know how you men cope with that. This is much better." Clash watched in amazement as Comet's broken arm and leg, straightened with a crunch, then clicked into place. "Earth." Zeal smiled weakly. "And a good old wash with Water to cleanse everything." The colour flushed back into Comet's cheeks, under the blood and grime.

"I don't believe what I've just seen." Clash was overwhelmed.

"What a blast eh?" Zeal swayed on the spot so Clash steered her into a chair. "Clash, look!" She pointed at Comet.

"I know. It's fantastic. He doesn't have a mark on him." Clash marvelled.

"No! Look at the forces! Clash they're singing!" Zeal laughed in joy. "They're swirling around and singing! Clash they're alive!"

"I wish I could see it." Clash looked, but only saw Comet.

"I do too. You have no magic, Clash. I looked." Zeal said sadly.

"Oh well. What do you expect with Lore as my father?" Clash smiled. "Is this why you came back? To make the forces sing?"

"I believe so. More than that though. They were dying, Clash. They tried to manage for years with just Fire and Air, after the Queen forbade female wizards. After she banned it completely, they began to die. We'd have lost them completely." Zeal walked back over to Comet. "I don't think Comet was meant to be part of the plan."

"You think not? This is twice you've used magic, against the law, for love. The forces must know what a soft lot you are." Clash smiled. "Come on, you must rest."

"I'm OK. I'll stay with him." Zeal nodded.

"You'll do as you're told." Clash rolled his eyes. "I'll stay with Comet, don't worry."

"Wake me if he wakes up?"

"Certainly. Come on, away with you." Clash shoo'd his mother out of the room.

Ruby Galeraven stood in a warehouse, surrounded by dust and shadows.

"You haven't been sent for." Said a voice.

"No but I'm here. Shadow will see me."

"Wait here."

"As you wish." Ruby waited until Violet Veil appeared through the gloom.

"Shadow is busy, Ruby."

"So am I. Where is he?" Ruby asked evenly.

"This way."

"Yes I know the way." Ruby pushed her way past Violet and made her way down the tunnel.

Shadow emerged from the drapes as Ruby entered the circular room.

"I don't like you being here." Shadow whispered from his hood.

"I don't like being here. You had Comet beaten? Beaten and left to crawl through the streets? How could you!" Ruby exclaimed.

"Quite easily. I want Zeal Dawnstar to show me the extent of her power, and she seems to have a soft spot for Comet. Probably her bed."

"He's your brother, Brand!" Ruby shouted.

"And his loyalty is quite admirable. He's doing all this for me anyway." Brand pushed back his hood and rubbed his fingers through his thin, blonde hair. "I'm dying, you old crow! You couldn't even give birth properly. Do you honestly think Comet's little trip to Tegrud is going to help? Of course not. Zeal Dawnstar's command over magic, however, is a different matter."

"Brand, the money left to me by your father is what put you here. I sold every inch of land to give you all this. I've turned my back on Comet to hide the tears, every single time he brought in a few coins for his savings for you. I maintained your secret, double life at the expense of my other son. Please Brand, for me, let him be. Find another way to get to Lady Zeal." Ruby said desperately.

"You miserable old witch!" Brand snarled. "You have the gall to speak to me about your maternal misery? You *chose* to put me here. You *chose* to ignore Comet. You *chose* to serve me as the most lucrative option."

"I did, and I bitterly regret it. I lost Comet's love long ago and I never had yours. I have nothing now. Comet doesn't deserve this. I'll return your books and accounts by the end of the week." Ruby hung her head.

"You do that, mother. Get out." Shadow pulled the hood back over his eyes. Ruby left under the escort of two guards. "Vittie!" He summoned a very rough looking man. "Find out what day the merchants' guild deposit the money they've embezzled, with Ruby. Once the payment is in, kill her and clear the place. Understood?"

"Yes Shadow." Vittie grinned viciously.

"Oh and if Comet survives, make sure he gets to know about it."

Comet woke up and yawned. He sat up and frowned at Clash, who was asleep in the chair. He wondered why he was sleeping in the lounge, then he saw the state of his clothes. Memories came flooding back and he realised that Zeal must have healed him. He stood up and tested out a few limbs.

"Sacred shit. Zeal you are magnificent."

"Of course she is. She's my mother." Clash got stiffly out of the chair.

"She did this? All of this?" Comet said in disbelief.

"She did." Clash gave Comet a full account of what he'd seen with his own eyes.

"I have to see her." Comet said.

"Oh no you don't. Sit down, Comet." Clash pointed at the couch.

"Clash I have ..."

"You can see her later. She's resting. Now why would Mittin, the serving girl, tell Delph, the cook, that you were beaten by The Web?" Clash scowled and looked exactly like his father. "Don't even think about trying to shit me, Comet. I'll replicate those injuries, and add a few more."

"Clash it's ... complicated." Comet sighed wearily.

"A complication in my life? Oh woe! I'll never cope! Listen to me. Usually, a man's business is his own, Web connections included. Half of Entia has ties with it, for shit's sake. Having said that, they really aren't nice people, are they? They could beat up a dozen people a day as far as I'm concerned. I don't care. However, I do care about my mother. If you're mixed up in any shit, then you stay away. You vanish and you don't come back." Clash was sitting forward in his chair and was deadly serious.

"She knows." Comet hung his head in shame. "Zeal knows everything, Clash, I swear she does."

"Oh? Well that's a start. How about letting me know too?" Clash told rather than asked. Comet had little choice but to tell him everything. He didn't even attempt to play down his own, deceitful part in it, he told it all as it was.

"So Shadow had me beat up to see if Zeal would heal me. She has." Comet finished gloomily. "I sincerely hope that you don't think I'm still using any of you. I'm not. I

wouldn't blame you for not trusting me though. I'm sorry."

"Well I can understand how my mother would forgive you." Clash nodded.

"I don't deserve it, I know." Comet said miserably.

"Oh stop wallowing in self pity, for shit's sake. Who's to say what you do or don't deserve unless they've been there? Anyhow, I doubt any deceit would extend to having yourself beaten half to death. So what will Shadow do when he sees you healed?" Clash asked.

"He'll want to know how. I tried to tell him. I tried to explain to him that she was limited to what she could use. I think he wanted to see for himself." Comet exhaled loudly.

"Does he realise that it's innate? It can't be taught or learned. Does he know he'll never be able to use magic himself, if it's not already there? Not even the Queen could order that one." Clash said.

"He won't need to if he has someone to do it for him. Yes he is insane, before you ask. All he needs is Zeal to ... activate ... a mage to do his bidding. He wants to live forever." Comet said in dejection. "No one wants an army of underground mages, what a terrible thought. I'll never hand her over, Clash."

"He has your brother." Clash reminded him.

"I'll think of something. I have to string Shadow along until I can get Brand out of there. We'll go to Tegrid. I'll walk all the way and carry him if I need to."

"If that need arises then the expenses are covered." Clash clasped Comet's shoulder. "You know, Shadow is just a man, afterall. We aren't exactly ordinary riff-raff either, are we? Mother is ... is ... awesome, and I'm a royal Councilor."

"And I'm a pickpocket from the slum quarter. Yes!" Comet rolled his eyes.

"I know, you peasant." Clash heaved. "Having knowledge of The Web isn't useful at all. Duh! Go and get cleaned up. You can't see my mother like that. You're a disgrace." Comet smiled and left the room feeling, once again, overwhelmingly humbled by the Dawnstars and their understanding and decency.

The following morning, Clash engaged the services of Captain Hunter Bane and five soldiers to stay with Zeal and Comet. This was for protection, but also for attention. Shadow wanted to see a result, so they were going to make sure he did just that.

"I was a a loss what to do." Hunter said as he accompanied Clash back to the house.

"I heard the gossip and came out here to see for myself. I found nothing unusual and no one had reported a beating. I put it down to exaggeration or mistaken identity."

"Well he wasn't as bad as he looked." Clash said casually. "Obviously I can't have such thuggery looming over my mother and her Tender, hence your presence."

"Of course. I regret not assigning a guard sooner." Hunter said.

"No one's at fault Hunter. If I thought it necessary, I'd have requested a guard myself. Do you hear music?" Clash looked towards the house.

"The lute, if I'm not mistaken." Hunter nodded.

"The cook plays the lute. Excuse me please." Clash found Delph playing the instrument, and Zeal and Comet dancing and laughing. "You'll be fit and healthy then?" He smiled at Comet.

"Clash!" Zeal ran at her son and hugged him. "Comet is an excellent dancer!"

"So I see. Come on, Twinkle Toes. Barracks first, then the Palace."

Comet's healthy and unabused appearance confused the population a great deal. Had he been beaten? Perhaps it was someone else? Had Lady Zeal healed him? Were his injuries so severe? Lore knew the truth, he'd seen it.

"So Zeal. You're intent on causing trouble at every turn." He said as they sat in the Palace hallway. "You're purposely fueling a rift, and I'm in the middle of it."

"With respect, Lore, I did no such thing. You all caused your own rifts." Zeal replied.

"They're all saying you're in revolt against the Queen. Did you know that?" Lore said accusingly.

"Once they see I'm not, they'll soon find something else to talk about." Zeal shrugged.

"They'll still see Clash." Lore snapped.

"Me? What about me?"

"Aligning with your mother as a lash out to the Queen? Yes? The Queen who's reconsidering you as a heir? Grow up, Clash." Lore snorted.

"That is utter bilge." Clash said wearily. "I'd fed up to my eyeballs of hearing this. I am not lashing out at anyone, let alone the Queen of Entia. We have to stop all this."

Can't you see that? People are getting hurt, father! The Courts are in uproar and Comet was attacked! It's all because of baseless mistrust and lack of communication. There's no need for such a high level of suspicion."

"He was beaten by The Web." Lore nodded at Comet. "The Web deal out beatings as warnings, they always have. It's a warning to you Zeal. You aren't wanted here."

"Yes she is." Comet spoke up. "The Web also deal out beatings as a show of power. They're telling you that that they're very much in touch with the situation. The Courts have informal ties with The Web. Maybe you should get on the same page and let them know you still have the last say."

"Rather impudent for a Tender, aren't you?" Lore snarled at Comet. "Also rather stupid. Do you think anyone would take on The Web?"

"They don't want a fight. They want you to stop bickering and pay attention. You run Entia and they profit from it." Comet replied.

"And where's the profit for you, Comet?" Lore lowered his voice to a growl. "According to Serai, it's in my bed with my wife."

"How dare you!" Zeal landed a stinging slap on Lore's face. "So you refuse to talk to me, but you're willing to degrade me in front of my son and Captain Bane? You spineless shit! Don't you dare raise your hand to me, Lore Dawnstar! I intend reclaiming every single coin you've ever made from my name, and that includes the damned bed! Stay here where you belong!" Zeal spun on her heel and marched from the Palace. Clash grit his teeth and followed her, dragging Hunter with him.

"That was a very cruel thing to do, Lord Dawnstar." Comet said quietly.

"Bedding another man's wife is none too fitting either." Lore snapped.

"Just because you do it on a grander scale, doesn't make it any different." Comet said nastily. "She was prepared to come to some discrete arrangement over this mess. She accepted that you have your own life here and that you've built it over twenty years. If she can understand that, despite it being so sudden for her, why can't you? Well you won't get the chance now. Keep your royal status and favour, Lore. Maybe one day you'll know what you've lost." Comet turned and left the Palace after the others. He saw Zeal's red hair in the crowd, and quickened his pace to catch up. A flash of purple caught his eye and he groaned out loud.

"Comet."

"Violet, not now. Whatever it is, not now." Comet said testily.

"You should have reported to Shadow." Violet said quietly.

"To demonstrate the results of his experiment? I'm sure you'll tell him." Comet sneered.

"He doesn't want me to tell him."

"Look, Violet, no matter what you say, I'm not running to Shadow at this very second. I can't tell you any more than I did yesterday." Comet said flatly.

"He asked me to remind you that you're under obligation." Violet said. "Apart from that, if your position was made known to the Dawnstars, I'm sure they'd demand a few answers from you. Even if there is a place in the realm that you could hide from them, Shadow would help them find you."

"Finished?" Comet planted his fists on his hips.

"Almost. Brand?" Violet raised her eyebrows.

"Unless I see proof that my brother is still alive, before tomorrow nightfall, I'll consider my contract with Shadow terminated and take my chances with Zeal and Clash." Comet stated.

"You're a fool, Comet. You can't dictate terms to Shadow. No one can. He owns you and he owns me." Violet spat.

"Why can't you understand? Why can't you see where I am? I cannot pass on further information because there is none! Shadow's convinced I'm holding back and there's nothing I can do to convince him otherwise. He cannot do what Zeal did, nor can anyone else. Are you getting the message, Violet? He can't do it and he can't have it done to him because it's impossible!" Comet tried to keep his voice down. "I want a sealed message from Brand telling me the whereabouts of the tin spears. Brand will know what that means." He gave Violet a long, challenging look, then set off to catch up with Zeal.

Hunter felt shocked and disgusted at Lord Dawnstar's behaviour. No matter how complicated ones domestic life got, it shouldn't be aired in public at the expense of one woman in otherwise male company. He also felt very overwhelmed to be included in the company as he sat in the Dawnstar's study with Zeal, Clash and Comet, the latter being of rather more importance than Hunter presumed. Zeal was a credit to herself and her strong will, as she sat tight-faced but tear and hysterics-free. Clash was annoyed, fed up, and exasperated. Comet was in a subdued rage over just about everything.

"Would you like me to leave, Duke Dawnstar?" Hunter asked awkwardly.

"I doubt you'll hear anything you've not already heard, or worked out." Clash said.
"Mother?"

"Hunter's fine. You're welcome here, Captain Bane." Zeal replied curtly.

"OK mother, out with it. You're as tight as a drum and it's making me edgy."

"I don't know what you mean." Zeal said stiffly.

"Fair enough. I can't even remember what he said." Clash said casually. Zeal inflated a full two inches and glared horribly at him.

"How dare he! The great horse's arse!" Zeal erupted, Clash nodded, Comet sniggered and Hunter flinched. "Why did he think a lecture on propriety from *him* was a good idea? I don't need an overinflated shit-heap like him drawing attention to my ... my ... stuff ... in public. Has he been the epitome of virtue? Has he knackers! Oh it's OK for him to strut his junk while I was away for twenty years in ethereal form! Does he think that was fun? Does he? Ethereal forms have no sense of fun, they just don't get it. Yes well he can go and boil his balls. My house, my stuff, my son and my ... Comet. Arse to him." Zeal folded her arms and glared at the fire.

"Well said, Zeal." Comet grinned.

"Too true." Zeal nodded.

"OK. So I'll go ..."

"And if that lot lurking about up Fogg Mountain think they can please themselves then they have another think coming." Zeal butted in and Clash shut up and rubbed his eyes. "Bunch of bloody losers. If that spineless cretin wants a lesson on immortality then I'll give him one. Step one, you aren't immortal! Zap! Ouch! Does it hurt?"

"Yes mother." Clash grimaced. "I'll go and find out ..."

"And what's the Queen doing? Apart from knobbing my husband, sitting on her pampered arse and listening to gossip? She spends all day long listening to that other addle-headed nut case ... thingy ... oh what's his face ..."

"Captain Baron?" Hunter helped, warily.

"That's him! What is his problem? Is it because I'm a girl? Is he trying to make a point? I'm a General. I'll order him to go sweep up leaves in the Harshlands. Arse. Saying my Clash is sulking because Queen Maneater won't let him on the throne.

Pfft! As though it's all that, eh?"

"Well it is all that, mother. It's the throne of Entia." Clash said, trying to fend off his headache. "But you're right! Who wants all the drama eh? It's a silly job. Now then, I need to be up ..."

"Maybe you should have stayed at the Palace, Clash. We need to know what's going on."

"That's a splendid idea, mother. I'll get right onto it." Clash exhaled loudly and Comet was useless with laughter. "Do grow up, Comet."

"Yes son. Have fun." Comet smirked and Clash gave him a dirty look. "I don't think we're going out again today, Hunter." Comet indicated himself and Zeal. "May we send for you if we need to?"

"Absolutely." Hunter nodded.

"Right!" Clash stated. "I'll go and fire Serai on my way out."

"I'll do it!" Zeal stood up.

"How does 'no' grab you? I meant fire as in remove her from her job. Settle down, mother." Clash pointed to the chair, then left.

"No fun in him." Zeal sniffed. "Hunter I'm sorry you were exposed to all this. It must have been awkward and embarrassing for you."

"Me? No, not at all." Hunter lied.

"Bulls nuts." Zeal smiled. "I'll go and catch Clash. I want his word that he's not going to fight with Lore. Excuse me." Hunter bobbed a bow and Zeal left.

"Despite Lore's bellowing, don't let anyone speak ill of her, Hunter." Comet said. "I deserve the title 'little shit', she doesn't."

"Not so long ago the title suited you, Galeraven." Hunter said and Comet started to laugh. "I've had you in that cell more times than I've changed my uniform!"

"That did puzzle me. Obviously you knew I wasn't from the Infirmary. why didn't you speak up?" Comet asked.

"I can only think of one way a toerag like you would be appointed to Lady Zeal. Web business. All I could do was to make sure you weren't physically harming her. I couldn't speak up, Comet. I have children." Hunter said and Comet understood.

"Luckily, and miraculously, Lance Baron didn't recognise you. He only has his mother and he'd sell her for a few coins, if she wasn't already doing so herself."

"I understand about your children, Hunter. You don't think I came here as a spy of my own accord, did you? Shadow has Brand."

"Ah yes. I did suspect that. I'm sorry Comet, truly." Hunter sympathised. "He's insane. It's all insane! You and Lady Zeal?" He shook his head in disbelief and made Comet laugh. "You little toad. You'll be wanting your name on the statue next. Anyway I must get going. My men are on patrol so just get word to me if necessary."

"Thank you for everything, Hunter." Comet let the captain out of the house. He was just about to close the front door when he heard Zeal.

"Oh you and everyone else, sister. It's not the first time I've seen you sniffing around. You're not seeing him, he's busy." Comet walked round the side of the house to investigate. "Don't make me take this broom to you."

"Oh shit!" Zeal and her broom were standing inches from Violet Veil. "Zeal! Zeal it's OK. Lower the broom, woman." He laughed. Violet grit her teeth and handed Comet a sealed note. She glanced at Zeal then left quickly.

"Yes you'd better run. Bloody trollop. What's it say?" Zeal leant on the broom.

"Three rocks after Blue Bolder." Comet smiled sadly. "Location of legendary treasure known to only me and Brand. Two tin swords made from scrap metal from the hooper's yard. We were going to go and retrieve it when we were sixteen and grown up, then conquer Entia."

"Oh I see! Er ... sorry. I thought she was a floosey." Zeal grimaced and made Comet laugh. "Comet we have to get him out of there. We have to face it, I'm going to have to meet Shadow myself."

"People don't meet Shadow, Zeal. People are absorbed by Shadow." Comet led Zeal back into the house. "If he releases Brand then someone else will take his place. Delph? Mittin? Hunter Bane's children? He's like a poisonous sponge that takes, takes, takes and gives nothing in return. Our advantage is that he doesn't know about us, Zeal. He doesn't know that you know everything, and that you've forgiven me. It's only a matter of time though, mainly thanks to Lore."

"Fat mouthed idiot." Zeal spat.

"It will give Shadow something to think about though. I was given this job because I'm good at gaining peoples' affections. Yes I know how arrogant that sounds. I'm a little toad. Charisma, Zeal, and we have trough loads between us." Comet smiled.

"But where does that leave Brand?" Zeal asked.

"With time because I'll still have Shadow's interest." Comet said. "I'm sorry Lore humiliated you like that. I felt so useless. Under any other circumstances, I'd have beaten him out of the city for that."

"It takes a better man not to do that. You're not useless." Zeal put her arms round Comet.

"So you thought Miss Veil was giving me the eye, did you?" Comet teased.

"Well it was hard to tell seeing as they pointed in different directions." Zeal sniffed. "She has magic, by the way."

"What?" Comet let go of Zeal. "Violet Veil is a mage?"

"No. She has the potential to become a mage if someone makes her aware of it. So does Hunter Bane."

"Good gods. I just can't imagine someone like Hunter using magic." Comet said in shock.

"He would have at one time." Zeal smiled and flicked her hand towards the coal bucket. It began to rattle, then coals began jumping out of it. Comet laughed in delight as the coals piled up and formed themselves into the figure of a man. Zeal made him dance and the forces sing. The coal man spun upstairs with Zeal and into the bedroom, the forces swirling all around them. Eventually, the little man took a seat by the door and Zeal and Comet sat laughing on the bed.

"He's not going to copy you all night is he?" Comet asked doubtfully.

"No he'll just sit there until I pay attention to him again." Zeal smiled.

"I'm sorry, my little rock friend, you can wait your turn." Comet blew out the lamp.

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Chapter 9

Zeal didn't sleep, she fell unconscious. She blamed it on the forces for instilling a deep sense of security and comfort within her. Comet blamed the forces for conspiring against him and making Zeal snore like a dying horse. He was just about to jam his head under the pillow when he heard something. It was the chinking of stones ... or pieces of coal. Comet rammed both of his feet into Zeal and pushed her clean out of bed, while sending himself rolling in the opposite direction. He heard two thuds, then the rustle of silks.

"Zeal! Under the bed!" Comet grabbed the lamp, then his boots. On the sides of either boot were two imperceptible pockets containing razor sharp daggers. He hurled one dagger at the silken clad figure and it struck him, or her, in the back of the knee. Comet lunged forward with the other dagger.

"Comet! Move aside!" Zeal called from under the bed. The assassin was also armed with blades and Comet was trying to steer clear of them, and attempting to immobilise the attacker. He managed to jump to one side of the doorway. Zeal clicked her fingers and the coal man shattered into a million sharp shards. These shards shot towards the brawl at high speed. Comet flung himself to the floor and the assassin howled in agony as the shards embedded themselves into his face and eyes. Comet rolled and dodged the flailing swipes of the assassin's daggers, then the assassin veered off and made a grab for Zeal. Zeal sent a spear of ice straight through his heart.

"What ... shit!" Clash was standing at the door in his under britches. "Mother are you OK? Mother!"

"I'm fine, Clash." Zeal said from under the bed. "Comet?"

"I'm OK Zeal." Comet threw a nightdress under the bed for Zeal, and dragged on his own leggings. Clash watched in astonishment as the ice spear began to melt and its water trickled across the floor with the dead man's blood.

"He tried to kill Comet." Zeal came out and gave the assassin a bare footed kick for good measure.

"You think. Those were shot first." Comet nodded to where two darts were embedded in Zeal's pillow. "Whoever this arsehole is, he isn't one of Shadow's."

"How do you know?" Zeal asked shakily, clutching her nightdress at the neck. Comet carefully moved the assassin's blade away from his body.

"The Web use poisoned blades, just incase the cut itself isn't fatal. This one's clean." Clash plucked the darts from the pillow.

"These too, but they are barbed." He said in disgust. "Someone knew exactly where you slept and in what position."

"W ... what?" zeal said in terror.

"They didn't aim for Comet, mother, they aimed for your face. That face that snores like a pregnant camel and lets everyone know where it is." Clash explained.

"So it was The Web. It has to be, Comet! They don't know about me and you, remember. That asshole down there thought I was alone in here." Zeal nodded.

"No he didn't. He's been in Comet's room too, I checked." Clash frowned at the dead man. "Those darts wouldn't have killed you, but they would have incapacitated you, possibly blinding you. You're both quick so the most lethal needed immobilised first. The daggers were for Comet who'd have been temporarily unarmed. He knew you wouldn't hesitate to fry him mother, law or no law. He's been told quite a bit about you." Clash wiped his hand over his shocked face. "I feel rather sick. Excuse me, will you?"

"Where are you going?" Zeal sobbed.

"The Palace. Take her downstairs, Comet." Clash stumbled his way to the guest room to dress.

Lance Baron stood in front of Clash on the Palace steps.

"You know no one's allowed in here at night, not even you Duke Dawnstar."

"I think my father would like to know that there's a dead assassin on my mother's bedroom floor. You pass on the message. Good night."

"Eh? Wait!" Lance hopped in front of Clash. "Someone tried to kill Lady Zeal?"

"You either let me in here to see my father, while you go and get that shit off my mother's floor, or I'll go and remove it and string it up above the Palace gates. I'm sure the crowds would love it." Clash snarled.

"I'll go and tell him you're here." Lance hurried up the steps.

Ten minutes later, Clash was sitting in the royal ante-room. Lore walked in and he was fully dressed, fully groomed, and badly shaken.

"What happened?" He forced a calm voice.

"He failed." Clash replied flatly. "Comet disarmed him, mother took his heart out with an ice spear."

"I see." Lore sat down.

"Yes you do. You've done some despicable things in your time, father, me right there alongside you. This is an absolute low that you'll never recover from." Clash got to his feet. "I've got to live with the fact that you believed you did it for me. Good night, father."

The stress and exhaustion levels were close to breaking point the following day. A royal summons was the last thing anyone needed, but it came none the less. Queen Honor herself looked tired and fretful as she sat on her throne. She tried to keep her face expressionless as she looked at Zeal, Comet and Clash.

"What makes you think you're above the law, Zeal Dawnstar." The Queen narrowed her eyes at Zeal. "Your Tender standing there is an irrefutable testament of your first, illegal act of magic. Your own son's reports of magical icicles and flying rocks are proof of your second. Tell me why I shouldn't have you exiled."

"I saved Comet's life twice and my own once. I can't apologise for that." Zeal said calmly.

"Majesty." Clash spoke up quickly. "If that assassination attempt had succeeded then you'd have a riot on your hands. The first attack on Comet was rumoured to be the work of The Web so it would have been assumed by the people, that this second attack on Lady Zeal was from the same source. You'd have been forced to condemn this violence, Majesty. You'd have been forced to speak out against The Web. Exiling Lady Zeal would necessitate explanations. Explanations to the people, and The Web. I'm being realistic here. Any ... understandings ... we have with The Web are hanging on a very vague and fragile balance. I know I'm not the only one who can foresee disadvantages in upsetting such a balance." Clash fell silent, and that was prolonged by everyone else present.

"You are a very surprising development in all this." Queen Honor turned her dark, cold eyes on Comet. "Where in the balance are you, Comet Galeraven?"

"Wherever Lady Zeal is." Comet answered.

"And your connections with The Web?"

"I could no more answer that than you could, Majesty."

"Get out." The Queen snapped. "Keep it in mind that I do not like being backed into a corner. Get out." Clash, Comet, and Zeal gratefully took their leave.

Shadow retrieved his dagger from the throat of one of his minions, then returned to his couch. Violet looked at the floor, away from the body of her colleague.

"I will not be dictated to." He said quietly. "Nor will I be forced to explain myself to *anyone*, not even Queen Honor, especially over something that was not of my doing. Who ordered that assassination, Violet?"

"We're trying to find out, Shadow." Violet replied.

"How hard can it be?" Shadow screamed. "Who hates her enough to have her killed? You stupid woman, Violet! Do I have to figure everything out for you? I ordered no killing and very few others have the contacts, means, or motive. Lore Dawnstar has all three. Find him! I may have use for his disillusioned mind."

"Yes, Shadow." Violet said quickly.

"Wait." Shadow sat forward and balanced his thin chin on his fingertips. "What's the general climate out there regarding Clash Dawnstar and the Queen?"

"I'm not sure of the truth, Shadow, but it's rumoured that Clash resents the Queen for not upholding her promise to appoint him as her heir."

"And Clash is in complete alliance with his mother and that rat, Comet. I'm not pleased about that development, incidentally. I've not finished with Comet, not by a long, long way." Shadow sat and brooded for a while. "You know, I see an absurdly clear way to complete control over Entia and at the same time, ridding myself of my magical power source's main protectors. Once Clash and Comet are incarcerated, I'll have Zeal at my mercy. I'll even have Lore at my side to help me break her."

"It sounds ideal, sir." Violet said, blindly.

"I'm pleased you agreed. Cadet Adri Greenbeck refused to side with Zeal. His decision was swayed because his father is a cripple, injured out on West Ridge. Ideal indeed. Find him and apprehend his father."

"Straight away, Shadow." Violet nodded. "Anything else, sir?"

"Have I received the accounts from Ruby's hovel?"

"Yes. I believe Vittie was very thorough." Violet swallowed hard. Vittie's taste for pain was too much for even the cold hearted Violet.

Clash, Zeal, and Comet hadn't reached home when an alarm was sounded. It was a sound that was very rarely heard in Entia. A two toned trumpet fanfare that denoted a Palace emergency.

"Sacred shit, what now?" Clash swore. "I'd better go back. Comet, take mother home and see she rests." Comet nodded and Clash backtracked to the Palace.

Lance Baron was there again and Clash pushed past him.

"Duke Clash! Wait!"

"You are seriously annoying me, Baron. I'm a Court Advisor and I hear a high security alarm. Go and haunt someone else." Clash snarled.

"It's your father!" Lance shouted and Clash turned round, a knot of dread forming in his stomach. "Lord Dawnstar is dead. sir." Clash spun away from Lance and ran for the ante-room.

"The Queen is on her way sir!" A Cadet tried to stop Clash but Clash threw him, and a few more soldiers aside, and pushed into the room. Lore sat at a desk, his back to the door. His arms rested on the arms of a chair, and two pools of congealed blood stained the floor beneath them.

"Lore?" The Queen stood behind Clash. "Turn round. Lore?"

"He's gone, Majesty. Come, you shouldn't ..."

"No. Gone?" Queen Honor turned her frightened, tear filled eyes towards Clash. "He can't be gone. Lore! Please turn round!" She took a few steps forward and Clash caught her and stopped her. "Lore! No! Please come back!" She cried against Lore's chest and all he could do was hold her. She had loved him after all.

Zeal received Clash's news with an expressionless face but it was clear that a multitude of emotions were bubbling under the surface.

"I'll go and lie down for a while. Excuse me." She hurried out of the room. Comet stood up to follow her but Clash stopped him.

"She needs to be alone, Comet. Let her be." Clash said.

"Yes of course. What about you? Are you OK?" Comet asked Clash.

"No not really." Clash exhaled loudly. "He felt like he'd lost everything. All he'd done for twenty years was ensure my succession to the throne. Suddenly I didn't want it and the Queen didn't want to give it."

"Blessed gods." Comet was shocked too. "I told him he'd realise what he'd lost. I never imagined he'd take his own life."

"Me either. I told him he'd hit rock bottom and he'd never recover." Clash stood up suddenly and looked out of the window at nothing.

"Do you want me to go? I'll go to my old room." Comet said tactfully.

"No. I'd prefer your company if you don't mind putting up with me." Clash tried to smile. "I can't believe he's gone. Despite a lifetime of disagreements and obsessions, he was always there. I'll miss knowing he's there, which isn't the same as missing him. The things he thought he'd lost were through his own narrow vision. His ambitions for me, his Court standing, his grandeur, the control of his life. He hadn't lost it all, Comet, because he had a woman who loved him very much, if only he's noticed."

"Er ... maybe I should go." Comet wasn't sure if he could handle hearing this right now.

"I meant Queen Honor." Clash clarified. "All my life I've seen political strategies, schemes and trade-offs. I never stopped to think that there were people under all that. Comet, mother is going to need you. You have to look after her. Don't let her blame herself for any of this."

"I'm there for her, Clash, you know I am. She'll need you too."

"She has me Comet. For now, there's a woman up at that Palace who's struggling. She doesn't need employees, Courts, Advisors and Councilors. She needs time alone for now, but she also needs to know someone's there." Clash sighed heavily.

"I understand, so will Zeal. You don't have to explain to me." Comet assured him.

"Just what I wanted to hear. Go and see her, Comet." Clash smiled and Comet went to comfort Zeal.

Lord Lore Dawnstar was interred the following morning. He was laid to rest in the royal vaults, attended by Queen Honor and Clash. Clash represented himself, and Zeal and the Queen was too exhausted to even voice an opinion on it. She watched as the vault was sealed over her lover of twenty years, then she retired to the solitude of her rooms. Clash stayed for five minutes more, ensured his tears had dried, then left the

Palace to return home.

"OK?" Comet asked Zeal as they sat in the study.

"I'm fine. He deserves to be there at the Palace, Comet. I'm pleased she loved him. I know that sounds odd but it isn't. He wasn't just a political arrangement after all."
Zeal smiled sadly.

"No, he wasn't." Comet said. "Captain Bane's coming up the path. I'll deal with him if you like."

"If any legalities need my attention then I'd prefer to get it done. I'll see him, Comet."
Zeal sat down and Comet went to let Hunter into the house. The soldier looked very upset and distressed and Comet asked him to sit down.

"I'll go and get some tea from Delph." Comet said tactfully.

"Comet it's you I've come to see." Hunter said and Comet panicked.

"Brand! It's Brand isn't it? What have they done to him?"

"It's not Brand, Comet. It's your mother, Ruby. The shop was completely cleaned out and she's dead. I'm so sorry." Hunter said sincerely.

"Dead?" Comet blinked in shock. "Ruby's dead? I don't understand. She was killed in a robbery? I have to go."

"No Comet, stay. It's better if you stay. I have men there now." Hunter stood in front of the door. Comet closed his eyes and stumbled into a chair. It was clear that Hunter was sparing him a very unpleasant sight. "I've arranged for her to be taken, discretely, to the barracks in a casket. Under the circumstances, and with Lord Dawnstar's funeral, I didn't know what else to do. I hope I did the right thing."

"Thank you Hunter. That was very good of you." Comet was just staring at Zeal as though he didn't know what was happening.

"Hunter could you let Clash know we need him? Tell him it's urgent. Poor Clash."
Zeal fretted.

"I was just about to suggest it." Hunter stood up and put his hand on Comet's shoulder. "Entia's gone mad, my friend. I'm sorry. I'll let myself out." Comet nodded and let him leave.

"Shadow." He said to Zeal. "Shadow had her killed, Zeal. She wasn't worth killing to anyone else. Brand ..."

"Yes I know." Zeal was pacing the floor. "Take me to him, Comet."

"What? No! Zeal ..."

"Comet! I'll teach him, advise him or whatever. I'll do it myself. I'll keep it contained because I won't identify any other potentials." Zeal said urgently.

"No! We'll wait for Clash. He's probably talking to Queen ..."

"Comet, no, no, no!" Zeal flung up her hands. "Nothing else will do! You told me that! I can't cure Brand but I can get him back here to Clash."

"I ... can't ..."

"He's killing your family, Comet. If you won't take me, I'll go and demand it of Tender Antal at the Infirmary." Zeal stated.

"I think not." Clash had been listening and he was far from happy. "I'm up to here with this shit. People are dying and it has to stop."

"Clash I promised you I'd never hand Zeal over." Clash said desperately.

"I know." Clash put a huge hand on Comet's shoulder. "Our first priority is to get your brother out of there. He's sick, we aren't. Shadow won't hurt mother, Comet. He needs her."

"I'll blast his nuts up his back if he tries." Zeal said fastening her cape. "Come on."

"See what I mean?" Clash said with a rueful look at his mother's back as she marched out of the house. "I'm sorry about your mother, Comet."

"A less maternal woman you will never meet, but she was still my mother. I understand what you meant about the presence being missed." Comet said. Clash nodded and they continued their journey.

Comet purposely took another maze of back streets so they wouldn't have to pass what was left of Ruby's shop.

"It's like a bloody rats' nest." Clash grumbled. "Do you know where we are? I don't."

"In here." Comet opened a metal door and they stepped into a gloomy warehouse. Moments later, Violet Veil appeared and she looked visibly shaken.

"Comet, you fool!" She hissed. "Vittie's gone to warn Shadow. You've just signed

their death warrant." She nodded towards Zeal and Clash.

"Just turn a blind eye so we can pass. Shadow will never know you've seen us." Comet said to Violet.

"You're a dead man, Comet."

"Look, just go and stand over there out of the way." Zeal intervened.

"You don't have your broom." Violet sniped.

"I'm a bloody mage. Why would I need a broom? Shift your tatty arse over there before I cause it to sprout an oak tree." Zeal ushered Violet over to stand by the exit.

"You really are annoying." Violet snarled at Zeal.

"Yes I hear that a lot. Have a nice day." Zeal nudged Comet and they set off along the tunnel. The first ambush came ten feet along it. Four men appeared from the recesses in the walls. Two were armed with daggers, and two with hooked claws. Comet unleashed one of his daggers before anyone could blink, while offering the other one to Clash.

"A sword is no good in a tunnel." Comet told him.

"Keep it." Clash grabbed one of the torches from the wall and crashed into the three remaining men. He used the torch as a bludgeoning weapon, together with his huge fist. He returned with Comet's dagger, plus four more, and two claws.

"How do I do this?" Zeal asked and Comet turned round.

"Zeal! Where did you get that? Here, give it to me." He tried to take the garotte from Zeal.

"That Violet creature had it." Zeal objected and put it back in her dress pocket.

"I'll show you how to use it later." Comet grinned and was quite impressed with Zeal's affinity for thievery.

"You will not." Clash snorted. "Mother, keep it in your pocket."

"Down!" Comet shouted and flung both daggers over Clash's head. Two foreheads ended up with a dagger each. "The gate down here usually has two guards but there will probably be more now." Comet was right. There was six on the outside and at least five double rows on the inside.

"What's behind it?" Clash asked.

"Staircase to Shadow's rooms." Comet replied.

"Innocent captives?"

"No. They'll be below ground in the cellars."

"Mother? See what you can do here, will you?" Clash grabbed Comet and dragged him back up the tunnel. Zeal nodded and let fly with dozens and dozens of ice needles that peppered the six front guards.

"Zeal! No quakes! We're below ground!" Comet called.

"Oh bugger." Zeal hurled more ice, then a huge wave of water that took the legs from the front six, and the first two behind the gate. "This is no good! I ... Clash! Throw the torch!" Clash threw the torch and Zeal let it roll to a stop by her feet.

"Er .. Comet? Let's back up a bit further." Clash bundled Comet up the tunnel a few more feet.

"Clash! Look!" Comet pointed and stared at Zeal. The flame from the torch was swirling up in a spiraling torrent towards Zeal's hands. "Fire? She can't do fire!"

"Try telling her that. Down!" Clash dropped to the floor, taking Comet with him. Zeal threw a searing arc of flame that engulfed the guards and roared up the staircase. She jolted wildly and her whole body was surrounded by a white hot glow. "Air, mother! Air!" Clash shouted. The arc of flame billowed wildly as Zeal channeled Air through it. The white hot glow dimmed to a pale orange. "Let it go, mother. You're burning up." Clash crept up the tunnel and Comet just sat where he was, staring at Zeal.

"I'm sweating like a blacksmith's arse. What an icky force to channel." Zeal swore.

"Come on." Clash grabbed her, and Comet scrambled forward. Clash seized the gate bars and began tugging with all his strength. To Comet's amazement, the gate began to give and Comet helped by rattling at the gate at its hinged side. Six more men came charging down the steps, trampling over their charred colleagues. The gate came loose and Clash ran forward with it, crushing the six men behind it and Comet's daggers finished them off. Zeal tutted and put away her garotte. Web members began fleeing from alcoves, recesses and hidden rooms.

"If they don't attack, leave them. We don't have time." Comet began running up the steps, and into the circular room. The guard were decisively edgy and Shadow himself stood by the exposed window.

"You damned fool!" He screamed at Comet. He took a step backwards when Clash and Zeal ran in too.

"Brand. I only want Brand, Shadow, nothing else." Comet panted. "Let me take him."

"You pathetic little bastard!" Shadow hissed.

"Shadow!" Zeal stepped forward. "Let Brand go and I'll teach you everything I know. I'll be your wizard."

"How very spineless, Comet. How sickeningly cowardly." Shadow sneered then broke out into a hacking cough.

"Take off that hood." Comet held out a dagger. "Remove the hood, Shadow!" He shouted. Shadow threw a dagger of his own at Comet and Zeal deflected it with an ice bolt. The next bolt was headed straight for Shadow. Comet lunged forward and pulled Shadow to the ground, out of the path of the magic. He held Shadow's thin wrists in one hand, and pushed back the hood with the other. "No!" He recoiled as though he'd been struck. "No, no, no!" He stumbled against the raised dais. "Brand! Why?" He sobbed.

"Why, he says!" Brand pushed himself to his feet and supported himself against the wall. "Why? Why? Why? Because I deserve it, Comet!" He screamed. "Look at you! Golden boy! Comet does this, Comet does that, Comet the fearless one. Comet who breathed after sapping our mother's strength! I almost died because of you!"

"Brand, no." Comet reached out for his twin. "I'll never let you die. I don't want you to die!"

"You want to save me and be a hero." Brand sneered.

"I want you with me because I love you, Brand. You're my brother." Comet walked forward and Brand suddenly threw himself through the drapes. "Brand!" Comet caught his wrist as he toppled over the rails that surrounded a balcony. "Hold on! Don't struggle!" Comet reached over with his other hand too and Clash and Zeal both ran to help.

"Not this time, Comet. The Palace needs you." Brand swung round with his free hand and drove a slim dagger into Comet's hand. Comet shouted out in pain but still clung on. Brand viciously twisted the dagger then withdrew it.

"Brand listen to me!"

"I have. I'm tired, Comet." Brand looked at Comet, then suddenly flung the dagger,

straight at Zeal. Comet spun round and Brand jerked free, plunging himself to his death. The dagger fell harmlessly to the floor and Comet slumped down against the rails. Zeal could barely see for tears and she was struggling to take in what she'd just witnessed.

"Comet? Oh my Comet I'm so sorry." Comet broke down and clung to Zeal like a babe to its mother.

"Blessed gods." Clash said in shock. "Comet I'm sorry. We have to get out of here. It's not safe." Zeal helped Comet to his feet. Comet nodded and tried to compose himself. "Good man." Clash lead the way out.

By the time they'd reached the barracks, the whole of Entia was in uproar. The Web was fleeing and Shadow was dead! The entire population was verging on hysteria.

"We have to get to the Palace." Comet said shakily. "Brand said the Palace needed us. The people will storm the place." Clash nodded and elbowed a path through the crushing crowds. The hysteria hit fever pitch when a two toned fanfare peeled across the city. Clash, Comet, and Zeal broke into a run, much hampered by the milling population. Lance Baron saw them approaching and bulldozed a pathway to the Palace.

"Inside! Quickly!" He pulled all three inside, then closed and barred the doors. "The Queen's been murdered."

"What?" Clash screamed in sheer frustration. "How? How? The place is surrounded by guards! How?"

"We're trying to find out!" Lance yelled back. "Do you think we're just standing here? The place is in turmoil. "One of my guards found her and raised the alarm."

"Where is she?" Clash asked. Lance lead them to the Queen's Inner chambre. Queen Honor of Entia was lying on her bed, in a pool of her own blood. Her throat had been punctured. Zeal swayed on the spot and turned away immediately.

"Why, Shadow, why?" Comet sighed. Clash looked quizzically at him. "Poisoned blade. The edges of the wound are blackened." Clash nodded and pulled a drape from the wall to cover the Queen's body. Comet returned to Zeal and put his arms round her.

"Tell Duke Dawnstar wha you saw." Lance had a Cadet by the arm. "And if you ever try and leave my watch again without permission, I'll have you in the jail house." The cadet looked at Comet with huge frightened eyed and swallowed hard. Comet took a closer look and recognised the young Cadet. He also knew that Adri Greenbeck supported a crippled father.

"I think it's pretty obvious what he saw, Captain Baron." Comet said. "It's clearly a Web assassination, and the man who ordered it is dead himself."

"Indeed." Clash agreed. "A rebel attack that succeeded and failed at the same time."

"I have to get Lady Zeal out of here." Comet said.

"I'll arrange an escort. You'll never get through the crowds." Lance said. "Dismissed, Cadet Greenbeck, and well done."

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Chapter 10

Queen Honor of Entia was laid to rest next to Lore Dawnstar. Clash, Comet and Zeal were in attendance, but outside the people were laying tributes on the Palace steps. Later the same day, Clash, Comet and Zeal stood in a secluded area of Zeal's private gardens. Ruby's casket had been buried there along with two tin swords, all that was left of Brand. The title of Queen, or King, would never again be used in Entia, but it wasn't difficult to tell who the people would elect to preside over them. Lady Zeal Dawnstar turned the Palace over for the use of her Council, and refused a separate Court. The building would never be used as a domestic dwelling again. Zeal had a home, she always had. Now she shared it with her husband, Lord Comet Galeraven. Clash only deviated slightly from this new, semi-democratic system. He reasoned that as a Lord, and the son of Lady Zeal, he needed more than a few miserable rooms in which to live. These rooms had been expanded, and added to, until it eventually shared a wall with the Palace. It was in one of Clash's partly finished rooms, that Zeal and Comet met with Violet Veil.

"They still exist, Violet. They're people." Comet said.

"Loosely, yes. Shadow's death left The Web with no structure." Violet replied.

"No brutality, you mean. Reform that structure without the brutality, Violet." Comet said evenly. Violet looked at him in surprise. "The Web is the eyes and ears of the streets. They always were. It can be done with no violence and no force or cruelty. I know you can do it Violet. You were Brand ... Shadow's first advisor for three years. Work with people like Antal Redsong, and we'll deal with people like Vittie."

"Yes. I trust that you will." Violet nodded.

"Well I don't trust you at all so let's not be under any misconceptions." Comet stated. "Do you want to tell me what Brand's hold was over you? You were the only person in Entia, apart from my mother who knew that Brand and Shadow were the same person."

"No. I don't want to tell you. I have a lot of work to do." Violet inclined her head. Comet nodded and she left.

"Weirdo." Zeal sniffed.

"Weirdo?" Comet laughed. "What in Entia is a weirdo?"

"Weirdo! You know? Someone who's ... weird! Anyway that's your bit sorted out, let's go and sort out mine." Zeal smiled at Comet.

"Clash will be there already." Comet said. "I hope he knows what he's doing, promoting Lance Baron to General."

"It's as he said, promoting Hunter over him would cause trouble we don't need right now. Everything's in its infancy. Promoting both of them created an active balance of opposing views. Those views turn into ideas and plans and that's what will shape Entia." Zeal explained.

"I hope so. I wonder if Clash managed to find Jasper Icevale?"

"Yes I believe you. Don't go on." Clash's voice came from round the corner. Zeal snickered and motioned for Comet to stand still and stay quiet.

"How you got in that position I do not know." Jasper's voice shrilled. "Mind you, look at the size of you. No wonder you got stuck sideways."

"Yes well I'm sure I wasn't this size back then." Clash said testily. "They should be here by now."

"Oh it was no good, you know." Jasper said seriously. "No bung, you see."

"What?" Clash said in irritation. "Bung? What are you talking about?"

"Bung. Your head should have been down there. See?"

"Ack! Icevale, please!"

"No you don't understand, Lord Dawnstar. If all the rest of it dropped out first then it could have been fatal!"

"Ew! Shut up! Yes I mean it Icevale, stop it. Great gods I'll throttle Comet if he's carted her off somewhere."

"Clash! How are you?" Zeal breezed round the corner, Comet following, grin first.

"Mother!" Clash darted at her. "Look, do we really need him? Can't we get someone else? He's as daft as a loon!"

"He likes me." Zeal smiled widely then turned round to address Jasper. "Jas ... huh?" He was flat on his face in front of Zeal, with his arms spread out. Comet was hopping

from one foot to the other and badly needed the small room.

"Get up man." Clash nudged Jasper with his boot. Jasper squeaked and shook his head. "Sacred gods." Clash went to grab him off the floor.

"Ah it's OK Clash. Leave him be." Zeal laughed and flung herself on the floor with him. "Jasper?"

"Lady Dawnstar." Jasper said to the floor.

"How old are you?"

"Oh I forget. I stopped counting at seventy. You?"

"Bugged if I know. So you'll remember all the oldies here who used to use magic?" Zeal nodded and Jasper turned his head.

"The Warrior Mages?"

"And the rest."

"Not many left now. Many died inside with no magic. They lost the need to live. Sad eh? Me? Oh well I had tales to tell and people to impress. Strange, you weren't really all that big when you were carrying him. How did that happen?" Jasper waved his hand in the direction of Clash, who looked like he was going to cry.

"You did a good job, Jasper. Do you think you could find the old mages? General Bane will go with you." Zeal said enthusiastically.

"An official escort? Oo I say! Just the old relics? No new imports?"

"No not for now. We need mature teachers first. Like a ... Council of Mystics! Yes!" Zeal grinned.

"I think The Illustrious Order of Zealian Mystics sounds better."

"You do? We'll sort that out later. So are you in?" Zeal nodded eagerly.

"Absolutely! Can we get up? My knees have gone." They helped one another up off the floor and Clash twitched his nostrils at Jasper. Comet had ran off to the small room and was now back for a refill.

"I'll get someone to see you home, Icevale." Clash said.

"That's Arch Mage Icevale the first, if you please. Come along." Jasper hobbled off

down the hallway and Clash looked like he'd dearly like to throttle him.

Zeal Day was as lively and as boisterous as it had been for two decades.

"Good gods Antal! Are there any Tenders left in the Infirmary?" Comet laughed. One end of the Market Square was bustling with blue tunics and they were all very busy.

"Icevale is the fittest among them so you work it out." Antal rolled his eyes. "Your good Lady wife is up to her elbows in it over there."

"What's she doing?" Comet couldn't even see Zeal.

"Last seen arranging cushions beneath Lynette Skywash. Poor old dear's suffered from piles for years." Antal said and Comet winced.

"Comet!" Clash barked and pushed his way over. He looked completely stressed out and utterly harassed "Ah Antal. Even better."

"I was just leaving, Lord Clash." Antal said quickly.

"Oh no you don't. My mother has just requested warm lathered water, tubes, and a jug and him on the back row looks green. Go and sort it out and Lady Zeal is to touch no one's backside. Understood?"

"I'll go and send her over." Antal laughed.

"This is a disaster waiting to happen." Clash fretted.

"Zeal thinks it's going to be fine." Comet shrugged.

"Comet the youngest one is sixty seven! I've never seen so many swollen veins, knobbled joints and hideous feet in all my life! Half of them can't see six feet in front of themselves. How are they supposed to direct it?" Clash exclaimed.

"It's a mage thing, apparently." Comet laughed. "Jasper's enjoying himself." Jasper was gliding around in a long, multicoloured robe that had so many beads and baubles hanging from it, it must have weighed as much as he did. He also wore a pendant with a six inch gold crescent, his 'stamp'.

"He somehow convinced the smith that that pendant was necessary and officially endorsed. The Treasury received the bill for it this morning." Clash sighed in resignation.

"Hello my men!" Zeal darted by.

"Hey! Hold up!" Comet caught her by the waist. "Where are you going?"

"Home to change. Lathered water doesn't take long to work." Zeal winked and Comet let go of her very quickly.

The senior mages were made comfortable in front of Zeal's statue, with the aid of cushions, stools, supports and a brigade of Tenders. Jasper had convinced Hunter to build him a plinth next to the statue, behind the mages. Zeal hitched up her skirts and clambered up there with him.

"Ready?" She beamed.

"I still think you should go first." Jasper nudged her in the ribs.

"We'll go together. Air and Water. OK? After three. One, two ..."

"Yay!" Jasper let loose with a shower a tiny sparks that were completely harmless and very beautiful.

"You cheated! I said after three, not oh dear gods." Zeal gasped in awe. The other mages had taken the cue and were now channeling forces into the sky above the Square. Sparkles and flashes of colourful magical fire were buffeted by whirlwinds of air. Water sprays dispelled the fire and made swirling, hypnotic mists. People watched in awe as enormous blooms erupted from gardens and rooftops. They were swept up by air currents and set free to dance among the elements.

"Come on, Lady Zeal!" Jasper whooped.

"Jasper they're singing!" Zeal said through the tears. "The forces are singing!"

Above the flowers and fireworks, the mists and swirls, the forces sang and they rejoiced. The people had come back to them. It's common knowledge on many realms that there is one absolute sign that magic is there. That Zeal Day, the whole of Enitia danced under a Raibow.

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