

Becoming Queen

Book One of the House Trageri Saga

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PROLOGUE

Captain Thomas Jessup walked away from the terminal and pondered a dilemma. He had just finished communicating with the new queen of their sister colony on Capella IV. This one had asked him quite forcefully to turn back. He wasn't going to go back. Frankly, he couldn't turn back, but he could not explain to the Queen why that was.

Even so, although Queen Faliza thought the colony was out of danger, Captain Jessup wasn't so sure. And he did take the job of protecting their sister colony seriously, even if the council on Daraelia couldn't have cared less.

Only six months had elapsed since the launch of his ship, yet already enough years had elapsed on Cappella IV for there to have been a new queen. By the time the ship arrived in four and a half years, two hundred years would have elapsed on both worlds. All aboard his ship knew this was a one-way trip.

He hoped that his continued communication with the leadership on that colony would cause them to see his perspective. It bothered him greatly that he could not tell them the full truth. That would have to wait a hundred and seventy-five years.

CHAPTER 1: THE NORTHERN COURT

Daneli stood still and straight, and quieted her mind. The distractions and conflict of the last hour drifted away as she looked straight at the target. As she let the first arrow fly, she felt time slow, and she kept track of the arrow to see whether she needed to nudge it in one direction or another. These days, she rarely did. Before that arrow finished its journey, she had already drawn the next, and pulled the bow back. As the first arrow buried itself deeply in the target with a loud “cthunk,” she let the second arrow fly, which split the shaft of first in half.

Her mentor, Master Garliri, had made a drunken bet last night with some of the Castle guard. His bet: that Daneli could do better than their best archer at making the target with three arrows. That archer had put three arrows inside the bulls eye, so she needed to do better. She dropped her arm with the bow, just before the third arrow split the second shaft in half.

She looked up to see Garliri beaming at her, and the group of guardsmen fishing in their pockets for coins, some with scowls on their faces.

“Well, My Lady, you certainly have proved yourself quite the archer.”

“Garliri, you have taught me well.”

He laughed. “Indeed I have.” The guardsmen handed over the coins, which looked to Daneli like five coins of silver. A hefty bet to lose, Daneli thought, although she imagined Master Garliri could afford to lose more easily than the guardsmen.

Daneli heard the guardsmen’s minds, and along with thoughts of anger at having lost the bet there were thoughts of disgust that a young woman should be able to beat their best archer. She discarded the thoughts, and walked toward the stable where her mare was. A good ride would make her feel better.

She didn’t know why she agreed to participate in the silly bet. Knowing that she was the best archer in Castle Trevalian didn’t really make her feel good; it made her feel as isolated and alienated as she always felt.

Galinsa nickered as Daneli came close. Daneli led her out of the stall and saddled her. She didn’t know exactly where she would ride this afternoon, but she knew she needed to get away from the castle.

She mounted Galinsa, and nudged her away from the stables and toward the south entrance to the castle. As she rode past the guard at the entrance, she sensed hatred coming her way, which she did her best to ignore as she greeted the guards on her way out. As soon as she could, she encouraged Galinsa into a gallop, and rode through the farmland toward the forest.

It seemed that the forest was always her refuge. She'd been coming here since she was first allowed to ride outside of the castle by herself, and she had a particular copse of trees that she liked to find shelter in. Before they entered the forest, she slowed Galinsa down, dismounted, and tied her reins to the saddle. Her horse started to graze.

“Stay here, Galinsa. I’m going into the forest for a little while.”

She walked toward a copse of trees on the edge of the forest, and sat down with her back to her favorite tree, watching Galinsa graze, and pondering her life. In one month, she would be on her way to the Warani Winter Palace far up north, to spend two months at court with her father, mother, sister, and both brothers. It would be her first time at court with the Royal Family. She hated going to court in general—all of the courts she'd been to over the years at this duchy, or that barony, had been stuffy and boring. But she knew it was necessary to show her face again before she settled in Trageri, her true home country, permanently.

She thought back on her last visit to Trageri. She remembered her conversation with Queen Raliro, who had explained to Daneli that diplomacy between Trageri and the Northern kingdom of Warani was essential, and that as the Queen's potential heir, she needed to continue to forge relationships that would help Warani and Trageri remain at peace.

“We need to begin to look at Warani as allies. I have hopes that the peace agreement that brought your mother and father together is lasting. If that is so, you'll need to know who your friends are. You, Daneli, and your siblings, are the keys. Born of both Warani and Trageri.”

“But Queen Raliro, I already know that many in Warani don't like my father much, and don't like me or my siblings. They feel like we stole Castle Trevalian, and the name, and aren't really of Warani.”

“I know that, child, but you will find that many there are weary of war, and will wish to make allegiances. And you need to be open to them. Having some friendships will help hold the peace. Please try your best.”

Daneli had promised to do her best, and she had, for the Queen. And she would see how this played out at court. She drifted off to sleep, and was awoken some time later by Galinsa's wet tongue on her cheek. She saw the sun low in the western horizon and she realized that if she didn't get back soon, she'd be late for dinner.

A month later, Daneli was running late, again. Master Maxi had promised the pantaloons would be done hours ago, but here he was, doing the last minute stitching on the last pair while she was in them. Luckily, almost everything was packed, and, of course, the entourage up to the Winter Palace wouldn't leave without her. Daneli was looking forward to the trip, although not at all to the destination.

"Ouch! Maxi, you stuck me!"

"I'm so sorry, Sulea Daneli. I'm almost done, I promise."

She really couldn't complain. He had done a wonderful job of creating clothes that split the difference between her preferred Trageri Southern style, and the more formal Warani gowns that Northern women wore at court. Her mother, of course, had insisted that Daneli wear Northern-style gowns, and even went so far as having her tailor make some, but Daneli had refused them, and her father had supported her. She was sorry that she'd not get to wear the standard Trageri formal attire to court, but at least these pantaloons wouldn't make her feel silly.

She heard her mother's thoughts in her head before she heard the slam of a door, and looked up to see her walking in, face screwed up as she looked at Daneli. Daneli was used to the litany of thoughts from her mother, and it was a good thing that she only verbalized a part of it. Daneli wondered what her mother would think if she knew that Daneli could hear almost everything she thought while near her. Daneli put her filters up, not wanting to hear anymore.

"Daneli, I wish you had listened to me. You will be the talk of the court—and I don't mean in a nice way."

Daneli's mother had a way of saying her name that de-emphasized the long 'ee' of the ending. Sort of like "Danel-eh". Because she was the daughter of a Trageri man, he had named her, and he chose a name with an ending that Northerners saw as masculine, but there was no such Southern convention. Daneli was the name of her father's favorite parent, a woman that Daneli

had sadly not been able to meet—she had been killed while fighting in the War of the Forest, twenty-three years ago—four years before she was born.

“Mother, please. We have talked about this over and over for years. Can you let it rest? I chose the Trageri path years ago, and have agreed to the Tala Shari. There isn’t anything else to say. It is a concession that I didn’t order Southern-style attire to wear to court.”

“I can hardly imagine that Southern attire would shock the court more than *this!*” Her mother looked disdainfully at the beautiful pantaloons that Maxi had made. Daneli looked down at the pair she was wearing. The fabric was a gorgeous azure blue, with small flecks of gold and gold trim. The legs of this particular pair were narrower than the others, but it was still hard to tell that Daneli wasn’t wearing a skirt if her legs were somewhat together. It certainly fell far short of the voluminous gowns that her mother preferred, but it was comfortable for her, and she loved the colors and style.

“My Lady Daneli, I’m all finished.” Maxi, or more properly, Master Maxi Garela Eta, never called her “My Lady” except in the presence of her mother or other Warani nobles. Calling Daneli by her proper honorific, “Sulea” would be impolitic, and Daneli understood that many staff in Castle Trevalian who came from Trageri had to tread carefully in the presence of her Warani mother. Daneli called him Maxi mostly, but sometimes she would properly address him as Master Maxi, but never in the presence of her mother.

“Thank you Maxi. These are wonderful. I hope that you have a fabulous winter holiday season at House Trageri. I’ll see you in the spring.” She looked at Maxi, and could see his face fall, and his dark mustache twitched just a little. She realized that he’d miss her. Maxi was not only her tailor, but also one of her teachers. She would miss him too. “And I won’t forget the homework you gave me.”

“That is good, My Lady. There is still much for you to learn...” He added in thought, “... before you return home for the Tala Shari.” The home he was referring to wasn’t Castle Trevalian, where she grew up.

He bowed, and walked out of the room. Her mother still stood a few feet from her.

“Mother, I’ll be ready in just a few minutes. I have to change into my traveling clothes, and put the rest of these clothes into the chest. I’ll bring the chest...”

“You will do no such thing. I will send Jema into the room to bring out the chest after you’ve finished.”

This was yet another of many points of contention. Between Daneli’s self-sufficient nature, and Trageri tradition that nobility did not have servants, she hated the Northern way where everything possible was done by servants. Her mother even had servants dress her! Daneli shuddered. Her mother twirled on her heel, and walked back out of Daneli’s rooms.

Daneli shucked the pantaloons and formal shirt, and carefully folded them and placed them along with the others in her chest. She put on her favorite traveling pants—they were soft suede with a silk lining. She put on a light undershirt, a heavy tunic, and a suede vest on top. She put on her riding moccasins. She closed the chest, grabbed her bow and slung it over her shoulder, and buckled her quiver to her back. She slid her dagger into its scabbard at her waist, and picked up her small leather saddle bag. After a moment’s thought, she placed the saddle bag on top of the chest, and picked up the chest to bring it out to the carriages.

Jema saw her as she rounded the corner of the hallway with her rooms.

“My Lady, let me take that from you! You know your mother will have a fit if she sees you carrying it.”

“Alright, Jema. It’s heavy, though.”

“If it’s too heavy for me, My Lady, I’ll find a squire, don’t you worry.”

Daneli dropped the chest, grabbed her saddle bag, and kept walking through the front halls of the castle and out into the courtyard, where there was some amount of chaos. She looked for her horse, and failed to find her. She found Henri, the stable-master, who was busy harnessing the horses for her mother’s carriage.

“Henri, where’s Galinsa?”

“My Lady, your mother insisted that you would be riding in carriage this trip.”

“No, Henri. I will not be riding in the carriage, since I have to travel south after the court season. I’ll go get Galinsa myself. You look busy.”

She turned and walked toward the stables before she could hear Henri complain. He would complain, of that she was sure. Daneli was seething inside. It didn’t seem to matter how petty, or how small—her mother was going to try her best to shape Daneli into the woman that her mother

wanted her to be, and Daneli couldn't figure out why her mother hadn't figured out that it was futile.

She walked into the stall with Galinsa, her mare. Galinsa was only three, and could ride faster than any horse she'd ever had. When she rode Galinsa, she felt as if they were one. Galinsa looked at her, and neighed lightly, as if in reproach. Daneli gently stroked her head, and scratched behind her ear.

"I'm sorry, love, they don't know what they are doing." Daneli led Galinsa out of her stall, and saddled her. She put some carrots and apples in a small canvas bag, along with a bit of grain, and mounted Galinsa, and they trotted out to the courtyard.

"Daneli! Put your horse back in the stable this minute! You are to ride in the carriage!" Her mother had her seemingly permanent look of outrage, but this time her face was suffused with red. Daneli ignored her, turned Galinsa, and rode to the front of the caravan, where her teacher Master Garliri was. She saw her father ride back to the carriage, and he smiled at her as he passed. She imagined he was smoothing her mother's ruffled feathers. She pulled Galinsa up alongside of Garliri and his horse.

"Master Garliri, will my mother ever stop trying?"

He laughed. "No, Sulea. She will not. I'm betting that when she's on her death bed, and you've ruled Trageri for years, she'll still be upset at you for wearing pants!"

It always made her uncomfortable to be reminded of the possibility, or in Master Garliri's mind, the probability, that she would rule someday. She'd chosen to undergo the Tala Shari test, so she knew her future. But it still made her uneasy.

"Ho!" She heard the captain's voice from a little bit behind her. She turned to see him signaling that they should start. The two horses ahead of them, carrying a squire and a member of the guard, started forward, and they followed, walking their horses at a pace that Daneli wished were faster.

Daneli loved to travel. The trip from Castle Trevalian to the Warani Winter Palace took about 5 days or so, depending on the pace. As they moved forward, Daneli looked back to see the caravan. It was surprisingly large. The amazing thing was that it was really only to bring her family to the Winter Court. If she'd had her druthers... Well, there was no point in dwelling on

that. The servants and guards that were deemed necessary for such a trip seemed excessive to her, but it was Northern custom.

“So, Sulea, I have been told by Master Maxi that you’ve been doing quite well in your history lessons.”

“I like history, Master Garliri.”

“As much as you like archery?”

Daneli smiled. Master Garliri was her weapons teacher, and he had been the first to teach her the bow and arrow when she was eight. She eagerly took to it, and Garliri insisted that she was now the best archer in all of Castle Trevalian. She had even proved it.

“Well, honestly, I do like the bow a bit better.”

“I thought so. Tell me, what have you learned lately from Master Maxi that you find most interesting?”

“The most recent thing we’ve been talking about is the history of Castle Trevalian.”

“What about it is interesting?”

“Well, I’m trying to figure out why father took the name for our family. It seems that the Trevalians had been nothing but trouble for our country, and particularly for our House.”

“Sulea Daneli, your father did not choose to take the Trevalian name—it was imposed upon him, as part of the agreement between King Holei Roqui and Queen Fero.”

Daneli knew some of the story, but hearing this made her realize there was more to learn. Twenty-three years ago, the Northern kingdom of Warani and the southern country of Trageri were again at war, as they had been many times over more than two hundred years, and they had reached a stalemate. Trageri had succeeded in capturing Castle Trevalian, one of the southernmost castles in Warani. The Trageri forces were surrounded and under siege, and Trageri suggested an agreement or truce. In Warani, that was most often accomplished by marriage, and Trageri agreed.

Duke Trevalian, who had been a hero in a past war with Trageri, had been killed along with his two sons in the battle to take his Castle. His wife and daughter survived. The agreement between Warani and Trageri was that Jorli, the eldest son of House Trageri, should be married to Kilea, the surviving Trevalian daughter. These were her parents, the current Duke and Duchess Trevalian.

King Holei Roqui died a few years later, and was succeeded by his eldest son, Holei Gasri. Queen Fero retired, and was succeeded by Raliro, her father's sibling, eldest daughter of House Trageri. Daneli was the eldest daughter of House Trageri in her generation, and even though she didn't grow up there, and her father didn't traditionally marry in Southern style, she had been given the title of Eldest. She had had spent a lot of time with her Southern siblings in House Trageri. Her own brothers and sister had split their chosen affiliations. Her eldest brother, heir to the Ducal throne, officially affiliated himself with Warani, as did her younger sister. Her younger brother had just returned from a visit to the House, and would return there when he came of age.

She always had to be careful around Northerners when she spoke of siblings. In the South, siblings were not all related by blood.

Daneli brought her mind back to the issues at hand. "That agreement was also what allowed me to be autonomous, and be in the Trageri line of succession?"

"Yes, Trageri insisted that any female offspring of a Warani-Trageri marriage must be allowed autonomy. Warani wanted to know that female offspring would have influence in the South. Your mother, of course, didn't like that part of the agreement."

"Yes, I know. Somehow she thinks that her own status is connected to whether or not I affiliate with Warani. She'd never actually say that to me, of course. Why does she think that, Garliri?"

"I'm not exactly sure, Sulea. I've lived in Warani now for almost twenty years, and there are still many things that confuse me. Your mother was basically forced to marry your father and bear his children. You'd think that she would be happy to know that her daughters need not share the same fate."

They rode on a while in silence, while Daneli pondered this question, and others related to her status in life.

They had been on the journey for four days when they stopped as the sun was going down in a wide clearing. They had been going on the Royal Road, a well-kept wide path through the forest that went from Fregili, a town one day east of Castle Trevalian, along the foothills of the West mountains, to the Warani winter palace. They had stayed at the largest inn in town, the proprietor

had been warned well ahead of time about the entourage. They had been treated graciously, and Daneli had slept quite well on one of the beds in a most luxurious room.

East and north of Fregili, the villages were small and rustic, and didn't have anything near the accommodations necessary for the Duke's entourage, so they had made elaborate camps. Daneli liked sleeping in the open, and she took this opportunity again this evening to ignore her mother, and set her bedroll down in a small copse of trees toward the outskirts of the main encampment. She was able to take care of herself, but of course Master Garliri felt it necessary to sleep by her. Daneli imagined it was more for his own protection against her mother's tirades rather than to actually protect Daneli.

As many servants worked to set up camp, and began cooking for dinner, Daneli and Garliri sat in front of a roaring fire. Daneli put her hands out near the fire to warm them—the temperature had dropped since the sun went down, and she wasn't used to being out when it was this cool.

“Garliri, I'm looking forward to seeing the ocean again.”

“Yes, the ocean is, as always, a beautiful sight.”

“Do you miss living in Trageri?”

“Every day, Sulea, every day. I look forward to when I return with you in spring.”

“Are you going to stay?”

“Sulea, you know this. I pledged to your grandmother that I would always protect you, and always stay by your side. Where you go, I will go also, until I die.”

Daneli felt embarrassed. She did know this, and she hated that he had to remind her of it. Perhaps it was that she felt strange knowing that there was someone pledged to live and die for her.

“My apologies, Master Garliri. Of course I know that. I sometimes just want to forget it.”

“Why, Sulea? Why does it bother you that I am pledged to protect you? You are of House Trageri, the House I to which I have made my allegiance. Further, you are the Eldest of House Trageri, and as such, you are due protection.”

Daneli nodded. Even if she failed the Tala Shari, and did not become heir to the throne of Trageri, she would always be the Eldest, and always be accorded honor and status, even as another sibling ruled. And she knew, deep down, even though she'd rather not admit it, that she

would do anything to pass the Tala Shari—challenges were something she could never pass up, and she always succeeded at them. She was driven to excel.

“I’m just getting used to this, Garliri. As I learn more about Trageri, and history, my role as Sulea becomes more real to me—but sometimes it still feels a dream.”

“Sulea, the North has influenced you overmuch. Your mother could never even imagine what it is like to be a woman from Trageri: respected and autonomous, with responsibility and honor. This is why it is not fully real to you.”

Daneli wasn’t sure that was it, but she imagined that was part of the picture. They sat in companionable silence for a while, then she heard small echoes in her mind of her mother and sister, and realized that they were having an argument about her. They were fairly far off, so she couldn’t catch everything said, but it seemed her sister was defending her in some way. She smiled.

Daneli loved her younger sister Hila, even though Hila seemed to be aligning herself with their mother. Hila was 4 years younger than Daneli, and the two of them used to play together a lot. Hila, like Daneli, loved being in the woods, and Daneli taught Hila everything she knew. But instead of excelling at the bow, or being able to make camp, or track animals, Hila became an expert at herb lore, and far outstripped Daneli’s knowledge in that area. Hila had begun to study with medicine Master Herlo, before he was forced to return to Trageri because of suspicions of having The Gift.

Daneli shook her head at the memory of being present during an audience with her father the Duke where that whole thing erupted. One of her mother’s ladies-in-waiting, a Baron’s younger daughter from a far eastern province of Warani, brought before her father her suspicion that Master Herlo had The Gift. Unlike in other duchies in Warani, her father never prosecuted or executed anyone with The Gift. He could not, since he secretly had The Gift himself, as did all of his children.

In Warani, anyone with The Gift was summarily executed. Even suspicion of having The Gift was sometimes enough. Children found to have The Gift were poisoned. It had been a point of deep contention between her father and the King that he would not prosecute anyone suspected of having The Gift. Herlo had been arrested, then escorted to the border by members of her

father's guard. If the King knew that Duke Trevalian had The Gift, she imagined that it would cause quite a stir, and potentially lead to war.

A servant came by the fire.

"Dinner is served, My Lady, Master."

Garliri said, "Thank you, sir. We will be over shortly." The servant went back toward the main part of the camp. He turned to her and said, "Ready, Daneli?"

She got up from the fire and stretched. "Ready for what, Master Garliri? Another evening of hearing my mother thinking daggers at me while saying nothing?"

He laughed as he rose from the ground. They started to walk toward the large canopy that was serving as the dining room.

He said, "I wish those Without could learn to shield their thoughts."

Daneli grinned, and said, "At least my mother!"

Two days later, as they crested the hill, Daneli saw in the distance the deep blue of the ocean with hints of whitecaps. The Warani Winter Castle was nestled between the ocean and the West mountains. Here, the places where land met ocean were rough and rocky, with cliff faces looming over foamy surf far below. It was quite different than the gentle slopes and beaches that Daneli knew from the South. She could now feel the bitterly icy ocean wind, which lent more misery because it had been drizzling cold rain for hours. She was soaked to the bone.

She could see the imposing face of the Palace in the near distance. It would take them about 2 more hours of riding in the cold rain and wind to get there. Before today's rain, she had enjoyed the trip enormously. She spent hours talking with Master Garliri—well, he would say he was teaching her things. She just absorbed it because it was so fascinating. She slept out in the open, and even got to hunt a couple of times, and she'd added some rabbits and a pheasant to the dinner feast one night.

She had to speak loudly to be heard over the wind. "Master Garliri, why is the Winter Palace here? It seems that it could have been quite further south—it's still cold here in winter."

"It will be clear why this is when we travel to House Trageri from the Winter Palace. There isn't really a convenient place between here and the southern border."

“I guess I’m spoiled, since most of Warani is north of Castle Trevalian. I can’t imagine living in a place where *this* is warm for winter!”

“Well, the House I grew up in, House Serel, is in the wide savannah of the south. It was hot all year round, with winter just being a little bit wetter.”

Daneli nodded. One of the things she was most looking forward to during the Tala Shari was that she would spend eighteen months visiting all of the regions of Trageri, visit many of the major Houses and some minor Houses as well, and get to see so much of the country that was her true home.

Finally, they rounded the trail that led to the north entrance to the Castle, and to Daneli’s relief, they were shielded from the wind by a small hill to their west. The Castle entrance was imposing, with a large drawbridge and huge door that was open. Daneli could see slots for archers on both sides. The entrance was decorated with gargoyles that had large teeth and long, curled tongues.

Daneli knew that there was no southern entrance to the Palace—there were high walls all the way around, and this was the only way in. She could see that the narrow road that led south from this entrance was dug deeply into the ground, with walls on both sides. She could not imagine a situation where an army would be successful in getting into the Palace from the south.

They crossed the drawbridge, and went through the gates, into the large central plaza. Daneli could see from here how large the palace was. It was easily five times as large as Castle Trevalian, although she knew that much was likely hidden from view—so she imagined it might be even larger. They were greeted by the King’s guard, standing in a line in the middle of the courtyard, with the man in the center carrying an overlarge Warani flag. Trumpets sounded and the company gathered around the line of guards.

The lead guard shouted ceremoniously, “Welcome to Palace Warani! We are glad to have the company of the Duke and Duchess Trevalian! May God the King bless your stay here.”

After a few minutes, a large group of servants and squires appeared from a doorway, and there was much bustling about. Her father dismounted, and a gaggle of servants took care of him and his horse. Her mother and sister left the carriage, and a squire came to stand by her own horse. She dismounted.

Daneli said, “Just show me to the stables—I’ll take care of Galinsa.”

“Certainly, My Lady. Please follow me.”

She followed the squire out of the courtyard, and through a large arched doorway. As she walked through, she sensed mostly thoughts of curiosity from the servants and others she passed. Although she'd been to court at other castles in Warani, this was her first visit to a Royal Palace, and her first interaction with the Warani Royal Family and staff. They entered the stables, and it took some time to get to the empty stall—the stable was the largest Daneli had ever seen, and was quite full of horses. Finally, the squire stopped in front of an empty stall.

“You can put her here. I'll...”

“Thank you, I'll handle her. I see everything I need.”

The squire nodded, and turned and walked away. Daneli took off the saddle and put it on the stand just outside the stall. She undid the bridle, and hung it on the wall near the saddle. She found water, and filled a bucket with it to give to Galinsa, and then she brushed her down. She went looking for grain, and found a barrel of oats on the other side of the stable, and she filled the feed tray next to the water bucket with the oats.

“OK girl, I'll see you tomorrow morning.”

She petted Galinsa on the nose, patted the side of her neck, and grabbed her saddle bags and bedroll. She walked slowly out of the stable, and retraced her steps back to the open courtyard, where it was clear that most of her party had found where they were supposed to be going. She saw Garliri talking to the same squire that had shown her where to put Galinsa. Garliri looked up as she approached.

“Ah, My Lady. This squire will show you to your rooms in our suite, where your travel chest is already on its way. Tonight we are on our own, and dinner will be served in our suites.”

“Thank you Master Garliri.”

He added in thought, with an emotional overtone of carefulness, “Call me just Garliri here.” He rarely did that, but she appreciated the reminder.

She nodded to the squire, who led her through more halls and courtyards than she could possibly remember, and then into a large room that was furnished with couches and chairs and a good-sized table for dining set near a large fireplace. Daneli could see there were many rooms that were connected to this room, and the squire led her to one toward the back end. She walked in, and saw a room with two comfortable chairs in front of another fireplace, and a large bed.

There was a doorway that led to the bath, with a large stone bathtub, a smaller washing tub on a stand, and steps to a toilet. Well, it wasn't the kind of toilet she was used to—it was simply a nice seat with a hole. She didn't want to ask what happened to what went down that hole.

Trageri had pipes and plumbing, including composting and treatment of waste, and she knew that when her father had moved into Castle Trevalian, one of the first things he did was to put in plumbing for toilets, baths and the kitchen. No buildings of any kind in the Northern kingdom, even the palaces, had plumbing. It seemed a bit backward to her, given that the expertise was easily available. But so often the North disdained what Trageri had to offer, like plumbing, or knowledge about their origins, or, most obviously, The Gift. The one thing even Castle Trevalian didn't have that the South had was hot running water. It always seemed a great luxury when she visited Trageri.

She sighed, and left the bathroom, and a servant bustled in.

“Milady, would you like me to prepare your bath?”

Since Daneli didn't know anything about where the water would be, or how to get it hot, she agreed by nodding, and saying “I like the water pretty hot.”

“Well, I can take care of that for you Milady. I'll let you know when it is ready.”

The servant, who upon reflection looked to Daneli to be ill-fed and ill-clothed, disappeared into some recess of the bath, and Daneli put her attention to unpacking her traveling chest, which had been placed on the end of the bed. As she opened the lid, she felt her mother's thoughts ahead of hearing her mother's voice, as always. Ah, time for The Lecture.

“Daneli, let the servants do that.” Daneli looked at her mother, to see another servant woman who looked ill-fed walking behind her with her head bowed.

“Keira, please unpack Daneli's chest. And when you are done with that, you can help our cook prepare dinner for us—he doesn't know the kitchen in our apartment yet.”

She said quietly, “Yes, Duchess, I'll do that.”

Daneli felt helpless while she waited for her bath to be drawn, and watched the servant put away her clothing. She saw a door in one wall, so she unlocked the bolt and opened it, expecting a closet or another room. Instead, she found that there was a relatively large outdoor courtyard, with several other doors leading into it. It had a well-tended garden, and benches arranged around, and a small fountain in the center.

It was still raining, so Daneli went back inside and closed and locked the door. She was happy to have found the courtyard, and looked forward to spending time in it when the weather was better.

After she had her bath, she dressed in a casual pair of pants, and soft shirt and slippers, and joined her family for dinner. For some reason, her mother wasn't at the table.

"Where is mother?"

Her father responded. "She said she was tired and not at all hungry. She took to her bed."

Daneli didn't mind at all. In fact, a meal without her mother was something she could really enjoy. She looked at her sister, Hila, who seemed to be dressed rather formally for a family dinner. But then her sister seemed never to need an excuse to dress up, in the same way as Daneli never needed an excuse to dress down.

They chatted amiably over dinner, and Daneli was happy that all of her family, except of course her mother, knew how to shield their thoughts, so she could dine in relative silence of mind without the effort of holding up her filters. Although they all knew that they shared The Gift, they never discussed it verbally—it was far too dangerous.

Hila said, "Well, I like it here already, and I'm looking forward to meeting the Prince!"

Her father said, "Dear Lady Hila, you do look quite fetching, and I can imagine that there will be many a lad looking for your favor, including the Prince, who is not so much older than you are."

Daneli said, "I'm not really looking forward too much of anything. Hila, I'm glad that you like it here—it's good that you get to stay longer."

Hila frowned, and looked at her plate. Her father looked at her and smiled.

"Daneli, you might well be surprised at what corners of support you'll be able to develop, here. Just be yourself."

Her brothers were silently eating, and hadn't said a word. They finally finished dinner, and Daneli said her good nights to her family, and went into her room. She saw that the servant had even put away her books in the small bookshelf on one side of the room, and Daneli found the history book she was supposed to read as homework. Her first assignment was to read the chapter on early Warani history, and send to Master Maxi an essay describing how it differed

from early Trageri history. One of the servants had already lit a fire in her fireplace, so she sat down in a chair next to it, and started to read.

CHAPTER 2: UNREQUITED LOVE

A week later, Daneli was doing her final preparations to attend the social event of the night, where she would finally meet the Royal Family, none of whom she'd met so far. Just now, as usual, Daneli's mother had lamented the fact that Daneli had brought her pantaloons instead of gowns. Daneli was tempted to tell her mother that if she continued, Daneli would simply not bother to attend anything. She had plenty of homework to do, and she could easily while away two months in the Winter Palace reading and writing. But, alas, she needed to make herself known, make acquaintances, and generally be friendly. That had been Queen Raliro's request, and she would honor it.

Daneli looked down at her attire for the evening. She was wearing the orange pantaloons with silver trim, a white silk blouse with frills at the neck, and an orange vest to match the pants. She was wearing a Trageri ceremonial belt. She knew that she would be the only woman dressed in this way, but she didn't mind.

She remembered her favorite formal clothing, still in her rooms at House Trageri. She had a pair of dark blue pants with silver grommets and a loose tunic of light blue silk. Her ceremonial belt looked great with those clothes, she remembered. She looked forward to being back at the House, where she would occasionally get to wear those clothes.

She had let her hair grow over the past few months, to satisfy her mother. She liked to keep it cropped short, but now it went down to her shoulders. It was very, very curly—basically unruly, so she had it tied back. She'd refused a visit with her mother's coiffeur—Daneli did not want any sort of hair style that he might create—they were abominable from her perspective.

She opened her door, and walked out of her room to see her family gathering for the walk to the ball. The court during the winter was littered with formal events, some large, and some small, many of which Daneli could safely avoid, others of which were required of her. This was the opening ball, where all of the noble families from throughout Warani would be present. This, and the ball at the close of court in three months were the key events. Daneli would miss the closing ball, because she was leaving a month early to start the Tala Shari on her 19th birthday.

Daneli's mother was dressed in a white and silver gown that was so voluminous that Daneli imagined there must be more than twenty layers. She was fussing over Hila, who was also dressed in a voluminous gown. Both of them had clearly visited the coiffeur—they had quite complicated hairdos.

She thought about the position of both of her parents, and wondered how much of her mother's attention to appearances was related. Before the most recent war, Trevalian was a key duchy in the kingdom. The Dukes of Trevalian had been close allies and friends to many a Warani king, and the fall of Castle Trevalian had been a devastating blow to Warani. Her father would always be a foreigner, and never considered the rightful Duke Trevalian, even though he had been given the name. Her mother, originally considered most likely to become the Princess Consort, was now relegated to be the wife of a Southerner—something that most Warani women would find difficult to swallow.

When they found out the order of families on the receiving line, their family came after several Earls and Barons. Daneli thought this was an insult, especially given her position in Trageri, but her father took it in stride.

The big door to their suite opened, and a squire said, "If you'll please follow me, I will take you to the ballroom. It's on the other side of the palace."

They followed him, and Daneli was trying to remember the layout as they walked down corridors, and went through the twisty maze that was the inner palace. They finally reached the top of a very grand staircase, and they could see all of the assembled nobles below, standing in line, waiting for things to start. Daneli saw a large set of double doors, and just next to them, a family that she assumed must be the Royal Family, given how decked out and bejeweled they were. The squire led them down the stairs, and placed them in the right position in line. Daneli could hear all manner of thoughts directed toward their family, and she used her skills to shut them out. She didn't want to hear what they were thinking at this present moment.

She couldn't help but notice the stares, however. Instead of making her feel ashamed, she felt proud, and she stood up straighter, and returned the stares with a proud smile. She was the Eldest of House Trageri, the most powerful house in the Southern country called Trageri. She had no reason to be ashamed, even if those in the North did not respect Southerners.

As the line moved, she watched the nobles ahead of them greet the royal family. They were deferent and mostly quiet, the men bowing deeply, the women doing curtsies, and a simple “greetings, Your Highness,” or “glad to see you, Princess.” Daneli got the hang of it fairly quickly.

She looked at the Royal Family. She knew some things about them from Masters Maxi and Garliri, and it was interesting to see them in person. The King was tall and olive-skinned with some gray in his hair and beard. He smiled often, and seemed genuinely nice, although Daneli knew that things were not always what they appeared to be. His wife, the Queen Consort, was short and squat, with darker skin than her husband. She was wearing a voluminous gown, with her dark hair pinned into a very tall cone. She looked bored, although on occasion she would animatedly greet one duke or another. Daneli’s breath caught just a little when she looked at their daughter, the Princess Kamila—she was quite beautiful. She shared her father’s olive tone, and she had black, curly hair that fell down just below her shoulders. She was wearing a very muted, conservative gown in comparison to her mother and the other women around her. It was Daneli’s favorite color—a deep azure blue. She looked strong, and sure of herself. Daneli was intrigued to know more about her.

Finally, their family was next. A guardsman said, “I present Duke and Duchess Trevalian, Son Trevalian Quero, Daughter Trevalian Daneli, Son Trevalian Sile, Daughter Trevalian Hila to the King and Queen Consort, Prince and Princess.”

Daneli had been bowing instead of curtsying since she was a child, and she wasn’t about to change now. Women in Trageri didn’t curtsy and she was a woman of Trageri. She bowed deeply to the King and Queen consort, gave her greetings, and then came face-to-face with the princess.

She couldn’t help but smile, and she said, “It is a pleasure to meet you, Princess.”

She bowed deeply, and as she did, she heard a quiet voice say, “I am glad to meet you as well, Daneli Trageri.” Daneli stood upright quickly, and looked left and right, and it appeared that neither the princess’ mother nor brother heard what she said. They seemed either too bored, or too preoccupied to notice the exchange.

Daneli looked into the princess’s eyes, and answered, “Thank you, Princess Kamila.” She could see a slight grin on the princess’s face.

Daneli had to move on, and she hoped that she would get a chance to talk more with Princess Kamila. She greeted and bowed to the prince, who was looking at her rather strangely. She moved on into the ballroom, where the music had started to play, and people were finding their seats. The squire led them to a table in the far back corner of the ballroom, and she could see her mother fume. She was rather happy to be far away from the action. She could watch things easily without drawing attention to herself. First there was the eight-course dinner, and then most of the tables were swept to the edges of the room so that the dancing could begin.

In Trageri dancing was totally informal. No steps to learn, no couples spinning together on the dance floor—it was just moving your body to an insistent beat. She liked Southern dancing, and she had no interest in learning the Northern style.

As people were milling about and some were dancing, she identified some of the nobles who were of her age, some of whom she had met before, and others she had not. She wandered around working to introduce herself or make conversation, but none of them wanted anything to do with her—they would just walk away as she approached, or turn away and pretend she wasn't there. It was almost as if just talking with her would be considered problematic in some way. She needed to discuss this with her father, and see if he had any suggestions.

After a while she stopped trying, and wandered around somewhat aimlessly. Finally, she got claustrophobic. She had seen a balcony through some glass doors in the middle of the ballroom and she walked toward them, going outside. She closed the doors behind her.

The balcony looked out over the ocean. She could hear the surf pounding at the rocks below. She could feel the bitter wind and smell the tang of the ocean. She didn't mind the cold, at least not for a while. She got lost in thought, missing the South, missing Jeri, wishing she were not here.

"I see you found the best spot, Sulea Daneli." Daneli whirled to see Princess Kamila approaching her, with a shawl over her shoulders.

"Princess Kamila... Yes, I like it here. I needed some air." The Princess was walking toward her, and took a place next to her at the edge of the balcony, along the short wall.

"I'm not surprised. I can't stand being in the presence of so many nobles in one place for very long."

“You seem to be the only noble who is willing to talk with me—none of the others would even say as much as ‘hello.’”

“Sulea Daneli, I am sorry that your experience here at the Northern court is so full of rudeness. I have a hard time imagining that if I visited the South, I’d be treated the way you are treated here.”

Daneli couldn’t help but smile. Kamila was not at all what she had imagined her to be.

“Thank you, Princess, for your kindness. You are correct, you would be welcomed gladly in the South. In fact, I do hope you’ll visit after the Tala Shari is finished in four years.”

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar with that term, Sulea Daneli.”

“Please just call me Daneli, Princess. I appreciate the honorific, but, in fact, we are equals.”

She nodded, and smiled. She said, “As long as you stop calling me Princess.”

Daneli laughed. “Alright, Kamila. Anyway, the Tala Shari is my period of intense learning and testing. If I pass it, I will become Sula—the heir to the Trageri throne.”

They talked amiably for a while, the princess asking her about the South, and Daneli asking her what it was like to live at court. Daneli wanted to stay outside and talk with Kamila for hours, but she knew that someone would notice eventually. Besides that, she was getting chilled.

“Kamila, it was very nice talking with you. I hope I get to have the pleasure of your company again.”

“Thank you, Daneli. I too enjoyed our conversation. Until next time.”

Daneli watched Kamila turn and walk inside the ballroom, and Daneli saw several young nobles gather around her. Daneli waited a few moments, and then went inside herself. She decided it was time to return to their suite, and she tried to find her own way back. She was mostly successful, but when she was momentarily lost, she was given proper directions by a servant she passed along the way.

As she walked into her room, and disrobed to get ready for bed, she couldn’t help thinking about Kamila. She had expected the epitome of a Warani girl: vapid, distant, overly feminine, and unwilling to engage in conversation with Daneli. She guessed she imagined a younger version of her mother. Instead, Kamila was strong, friendly, down-to-earth, and surprisingly knowledgeable about her and Trageri. Daneli could tell she was intelligent and well read. Daneli

had her filters up while they talked, but she could swear she sensed in Kamila an attraction towards Daneli. And Daneli was certainly attracted to Kamila.

For Daneli, this wasn't a big deal. It was expected and normal. But here... she would have to be very careful.

Daneli was sitting at the dining table in their suite, having breakfast. After her trips to Trageri, she'd taken to their breakfast style. She missed the simple rice porridge and fruit of the South. And she missed coffee. Yet another Southern thing that the North disdained. The morning hot drink was called grot and it smelled and tasted of nuts and herbs. It wasn't unpleasant, but it didn't have the kick that coffee did.

After the first ball three weeks ago, she had seen no more of Kamila, or other members of the Royal Family—they had not attended any of the events that Daneli had been to. Her mother had been summoned to a separate audience with the King a few days ago, and if the tenor of her thoughts afterward was any indicator, it had been quite unpleasant. Daneli noted that her father had not been summoned. When she asked him about it, he said, quite simply, "I am still the representative of the enemy."

Daneli had casually asked her mother how her audience went, and her mother replied, "It was fine." The contrast between what she said about the audience and what she thought were diametrically opposed, but of course Daneli could not dive in further. Daneli was intensely curious about this audience and about the way she had been treated so far here at court.

"Father, I need to ask you something. Very few of the other nobles I've seen here will acknowledge me with a greeting, let alone engage me in conversation. I feel like I mostly have no hope of even being able to cement the acquaintances I've already made, let alone meet new nobles!"

"You understand our status, Daneli. Now that we are at the Royal Palace, instead of on their home turf, appearances are everything, and people are avoiding us—you in particular."

Her mother cut in, "Jorli, don't be silly. How could she expect to be acknowledged when she dresses and acts like she does? Of course no one will acknowledge you! It has nothing to do with our supposed 'status.'"

Daneli said, “Mother, please stop. If you ask Hila, Quero and Sile, they will tell you the same exact thing. Hila was complaining to me after the Holiday Ball that she’d been mostly ignored. Not even Quero has gotten much further with other nobles, and he has disavowed his Trageri citizenship. Right Quero?”

Her eldest brother nodded, somewhat reluctantly. And added, in thought, “I don’t really want to talk about this.”

She responded, also in thought, “Sorry, brother, but I have to understand.”

Her mother was silenced. Her father said, “Daneli, all of you are facing an uphill battle, you most particularly. You know that Warani still considers Trageri a mortal enemy, and most Northern nobles consider the truce to be temporary, until the North has the strength to finally overtake the South. And for them, any appearance that they might ally themselves with you would be extremely dangerous.”

“So why did I bother to come? What use is it being here?”

“Because you need to see all of this with your own eyes, Daneli. You will be ruling Trageri someday, and you need to know where you stand, and where the South stands.”

“Father, you’re not allowed to say that. I am only Sulea until I pass the Tala Shari.”

He laughed. “Daneli, I knew Raliro when she was your age. You will pass the Tala Shari.”

They all turned when the door to their suite opened, and a squire and guard entered.

“Duke Trevalian, the King wishes an audience with your daughter Daneli, at high sun. We will return then.”

Her father nodded, and they turned and left the room. The entire family was shocked into silence. Daneli finally broke it.

“Father why...?”

“I have no idea, Daneli, none at all. It doesn’t even make much sense. It would be considered proper for me to accompany you, and I will, if you wish.”

“True, if I were a Warani girl, considered under your care until I was married. I am autonomous, and Sulea. I will go by myself.”

Daneli looked toward her mother, who was silent and brooding, but she could loudly hear her thoughts. Her mother knew exactly what this audience was about.

“Daneli will bring disgrace on Trevalian, since she will not do what the King asks of her.”

Daneli put her filters up. She didn't want to hear any more from her mother. She wanted to learn exactly what was going on herself, and often what she heard from her mother was more confused than clear. She got up from the table, and went into her room; she needed to prepare mentally for the experience of the audience. She decided to see what it was like outside, so she opened the door that led to the courtyard. The sun was just peeking above the far wall of the courtyard, and it was relatively pleasant. It was quiet, and there were few people in the courtyard—they all looked to be servants on their way from one place to the next. She walked into the middle of the courtyard, and sat down next to the bubbling fountain, taking in the sun that she had seen too little of over the course of the weeks she had been here.

First, she had to consider what to wear. None of the pantaloons that had been made for her were appropriate for a daytime audience with the King. She had brought one semi-formal pair of pants, and a very nice, but muted tunic. She would wear these, with a soft silk belt. She remembered belatedly that it would be proper for her to wear the medallion that signified her status as Sulea. She didn't know how they would react to it, but she should wear it. She was Sulea, whether or not these Northerners would acknowledge that rank.

She laughed. At least one Northerner did acknowledge her rank. She thought more about Kamila, and wondered if she would get the chance to see her again before she left for Trageri. She hoped so.

She sat in the courtyard for a long while, until the sun got high enough in the sky to make her think the time was getting close. It annoyed Daneli to no end that those in Warani refused to use clocks. She couldn't see the point. But no matter. She got up, and walked back to her door. On the way, she saw the princess standing in the far corner of the courtyard, looking at her. She waved, and Kamila waved back. She entered her room, and reluctantly closed the door behind her, and started to take off the clothes she was wearing, and put on the clothes she had planned. She had just put on her soft shoes, and put the medallion over her head, when she heard a soft knock at her door.

“Daneli, the guard is here to take you to the King.” It was her father's voice.

“I'll be right there.”

She looked at herself one last time in the mirror in the bathroom, and then walked out and opened the door to the suite. The guard and squire were standing impatiently at the entrance to the suite, and her father and family were seated near the fireplace.

“I’m ready.”

“Daneli, you chose your wardrobe well.”

“Thank you, father. I’ll see you later.”

She went toward the guard, who turned and left the suite. She followed him. The squire walked behind her. It was a rather long walk to the King’s chamber, and it gave her time to see even more of the palace than she’d already seen. She was getting used to the layout, which was not all that far different from the layout of Castle Trevalian, just much larger.

She saw ahead of her a wide entryway, and there were people of all sorts milling about talking to each other. She recognized several of the nobles. As she passed, there was a hush, and conversations stopped, and people stared at her. She had her filters up, and ignored their stares. They entered through a large set of doors and she could see the King at the far end of a very long room. There were guards stationed all over the room, and several nobles seated at the King’s left and right. Daneli knew that the old Duke Trevalian would have probably had a seat just to the right of the King’s throne.

As she got closer, she saw the prince standing next to his father. For some reason, he looked nervous: he was fidgeting, and he looked like he was sweating even though it was cool in the chamber. She was tempted to drop her filters to learn what was going on, but she realized that would be dangerous. Especially in times of stress, it was possible to mistake what was thought for what was said from those Without, and she could not risk suspicion of having The Gift.

The guard stopped several feet from the throne, so she did as well.

“Presenting daughter of Trevalian, Daneli.” She looked at the King, who was smiling.

She bowed deeply. “Your Majesty, the Sulea of Trageri is honored to be your guest.” She heard several gasps in the room. She was only mildly surprised.

As she rose, and looked at him, his earlier friendly demeanor had evaporated.

His voice grated. “The Sulea of Trageri is *not* my guest.” He said the words angrily. “The daughter of Duke Trevalian is my guest.”

She refused to give in. “I am both, your Majesty. How can I be of service?”

He was silent for a moment, regarding her, his eyes narrowed. She realized in a flash that although in Trageri it would be against convention to assume that she would rule, here she needed to make them realize that she was heir. They needed to understand that she was the equal of the prince standing next to the King.

Finally, the King spoke. “As you know, my son is looking for a Princess Consort. He is 17, and of the age to choose. He has chosen you. I have agreed with him that this is, in fact, a worthy match, and a good continuation of the agreement solidified by the marriage of your parents. Your mother has agreed to this match. What remains now is to determine when the betrothal ceremony will be.”

Daneli was shocked, by several things. First, shocked that he would even consider such a thing, and shocked that permission by *her mother* was considered enough to make this a reality. By Northern standards that was ridiculous—her father needed to agree. Of course, her father never would have. She looked at the prince, who was sweating even more—no wonder he was nervous. She took her time in answering, and as she was considering her words, the murmurs in the room grew louder and louder. Finally, she cleared her throat, and the room quieted.

She looked at the prince. “Holei Richi, I am not sure what it is that you see in me, but I am honored that you think I am a worthy match.” She could afford to be generous. There were murmurs in the room, and she heard distinctly someone say “How dare she address the prince that way?”

She then turned to the King. “Your Majesty, as you know, I am Sulea of Trageri, soon to be heir to the Southern throne, eventually queen of Trageri. I will not be the Warani Princess Consort. You may not know the details of Southern marriage tradition, but I will be willing to entertain Holei Richi as a spouse candidate of House Trageri.”

The room erupted in shouts, and she waited patiently for it to die down. Throughout, the King was regarding her steadily.

“My Lady Daneli, this is unacceptable. You must agree to become Princess Consort, and live in the Warani Palace. There is no other acceptable choice, and if you do not agree, it will put the relationship between the North and South in great jeopardy.”

“Your Majesty, whether you wish to acknowledge it or not, I *can* determine my own fate. I have already chosen my path. I will not become the Princess Consort. The status of the ongoing

relationship between Warani and Trageri is a subject for you to discuss with Queen Raliro, not with me.” She took in a breath, and then kept going. “Further, it is unwise for you to hold the agreement between Trageri and Warani hostage to something that you well know is against Southern culture and tradition.” She was risking a lot by saying that, but he needed to know that she understood what was going on.

She saw him flinch and she realized that she’d won this round. The other nobles in the room were silent. She knew that this wasn’t near the end. The good news, from her perspective, was that it was now for Queen Raliro to deal with, not her. She’d be busy with the Tala Shari.

He nodded, finally, and inclined his head slightly. She knew that was the only acknowledgment of her status she would ever get from him, at least until she was queen, if he still was alive then.

The King said, “Give my regards to your mother, Lady Daneli. You are dismissed.”

She looked at him and lowered her filters. His thoughts were a jumble, but there was one clear emotion—he was very angry. It was an old, old anger—a child’s anger, and Daneli knew that a child’s anger unrecognized in an adult was the most dangerous kind.

She turned and walked out, taking in the varied thoughts around her. She’d go through them all later and ask her father and Master Garliri about what had happened here.

The next day, Daneli and her father were sitting alone next to the fire in their suite, talking about what had happened in the King’s audience.

“I’m sorry Daneli, I have no idea why he is so angry. He was only 13 when the last war with Trageri ended. From what I know, he’s never even been to Castle Trevalian. Anyway, you did well. Your mother was being... well, your mother. You can’t blame her, really.”

“But father, she *knew* it was improper for her to agree to that marriage!”

“Daneli, she is fiercely loyal to the North. So loyal, that she married someone who she had only contempt for—a Southern man. For those in Warani, Southern men are worse than Southern women—we have allowed Southern women to rule us. We are weak in their eyes.”

“Will there be another war?”

“I don’t know, but I do know that the strength of Trageri will greatly surprise the North should they decide to go to war again.”

She wished him a good day. She decided to go outside and meditate. It was a sunny day, and unusually warm, so it was pleasant to be outside. She sat in a quiet corner of the courtyard close to her door and settled into silence. After a few minutes, she sensed someone sitting on the bench across from her. She let that go, and kept meditating. When she was done, she opened her eyes, and was relatively unsurprised to see Kamila sitting across from her, her eyes closed.

She watched Kamila for a while. Kamila looked content sitting in silence, and for the first time, Daneli realized that she felt no thoughts coming from Kamila. Either Kamila had learned to put up a shield, meaning she had The Gift, or she had an unusually quiet mind. Daneli didn't quite know what to think. She left her filters down—she wanted to know for sure.

Eventually, Kamila opened her eyes, and looked at Daneli and smiled.

“Thank you, Daneli, for giving me this opportunity to meditate. I don't do it often enough. Do you meditate every day?”

“Most days. It is part of our discipline, and much meditation is required during the Tala Shari.” Daneli continued to notice silence from Kamila's mind. She was sure now, Kamila had The Gift.

Kamila said, “I heard what happened yesterday. You must forgive my brother.”

“Forgive him?”

“He is a little... well, *slow*. If he had really understood things, he would never have acted on his attraction to you in that way—he would understand the diplomatic situation. My father seized upon it as a convenient way to create conflict.”

“Your father was angry—do you know why?”

Kamila cocked her head to one side, as if considering what she had said. Daneli noticed that she didn't ask how Daneli knew he was angry.

“When he was a boy, his favorite ‘uncle’ was Duke Trevalian—even though they weren't related. The duke took him hunting, taught him the sword, and basically was the father that my grandfather couldn't be. My father doesn't speak much of it, but I know the Duke's death devastated him.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

“I think it might help that you know. I am afraid that a war could start from his anger, and the general fear and hatred Northerners have for the South. I'd hate for that to happen.”

“As would I, Kamila. Why is it that you seem not to share those feelings?”

She lowered her voice. “When I was eight, I had a teacher I loved. His name was Harli. He was from Trageri, but kept that secret from everyone. It was he who discovered that I... well, you know, right?”

Daneli nodded.

“He protected me and taught me. And he told me of Trageri, and how different it was from Warani. I loved to hear those stories, and I always thought Trageri must be a wonderful place. I sometimes dreamed I could live there. A few years later, he was found out and executed.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I have no hatred for Trageri, or anything of the South, but I am trapped. I have already been betrothed to the eldest son of Duke Karina, who is now favored of my father.”

Daneli didn’t know what to say. She looked at Kamila, who had a tear falling down her cheek. Without thinking, she got up to sit next to Kamila, and held her, while Kamila softly cried. She hoped they would not be observed.

After a bit, Kamila straightened and separated herself from Daneli.

Daneli said, “I wish I could change your lot, Kamila. While here in Warani, I can’t help you. But know this: you will always have sanctuary in Trageri should you choose it, and you will always be welcome to live at House Trageri.”

Daneli did not know if Kamila understood the significance of that statement. An offer of that sort by the eldest of a House was tantamount to a marriage proposal, but Daneli figured that Kamila didn’t know that, so it didn’t quite count.

But Kamila surprised Daneli. She stroked Daneli’s cheek, gently, and said, “I am honored and quite pleased at your proposal, dear Daneli, and I know you do not offer it lightly. But I am Warani, daughter of the King, and I must stay here.”

Kamila got up. “I must return to my rooms—my mother is probably wondering where I am. It was very nice to spend this time with you—I hope we can spend more time before you leave.”

“I would like that very much, Kamila.”

Kamila turned and walked toward the other end of the courtyard. Daneli watched her go, and felt the ache in her heart.

A few weeks later, she was standing in her room, deciding what to wear. Finally, Daneli thought, the last ball she would have to attend. It was the mid-winter ball, the big bash in the middle of the court season. Everyone would be there, and Daneli decided to wear her azure pantaloons, finally.

She was leaving in three days. It had been a very eventful time since her audience with the King. Her refusal to marry the King's son made her worse than *persona non grata* for most Northerners, which was far from a surprise. But some Northern nobles, particularly those to the south and southeast, far away from the protections of the Warani army, and close to the Trageri border, could tell where the wind was blowing. She had been surprised to get requests for audiences from two dukes and four barons, and the conversations with them had been quite illuminating. Two of them had even offered their sons in marriage, but she knew they had no idea what that really meant. She assured them of friendly relations with Trageri, and told them she would make sure that Queen Raliro knew of their friendliness. They also knew that she would never betray them to the King.

She had spent the last few weeks feeling over her head, but her father and Master Garliri had been good guides and support. The one good thing about the last few weeks was that she had gotten to spend time with Kamila. They had met almost daily in the courtyard, and when they met, the courtyard was surprisingly empty, suggesting to Daneli that Kamila had servants keep it clear during their visits.

She had finally met Duke Karina Jerlo and his son Karina Remiro at one of the earlier balls. She could tell that Kamila's marriage to Remiro would not be a happy one. He was taken to drink and obnoxious. Worse yet, she had found out where Karina was located—far, far to the north, the large wooded territory just east of the Northern mountains and the Warani Summer Palace, and south of the glaciers. It was cool in summer, and forbidding in the wintertime. She felt for Kamila—she would be alone, in a forbidding part of the Kingdom, and have to hide her Gift, as well.

She dismissed that dismal thought, and finished dressing. She decided to wear a tunic instead of a shirt and vest. Her mother had been surprisingly mute since Daneli had her audience with the King, and stopped bothering her about her dress and manner. The thoughts that drifted her way were full of remorse for her life, and hopelessness about living at Castle Trevalian.

Even though she didn't like the Northern style of dancing, she had to admit that she wished she could dance with Kamila tonight. She could imagine herself swirling around, her arms around Kamila's waist, their hands clasped, her face close enough to Kamila's to feel her breathe. She tossed the thought away—it was no use dwelling on her feelings for Kamila.

She finished dressing, and then joined the rest of her family for the walk to the ballrooms. Her eldest brother was decked out in his most formal suit, with the Trevalian badge and the heir's sash. He looked dashing, and she thought she should tell him so.

“Brother, you look fabulous tonight—you'll charm them, for sure.” Quero smiled. She continued, “I know that you've been getting a bit of attention from the ladies, lately—any of them catch your fancy?” Daneli knew that unlike her younger brother, who loved everything about girls, Quero wasn't all that interested in them. But he surprised her.

“Yes, Daneli, the daughter of Duke Soldaro is quite the catch, I think, and the Duke has been making sounds of possibly offering his daughter to me in marriage, and I expect I will agree.”

That Quero was entertaining this was a surprise. That Duke Soldaro offered was not. Duke Soldaro was one of the Dukes she'd had an audience with, and he had offered his son to Daneli in marriage—she'd politely turned him down, explaining that a Southern marriage was something his son was certainly not prepared for. The Duke was curious, but didn't press her. His duchy bordered Trevalian, and hugged the southern border with Trageri for miles. It would be the first casualty of a war between Trageri and Warani. The only reason it had been spared in the last war was that Trageri was particularly interested in taking down Duke Trevalian, who had been nothing but a thorn in the side of Trageri for more than 20 years. They bypassed Soldaro to focus on Trevalian.

Daneli knew that although Quero had discarded his Trageri citizenship and officially aligned himself to the North, if war really came, he would ally himself with Trageri. For one thing, he, like all of the Trevalian children, had The Gift, a dangerous thing to have if you were a Northern noble, especially during wartime. During the last war, hundreds of nobles and commoners alike were put to death just on suspicion of having The Gift. That Daneli's father had escaped suspicion for all of these years was a testament to his abilities. And in Daneli's conversations with Quero, it was clear he was biding his time—being politic. His true allegiance was to Trageri.

They started their walk to the ballrooms. The only thing Daneli was looking forward to was catching a glimpse of Kamila once or twice. She shook her head, and internally scolded herself. When she left in three days for House Trageri, besides the arduous Tala Shari, as Eldest, she would also be screening potential spouses for her generation of House Trageri. She had to forcefully remind herself that Kamila would not be among them.

Just an hour or so before Daneli was due to leave with Master Garliri, she and her father were sitting next to the fireplace, having just finished breakfast. The rest of the family had left the room to allow Daneli and her father to talk alone.

“Daneli, I had a talk with Duke Soldaro yesterday. He is quite certain that King Gasri wants war with Trageri. The King thinks that when you refused marriage to his son you broke the agreement. I don’t think he will wait until my death to start a war.”

“What should I be doing, father?”

“Tell the Queen everything you’ve learned here. And just keep doing what you are doing, Daneli: learning, listening, and watching. Notice that when Trageri *appears* to be at its weakest is when they will start the war.”

“Father, why does the King want war? He must know he would lose.”

“I don’t think he does know, peach. Trageri is stronger than he could understand. He hasn’t been able to get any reliable intelligence on the South, and he has no idea that we’ve been developing weaponry from our forbears. He, like all of the Warani kings before him, covet our land.”

“Maybe he needs to find out how strong we are?”

“He will. My suspicion is that at the first sign that Warani wants to invade, the Queen will give him a potent demonstration. She will also have more to tell you when you become Sula. It will astonish you.”

“Father! You can’t just give me that hint...”

“I have to, Daneli—I am sworn to secrecy. You’ll understand, I promise. I will miss you. I hope to get to visit sometime next winter—I need to spend time with my family.”

“I will look forward to your visit, Father. I will miss you, too.”

They embraced and said goodbye. Daneli went back into her room, to finish packing a few things. When she was done, she went into the courtyard for her last visit with Kamila. She found her in the usual spot, and she sat down next to her. Kamila smiled.

“Daneli, do you know roses?”

“A little. My mother keeps trying to maintain a rose garden, but they don’t grow so well, even in lands near Trevalian. They don’t grow at all in Trageri.”

“Has she told you of the Northern custom of giving roses?”

“No, she hasn’t.”

“It is an important custom among nobles in the North—it has great significance. Red roses are rare, and hard to cultivate. It signals romance, signifying love and attraction. Like the rose itself, that is a rarity among Warani, since we always marry for status or to seal agreements. A pink rose is also romantic, but muted and chaste. A yellow rose is a gift of friendship, signifying a life-long connection. A black rose is given at the death of a loved one.”

Kamila reached into a pocket of her gown, and handed Daneli a small box.

“Open it.”

Daneli looked at Kamila, but her face didn’t reflect any emotion Daneli could detect. She looked down at the box, which was a beautiful blue velvet. She opened the box, and on a small velvet pillow, sat an exquisitely crafted white rose pin. She had expected yellow. She didn’t know what a white rose meant.

Daneli looked up again. “A white rose?”

Kamila said quietly, “The white rose is... it signifies something all too common in Northern royalty. Unrequited love.”

Daneli was speechless. She took the rose pin out of the box, and put the pin on her travel vest, toward the top.

“I don’t quite know what to say, Kamila.”

Kamila came close to Daneli, and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips. “I will miss you, Daneli. I hope someday to see you again.”

“I will see you again, Kamila. Until then, may Sabadora shine on you.”

Daneli knew that most in Warani thought that Sabadora, the Southern Goddess of wisdom, was a devil. But she knew that Kamila would appreciate the sentiment.

“May Sabadora shine on you, dear Daneli—you will need her light. You need to go now. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Kamila turned and walked away, and Daneli couldn't help but watch her, and feel the tears running down her cheeks.

CHAPTER 3: TO BE TESTED

The entourage, if it could even be called that, was nothing compared to the company that she had around her on the trip to the Winter Palace from Castle Trevalian. Next to her was Master Garliri, and ahead of them was a member of the Palace Guard named Hesero, who would escort them to the southern border. Apparently the King must want to know exactly what they did on their way to the border. Behind them were five donkeys, laden with a combination of travel goods, their personal effects, and gifts from her father to members of House Trageri.

Because of Hesero, Master Garliri and Daneli hadn't said much to each other about the visit to the Winter Palace. They mostly rode in silence, with occasional commentary from Master Garliri about the surroundings. The ride from the Winter Palace northern entrance had been illuminating for Daneli, and she was taking in as much as she could.

As she remembered, the road winding around the west and south of the Palace was dug deep into the rock, and couldn't even really fit two riders abreast. They had traveled in single file, with Garliri taking up the rear, making sure the donkeys didn't stray behind. There were any number of false forks in the road from the other direction, and Daneli could see places where large numbers of archers and lancers could simply pick off any soldiers who might be marching on the road.

Finally, after about three miles of this, the road widened, and ended on the beach, with extremely tall cliffs to the east, which lead to the high mountains. The beach was quite narrow in places. She'd asked Master Garliri about it, and he said that they would be traveling on the beach for many miles—it was the only convenient way south from the Palace, without going all the way around the mountains to the east—the way they had come from Castle Trevalian.

They were still two hundred miles from the river delta which was the border between Warani and Trageri. Master Garliri explained there wasn't really much between here and there, besides beach. After they reached the border, they would travel inland, along the road that led from the Northern town and barony of Szeri to House Trageri.

The sun was getting close to the horizon over the ocean, and Garliri told the guard that they would halt for the night. Daneli set up the tent that she would sleep in, and she noticed the guard

watching her with some curiosity as she deftly put it up. He probably had not witnessed a noblewoman doing such a task. Garliri was busy starting the fire, and Daneli started to take out of their travel goods some of the smoked meats, smoked cheese and bread for the evening meal.

The guard kept to himself, and didn't take the food she offered him, but instead sat to one side away from the fire and watched them, chewing on something that Daneli assumed was some sort of jerky. She'd seen some shore birds, and she was determined tomorrow to do some hunting. She was looking forward to tempting him with freshly roasted bird the next evening. She couldn't imagine that he would refuse.

She and Garliri ate in silence, and she went off to her tent, lit a lamp, and started writing. She'd been keeping a detailed journal for many years, so it was habit—but she was trying to capture as much as she could of the castle and the landscape they had passed through today.

The truth was, Trageri didn't care about the Winter Palace, or really any of the Northern territory, even though it seemed Warani thought they coveted it. It made Daneli laugh to think of it. Why would any in Trageri want what was largely cold and inhospitable? The South had its own share of inhospitable desert in the southern reaches, but there was no lack of land for living or cultivating. The South only wanted peace from the North, nothing more.

She remembered a conversation she'd had with Queen Raliro, on one of their rare outings when she was younger. They were out riding with some of her siblings. Daneli could see it as if it were yesterday, even though it was probably four or more years ago. She was riding next to the Queen.

“So, Daneli, how is life at Castle Trevalian?”

“I'm learning a lot, thanks to Masters Maxi and Garliri. But...”

“But?”

“I don't really understand my position. Most of the other Northern nobles my age seem to hate me. Thankfully, I don't have a chance to meet them often.”

“I imagine some see you as a threat, and others envy you.”

“Envy me?”

“Yes. You have a lot of freedom—certainly more freedom than other girls your age.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“And, I hear from those who serve in the North, that many are afraid of us.”

“Why?”

“They think we want to take their land.”

“Why would they think that?”

The Queen laughed. “Because they want to take ours.”

In that moment, she understood much of what had been puzzling her for a long time about the relationship between the North and the South.

She started to feel sleepy, so she doused the light, and went promptly to sleep.

Finally, at the end of their trip, Daneli could see House Trageri in the distance, after the fog that had been with them for most of the day lifted. They had spent last night at House Suli, one of the minor houses. The difference in the way that Daneli was treated at House Suli reminded her of her status—something she had been trying hard to exert at the Warani court. Here, no exertion was necessary—they knew who she was, and it felt like they already thought she was queen.

Of course, that wasn't true—she knew if Queen Raliro actually visited Suli, the welcome would be much more effusive. There was a sumptuous, but understated banquet where she met the Kala, Eldest of Suli, and many of her spouses and siblings. There was a nice dance party afterward. The only challenge for her was the line of Suli siblings her age who were trying hard to impress her.

When she had visited House Trageri last, she spent an extended time with Master Poera, her teacher of culture and tradition. She had explained in detail the Trageri marriage custom. Daneli had always known that her father had many siblings, and not all of them were actually related to him. And he had explained to her that he had many parents. But she was young then, and hadn't really understood the implications. Now that she was older, all of the implications were much more clear to her. Viewed through that lens, the stark difference between South and North could hardly be clearer.

In every family, the eldest daughter was the leader of that family. When she came of age, around 21 to 24, it was her role to gather a collection of nine to eleven other women and men about her age, to create the new generation of her family. The eldest never had children of her own—it was her role to lead the others. Some of her potential spouses might be people who she

would become sexually involved with. One or two might be her siblings that she was not related to. Most of them would be practical choices: men and women who would form a cohesive bond with each other, contribute their talents, raise each other's children, and create a strong family.

In the case of Houses, like House Trageri, the eldest was also a clan leader. And in Daneli's case, she would be a clan leader, and queen. Eldests of families mostly had to recruit for their family, depending on their status as a house. Eldests of minor Houses, leaders of smaller clans, sometimes had to do a little recruiting, especially if they wanted spouses from major Houses, but Eldests of major Houses had to beat back the hordes wanting in. As Eldest of the royal Trageri House, Daneli would be able to cherry pick the best—but she also had to be careful—the cohesion of the House was one of the most important factors in creating a strong House—cohesion was more important than the status or characteristics of the individuals she chose.

She noticed one Suli sibling she knew she would want to find out more about. His name was Ulio, and he wasn't one of those vying for her attention—he was friendly, and she thought he had a nice smile. It was the way he talked with his siblings at dinner that suggested that he might be a good choice—he was smart, and kind, and seemed to bring out the best in his siblings.

She looked up to see Garliri a bit ahead of her in the distance. She gently nudged Galinsa to catch up to him.

“Looking forward to being home Master Garliri?”

“Indeed, Sulea, indeed. How did you enjoy your visit to House Suli?”

“It was a relief! I could just be myself, and relax. Well, except for having to entertain the Suli siblings!”

“Get used to it, Sulea. You'll be neck deep in studies and training for the Tala Shari, and have to entertain eldests from all over Trageri wanting to let you know how wonderful their crop of siblings is!”

“Were you around when Raliro organized the House?”

“I was. I was a young pup, just assigned to House Trageri as a teacher for some of the younger siblings, including your father. Raliro had just passed the Tala Shari, and she had greatly delayed making her spouse choices, so she spent an entire month doing nothing but entertaining a steady stream of suitors from all over Trageri. It was quite the spectacle.”

“I'm not looking forward to it, Master Garliri. But I know it is my duty.”

“Don’t forget, Sulea, that your pleasure is not to be completely set aside. Master Poera will explain that to you.”

“Yes, it’s hard to remember that sometimes...”

“Sulea, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Master Garliri, you can ask me whatever you want.”

“Who gave you the white rose pin you wear on your vest?”

Daneli thought a moment. She knew that Garliri would keep this to himself.

“Princess Kamila.”

She looked at him, and he had a raised eyebrow.

“I know what the white rose signifies, Sulea. Do you?”

“Yes, Master Garliri, I do. The feeling between us is mutual.”

Garliri sighed. “Sulea... be careful. Your father had a liaison with the daughter of the Baron of Szeri before he became Duke Trevalian. He almost betrayed his duty because of it.”

“Master Garliri, we both have our duties—she to her family and Karina, and me to Trageri, House and country. I understand that a relationship between us would be an anathema in the North, and I have offered my House, but she will not accept—she cannot accept it. It is done, Garliri—all I have is this rose.”

They rode in silence, and Daneli wondered what was on Garliri’s mind. She looked again at the imposing bulk of House Trageri—a “castle” twice as large as Castle Trevalian, but built with mostly wood instead of stone. It had the signature dark, shiny roof that all Southern buildings did—a roof that generated light, heat and cooling for the buildings—yet another Southern thing that the North disdained. It had no outer walls and no obvious defenses. She had taken that for granted before, but now that she had spent time at a Warani Palace, a piece of the puzzle from her reading of early Warani history clicked into place.

Warani had not always been united. During the early part of Warani history, small feudal regions were often at war with each other, trying to take over the most fertile part of a mostly forbidding region of the continent. Trevalian was the largest region with fertile farmland, and Trevalian had been at war with just about every region of Warani at one point or another. Two hundred years ago, well after most of the castles of Warani were built, the first king of Warani was crowned, after all of the regions had decided to unite to fight Trageri in the first war.

Trageri had been much more sparsely settled than Warani at the very beginning, but because Trageri had more fertile land, and Trageri was willing to maintain more of the knowledge of their forbears, knowledge Warani discarded, Trageri grew faster. They stopped growing a few hundred years ago, because they wanted to remain sustainable on the land they had.

The broad fertile plains south of the river that served as the border between Trageri and Warani had been coveted by Warani for a very long time, and it was the promise of dividing up this land that had been the primary uniting factor in the North two hundred years ago.

There had been five wars since the first war, and although House Trageri was nearly destroyed in the first war, it still remained as it is—without obvious defenses. But Daneli knew that House Trageri was indeed well-defended when necessary.

They finally rode up the wide tree-lined road to the main entrance of House Trageri. She was home, finally.

Daneli had been at House Trageri for just a few days—time enough to get rested... and get restless. She had enjoyed seeing her own siblings and the Queen's spouses again. Since she had not been raised in House Trageri, the Queen's spouses hadn't been quite the parents they would have been had she lived here since birth. But since she arrived, they seemed to be fitting into that role, and she realized she started thinking of them as her parents. The whole House had been in a state of happy chaos when she arrived, and was just now settling down.

Instead of the relatively small room she had normally been assigned when she visited, she was given the official Sulea's quarters—a suite of three rooms and a very large bathroom. She couldn't help but spend many hours in the large tub—after two months in the Warani Palace and days on the road, a bath with a constant flow of hot water felt luxurious.

She sat in the tub, thinking about tomorrow—the official beginning of the Tala Shari. There would be a brief ceremony with just Queen Raliro, Suha Fero, who was the retired queen, and the priestess of Sabadora. Then, she would be introduced to all of her teachers—most of whom she already knew, thankfully. And then it would begin.

What she knew was mostly in outline. The Tala Shari was four years long, from her 19th birthday, which was tomorrow, until her 23rd birthday, four years hence. It was divided up into roughly eight five-month periods, with about a one month break in between them. The first three

of these periods she would be here, at House Trageri. During the fourth, fifth, and sixth, she would be traveling all over Trageri with a small contingent of teachers. Then she would return for her big examination. The seventh and eighth periods were not actually part of the Tala Shari test. If she passed the examination, she would spend the seventh and eighth periods in a sort of apprenticeship under the Queen in preparation for her ceremony to become Sula. If she failed the examination, she would retain the honorific of Sulea, Eldest of House Trageri, and still be responsible for organizing the House, but another sibling would then be tapped to go through the Tala Shari, and rule the clan and country in her stead. It didn't happen very often, but the eldest before Fero did not rule, her sibling did.

Although her next youngest female sibling, Gerasi, who was also 19, was her alternate should she fail, no one seemed to take that idea seriously, and Gerasi had already all but decided to marry into House Seralo. Daneli, however, didn't take passing the Tala Shari for granted, and the idea of failure frightened her.

The nitty gritty details of the Tala Shari were still a mystery to her. She decided to spend the rest of the evening not thinking about it, and enjoy her time in the tub. Finally, her fingers looked like prunes, and it was time to wrest herself from the hot water. She dried herself off, put on a soft pair of pants and a shirt, and went downstairs to get a late-night snack before she retired.

Her sibling Jeri, who was a year younger than she, and not related by blood, sat at the kitchen table that the house used for informal eating. She looked up as Daneli arrived in the kitchen, with a wide grin on her face. Daneli always liked spending time with her, and loved her. She had already decided on an offer of marriage, the only one of her siblings that she would give such an offer to, but she hadn't told Jeri that yet.

"Daneli, love, are you ready for tomorrow?"

"Jeri, I'm trying not to think too much about it."

"It will be fine, dear heart," Jeri said in thought, with overtones of love and support.

Daneli smiled; Jeri was always ready to lend her support.

"What is there to eat, anyway?"

"Some of Mara's leftover chicken turnovers! They are in the warming oven."

Daneli went to the large oven, and opened the small door to the part of the oven kept slightly warm all the time. She could see a few turnovers sitting on a pan, and she grabbed a couple and

put them on a plate. She went to the coldbox, and opened the spigot to the wine container, giving herself a small glass of sweet white wine. She sat down at the table and started eating.

“So, Jeri, we haven’t had much time to spend together since I arrived—how have you been? What have you been up to since I saw you last year?”

“I started my apprenticeship with Master Karini.”

“That’s wonderful! I know you’ll make a great engineer—the House will need it.”

Jeri’s eyebrow raised, and Daneli belatedly realized that her comment, meant only to be supportive, spilled the beans. She smiled broadly, and said, “I’ve been meaning to let you know to expect an offer.”

Jeri got up, and sat in the chair right next to Daneli.

“I am most honored, love, and happy to accept.” They kissed, briefly, and Jeri put her hand through Daneli’s newly shorn hair.

“I’m glad you got your hair cut again.”

“Me too. That’s the last time I give into my mother for anything!”

“How was it like to be with her at the Warani court?”

“Excruciating. She was demanding, angry and unreasonable. I imagine some of it had to do with the fact that she is in an impossible situation. I do feel for her, but it was far from pleasant. You know, it was always a little surreal to be here. But now that I’m here permanently, the North is what seems surreal—it is almost fading as a dream. I feel so at home here.”

They kissed again, longer this time, and then Daneli said goodnight, to go write in her journal. Eventually, the wine and fatigue got to her. She turned off the light and dropped off into a deep slumber.

The next day she was awoken by the early morning sun streaming into her window. She looked over at the wall with the clock—she still had more than an hour before she needed to show up for the ceremony. The Tala Shari tradition called for a fast this morning. She bathed, dressed, and sat in meditation for a while. Then she started to gather the things she would need—her medallion, her certificate of birth and citizenship, and her ceremonial belt. She heard a soft knock at the door, and saw Rogera, one of her parents, pop his head in.

“Daneli, they are waiting for you. I’m to escort you to the chapel.”

She gathered everything she needed and followed Rogera.

“How are you feeling, Daneli?”

“Nervous, Rogera. I’m really nervous.”

“That’s understandable. You know we are all incredibly proud of you?”

“Thank you, that’s nice to hear.”

“It’s true, my dear Daneli. All will be well.”

They walked in silence down to the chapel, where all of her Trageri parents (except the Queen) waited outside the door. In turn, they all hugged her, and wished her well. She appreciated their care for her, and it felt like such a difference from the life she had been used to for so long.

Finally, it was time. She opened the chapel doors, and she walked down the seemingly long aisle, to see Queen Raliro sitting in a large chair, next to Suha Fero, who was in a slightly smaller chair. The Queen seemed somehow more imposing today, her dark hair shorn close to her scalp, her black eyes shining. The Suha smiled, and her dimples showed among the wrinkles in her light skin. Ganeli, House Trageri’s priestess of Sabadora, was dressed in white, from head to toe, and addressed her.

“Sulea Daneli Trageri, are you ready to start the Tala Shari?”

She’d been given a script to memorize, and she knew it well. She bowed, with her hands together at her chest.

“I am, Priestess, Suha, Queen. I am ready.”

“Have you prepared your mind and body for the trial of the Tala Shari?”

“I have.”

“Are you willing to take on the mantle of leadership of House Trageri?”

“I am.”

“Are you willing to take on the mantle of Queen, should you pass the Tala Shari?”

“I am.”

The ceremony went on, and it became a blur. Reciting things, presenting things—they all ran together. At the end, Daneli found herself kneeling before the Queen and Suha, the priestess had her hands on her head, and was chanting a blessing:

“May Sabadora be with you, may She guide you, plant your feet on the path She has laid out for you. May you always listen to Her guidance, and walk in Her light.”

The Queen said, “Sulea Tala Daneli Trageri, you may rise, the Tala Shari has started.”

“Thank you, Queen Raliro, Suha Fero, Priestess Ganeli.” She bowed deeply.

“Daneli, go, have something to eat with your siblings. Once you’ve eaten, please report to my rooms—there is much we need to discuss.”

“Yes, my Queen.” She bowed again, and turned and walked out of the chapel, to be greeted, this time by her own siblings, who hugged and kissed her.

“How does it feel, Daneli, to finally be in the Tala Shari?”

“I feel relieved, Hojio, really relieved. And I’m hungry!”

There was a laugh from many of her siblings, and they all walked to the dining room, where there was a huge feast set out on one of the sideboards. It was a joyful, celebratory meal, full of conversation, and the attention of her siblings. She enjoyed it immensely.

Afterward, she walked to Queen Raliro’s rooms. She had only had the briefest discussion with the Queen since she arrived, and she had been looking forward to telling her all about her time at the Northern court.

She knocked on the Queen’s door, and heard her say, “Come in, Daneli.” She opened the door to see the Queen sitting next to her fireplace, book in hand.

“Daneli, sit, please.”

“Thank you, my Queen.”

“Daneli, please just call me Raliro when we are in private—I’d prefer it.”

“Certainly, My... Raliro. I will.”

She held up the book that she was reading. “Daneli, I need to give you this book.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a chronicle written by the founder of House Trageri.”

“How long ago?”

“More than a thousand years. I’ve read it many times. It passes from eldest to eldest. It is your turn to hold the chronicle. And read it, of course. When you read it, you will have many questions. There is much for you to know.”

Daneli nodded, and took the book as it was offered to her by Raliro. She held it very carefully, and Raliro laughed.

“Actually, *that* book is only a few years old. The original sits in the Trageri library—that’s a copy. So you don’t need to be quite so tender with it.”

Daneli smiled, relieved.

“So, Daneli, tell me of your time at court.”

Daneli told Raliro everything—well, everything except Kamila. When she was done, Raliro shook her head.

“King Gasri is an idiot. He has no idea what he doesn’t know, and it doesn’t seem to matter to him. Before the first war 200 years ago, we never thought that the Northern Kingdom would unite to try to invade us. Afterward however, since we almost lost so much, we have made great strides in our ability to defend our territory. The truce over 20 years ago was more about our own unwillingness to continue to kill Northerners than it was that we couldn’t win. We have been building defensive weapons from the knowledge of our forbears—weapons that would amaze the North. Weapons that would prevent the North from ever gaining a toe-hold in our territory. And then there is what’s coming...”

“What’s coming?”

Raliro shook her head. “Never mind, child. You’ll learn of it soon enough. Leave the diplomacy to me for now—you have enough on your plate—the Tala Shari, and then preparation for your role in next year’s Sala Trageri, and Sala Red.”

Daneli nodded. She knew that as Sulea Tala, her official title during the Tala Shari, she has a role in the annual gathering of all families of clan Trageri, and the Sala Red, the gathering of kalas—eldests of all clan-leading Houses that happens a month later.

“A little birdie told me that you’ve already chosen at least one spouse.”

Daneli smiled. “Yes, I’ve chosen Jeri.”

Raliro nodded. “I am far from surprised. When the two of you became fast friends the first time you visited the House, I knew that it was an important relationship—one that would last. I think it was a good choice.”

“Thank you, Raliro.”

“Any others?”

“Not really. I met one of the Suli siblings on my way here who I really liked, but I need to know more about him. And, of course, Suli is a minor house.”

“Yes, a minor house, but a very well-respected one. I would prefer a sibling from Suli, to one from Zerola.”

Daneli knew that although Zerola was a major House, and clan leader to over 2500 families, just behind House Trageri, which was clan leader to 2900, it was likely to lose its clan-leadership during the next Sala Red. The house had gone into decay, and the most recent generation only had four siblings. It would take a miraculous turnaround by the latest kala, but Daneli knew that was unlikely.

“Anyway, Daneli, I trust your judgment. Listen to Master Poera, and feel free to ask me for advice when you feel like you need it. It can feel overwhelming to make choices that will affect the House for many years to come.”

Daneli nodded. “Thank you, Raliro.”

“Well, my child, it’s time for you to meet with your teachers. You have a full day ahead of you still.”

Daneli took her leave, and went downstairs and into the east wing of the House, where the children lived, and where the classrooms were. At the far end was a room that was reserved for her and her teachers. She entered it, and saw her teachers sitting around a large table. They stopped talking when she came in. Master Garliri was the first to speak.

“Welcome, welcome, Sulea Tala!” The rest of the teachers repeated that, in unison. It felt odd—somehow both welcoming and challenging at the same time. Daneli bowed.

“Thank you Masters. I am ready to learn.”

“Come, sit.” Daneli found the empty chair at the head of the table.

“First, Daneli, you should meet your teachers. You know me—I will be your teacher of arms and military strategy. Master Maxi here, will be your teacher of geography and history. Master Poera, your teacher of culture and tradition. Master Karini, your teacher of math and science. Master Hurko, your teacher of diplomacy. And, last but not least, Master Weolin, your teacher of The Gift.”

Daneli looked at her teachers, and felt intimidated. All but Masters Poera and Karini were men—that was standard in Trageri—most teachers were men. She knew Maxi, Garliri and Poera, but hadn’t met the others. And Daneli knew that these were finest teachers—and practitioners—

in all of Trageri. She could hardly imagine living up to their standards. She could feel failure sitting right next to her, and it scared her.

“Daneli, you have an easy or difficult schedule, depending on your perspective. You need to know only three things: show up in this room every morning at 7:00am except on Sabbath, make sure you’ve had a good breakfast, and remember to bring some exercise clothing with you every day. All assignments and homework and such will be arranged by us, and will change day to day and week to week. Clear?”

Daneli nodded.

Master Garliri looked at Master Maxi. “Master Maxi?”

“Daneli, did you finish the essays I gave you?”

“Yes Master Maxi. Sorry I forgot to bring them today.”

“Remember them tomorrow. In the meantime, I understand that the Queen has given you *The Chronicle of Joella Trageri*.”

“Yes, she has.”

“Good. I want you to read that, and write an essay describing in what ways has House Trageri changed since its founding, and in what ways has it not changed. I want that essay in three days.”

Daneli nodded numbly. She knew there would be more. And there was. Master Maxi turned to Master Poera, and nodded. She said, “Daneli, I want you to write an essay about the essentials of Northern Culture as you see them.”

Daneli said tentatively, “Is there some paper I can write with?” Garliri smiled, and turned to the shelf, and handed her paper and pen. She started taking notes on her assignments so far.

“Master Poera, when do you need this by?”

“I’d like you to write it before your time in the North gets too dim. The day after tomorrow, please.”

Daneli nodded, feeling a knot growing in her throat.

Master Poera said, “Master Karini?”

Master Karini had a big book in front of her. She slid it toward Daneli, and she took it from the center of the table, looked at it, and gulped. It read “Algebra and Trigonometry.” Daneli shuddered. She wished she was Jeri at this moment. Math was not her strong suit.

She looked up at Karini, who was watching her. Her teacher said, “We will need to get through this book during this period of the Tala Shari. That’s about one chapter a week. There are problem sets at the end of each chapter. I want you to turn each set of these in on the morning of the day before Sabbath.”

Daneli faithfully wrote everything down—she knew she would forget it otherwise.

“Master Weolin?”

“Daneli, please come tomorrow prepared to talk about your own Gift, and how you experience it. It would help to write that down, but it isn’t necessary.”

She nodded, noting it down on her paper.

“Master Hurko?”

He looked at her and smiled. “I think you already got your first lesson in diplomacy during your time at the Winter Court, did you not?”

“That’s for sure, Master Hurko!” She smiled, relieved.

He slid a sheaf of papers towards her. It looked like it had a lot of words—she felt too overwhelmed to look at it.

“That is a copy of the agreement between Trageri and Warani made twenty-three years ago. I want you to read it, and then tell me its major flaws tomorrow when we meet next.” Her relief dropped away, leaving a heavy feeling in its place. She was beginning to panic. There was no way she would be able to do all of this in the time frame they all wanted, *and* show up for a full class day each day. But, this was her test, and she wasn’t about to fail. She realized Garliri hadn’t given her any homework. She looked at him, saw the books under his hand, and was instantly dismayed.

“And, I have one little thing for you as well.” He slid two books toward her.

“These are historical accounts of the first war two hundred years ago—one from the Southern perspective, and one from the Northern perspective. Read them both, and write an essay explaining why the perspectives are different.”

Daneli asked quietly, “When do you want this, Master Garliri?”

“Oh, you need at least a week to do that, right? A week from today. And I think you’ve had enough for today, yes? You can have the rest of the day off.”

It was early in the afternoon of Sabbath, and Daneli was working desperately to keep her eyes open. She was sitting at her desk, trying to focus on the piece of paper in front of her. It was the second revision of her paper for Master Poera about Northern culture. Master Poera hadn't thought that Daneli had spent enough time describing Northern religious traditions. The paper had then, by necessity, turned into a research paper, because Daneli had been largely spared from experiencing much of Northern religion. A treatise on Northern religion was sitting open next to the paper.

She had been spared because her father had fired all but one of the Northern priests of Castle Trevalian, and that one was only allowed to talk to her mother. Although her mother tried to expose Daneli to the Northern faith, Daneli was uniformly uninterested, and avoided all opportunities to learn about it. When her sister converted, the ceremony had been held conveniently while Daneli had been south, visiting the House.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, which startled her fully awake.

"It's just me, love." It was Jeri's voice.

Daneli turned around in her chair, and looked up at Jeri, who had a very concerned look on her face. Daneli felt a wave of frustration and hopelessness, and burst into uncontrollable tears.

"Jeri, I'm going to fail. Totally. Like tomorrow!"

"Daneli, why do you say that?"

"It's been three weeks. I am two weeks behind in Algebra, I'm on my second revision of Master Poera's paper, I am behind on every other assignment, too, because they keep piling them on, faster and faster. I have barely slept, *and* I am exhausted and sore from three hours a day of Master Garliri's sword and lance training. Why is it I need sword and lance training, anyway? I can't keep this up, Jeri."

Jeri put her hands on Daneli's shoulders. "Come, come, lie down a bit."

"I can't! I have to..."

"Lying down for a bit couldn't possibly make things worse, if they are as bad as you say they are."

Daneli got up, and followed Jeri out of her study, into her bedroom. Jeri took off her shoes, and her sweater, and pulled Daneli's sweater up over her shoulders. Daneli was hardly in a position to resist.

“Come, lay down with me.”

They lay down in Daneli’s bed, and Jeri held Daneli, who continued to cry.

“I am going to fail, Jeri. I can feel it.”

“Daneli, there is more than one kind of test, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, some tests are straightforward—like testing your knowledge, or that you can write a paper. You seem to think that all of your teachers are giving you those kinds of tests. Has it occurred to you that they are testing your ability to deal with being overwhelmed?”

“I don’t understand.”

“They are looking at whether you can ask for help.”

“But if I was queen, how could I ask for help, or tell the world I can’t keep up?”

Jeri laughed. “Daneli, you think Queen Raliro doesn’t get help?”

“What do you mean?”

Jeri laughed. “For a smart woman, you sure can be dumb sometimes. If the North came knocking on our door tomorrow, do you think it would only be Queen Raliro who answered it?”

“Well, of course not! Master Garliri would be there, and the Guard and... Oh.”

“Do you think the Queen knows everything? Do you think she negotiates alone?”

“Well, no...”

“How does she learn about things?”

“I’m sure she learned during her Tala Shari, and I know she reads a lot. But I guess also other people tell her?”

“Yeah. A lot. One of my jobs as an apprentice is to explain to her the pros and cons of spending research time and resources to make better solar collectors. She doesn’t understand the engineering behind it, so she needs someone like me to help her decide. Since you didn’t grow up here, you’ve missed a lot of that—but the Queen can’t stand by herself. She must depend on other people. Remember your teachers know you, Daneli. They will be testing your weaknesses, not your strengths. One of your weaknesses is an overly large sense of personal responsibility. Do you really think *anyone* can do the amount of work they have set before you?”

Daneli thought about it for a while, and realized the truth of what Jeri was saying. She wasn’t sure what she’d tell her teachers tomorrow, but it wouldn’t be the same thing that she told them

the last time she saw them, when she promised she'd catch up. She relaxed, and drifted off to sleep.

When she awoke, the sun had gone down, and Jeri wasn't in the bed anymore. She looked at the clock—she'd slept for over five hours! She guessed she needed it. She got up out of bed, and decided to take a shower before finding something for dinner.

CHAPTER 4: SULEA DANELI

Ever since Daneli had learned the important lesson of her own limits, and talked with her teachers about it, her life had improved enormously. She remembered that moment several weeks ago, and still sometimes cringed. She had felt failure, and embarrassed by the fact that she couldn't keep up, and had told them that she needed to slow down, and get some help with a few things, like algebra.

Jeri had been right, of course. They told her that they were happy that she had learned that she couldn't do absolutely everything alone, and she wasn't invincible. They had ratcheted down the assignments so she actually could get them done, had allowed Jeri to tutor her in algebra, and Garliri had suspended sword and lance practice in exchange for an hour of daily calisthenics. She even had a few hours of leisure time on the Sabbath.

Today, she was finally digging deeply into *The Chronicle of Joella Trageri*. Master Maxi had told her to set it aside for a while, after she got caught up in her other assignments. She'd read the first chapter weeks ago, but it had been in the swirl of everything else, so she'd not really been able to understand anything it said. Now that she had some spaciousness, she could figure out exactly what she could understand, and what of it didn't make sense to her.

The book was strictly chronologically organized, with the first two chapters taking place on their planet of origin, called "Earth." Daneli had always known that they were from somewhere else—she'd been taught that since she was a child—but it was fascinating to finally read about it in detail. Joella Trageri had been born in one of the few habitable enclaves left, on a continent called "North America." Earth had once been as verdant, or more so, as this world was.

The book was written in first person and was so vivid that sometimes Daneli could imagine what it would have been like to live in a place where you couldn't go outside or see the stars. Joella's parents (only two) were leaders of the enclave, which was basically one very large family, genetically and culturally. Her parents had worked hard to start the application process for a new colony, but had died before it came to fruition. Joella, one of three children of her parents, who led this group after they died, finished it for them. It turned out that Joella had a

somewhat different idea about what the colony should be like than her parents did, and the colony definitely bore her stamp.

Joella's parents and the rest of the enclave had been the result of a long-term genetics experiment, started by a man two hundred years earlier, who felt that it was possible that humans could develop special gifts of the mind. Daneli knew that she would need to learn more from Master Karini about the concepts of genetics. This man, Roger Caler, had tested hundreds of people, and gotten their involvement in this grand experiment. Two hundred years later there were more than five hundred individuals who shared a genetic trait that allowed them to learn telepathy, empathy and telekinesis. Daneli knew that the vast majority of Trageri's people still had this trait.

The second chapter of the book is where Joella explained how one of the conditions of their acceptance for one of the colonies was that they would have to share a planet with two other groups, and a continent with another group from North America—a group with diametrically opposed ideas and culture. Joella agreed, only because she knew that it could be their last chance to leave Earth. There were some that decided to stay, and wait until the next colony became available, on which they could live alone. There was only the briefest mention of this group, led by one of Joella's siblings, and it wasn't clear whether or not they got their colony.

Joella's parents, Daneli read, believed in a system called "democracy" where individuals are able to vote on what happened in their country. Joella, learning about the character of the others who would share their continent, was afraid that democracy would be too fragile, and chose to have a monarchy, ironically like the Northern colonists, but diametrically opposite in intent and practice. And Joella had come up with the House and family system herself.

Daneli didn't quite know what to do with the idea that her whole understanding of how her Southern family worked, and how The Gift worked, was, in a sense, constructed. She realized that in the end, it didn't really matter. The system worked well for them, and unlike the North, everyone had autonomy and had what they needed.

Daneli did have a lot of questions—the first of which was what had Raliro done when she'd read *The Chronicle*? She decided that she'd talk to Raliro once she'd read the whole thing. It also helped her understand why the North was so different than the South—and why peace between them would be difficult without force of arms.

From the readings she'd been given by Master Maxi that talked about the early history of Warani, she knew that the early leaders purposefully hid the origins of their people from each successive generation, so that now, no Northerner really knew the truth, and believed that what the South said about things was an evil lie. She'd have to talk to Master's Maxi and Garliri about why this made sense for the North. She wondered what Kamila believed. She knew that both the North and the South had wanted to make sure that this world didn't share the fate of Earth, but they went about it quite differently. The North chose to deny all connection to the past, and refuse all technology. The South chose to refuse most but not all technology, and acknowledge rather than deny the past.

Months later, Daneli sat in a chair, nervous and fidgeting. She was in the conference room, waiting for Mara and Rogera. Masters Garliri and Poera were sitting at the other end of the table.

The start of the Tala Shari seemed far away to Daneli now. She was about one month away from the end of her second term, 10 months since she'd arrived here from the Warani court. Sadly, at the end of this term, she wouldn't get much of a break. In a week, eldests of families that belong to clan Trageri would be showing up for the Sala Trageri, held in a conference center near the House, built several hundred years ago. Then, two weeks after it was over, she would be traveling with the Queen and two of her spouses to the Sala Red, the gathering of all clan leaders that is held at Hasni, four days travel southeast. Hasni housed the Sala Red each year and was neutral territory.

The door opened and Rogera and Mara entered, the two spouses that had official diplomatic roles. She was reminded again of her duty, and wondered who would be the spouses that she chose to fill those roles. They sat down, and Mara had a stack of paper, which she started to hand out.

"Hello, and thank you all for being here. In your little group of papers are three things. First, the tentative schedule of the Sala Trageri, the proposed list of agenda items compiled from the requests sent from eldests, and then the list of procedure or policy changes that eldests wish to propose being sent to the Sala Red. The Queen has reviewed all of these, and vetoes none of them."

Daneli knew that queens did reserve the right to veto any potential agenda item, as well as any item to be considered for the Sala Red. In practice, it was used extremely sparingly, and almost always, the queen explained the rationale for the veto. Daneli had learned that every once in a very long while, like a hundred years, a queen vetoed something without explanation. And in each case, the reasoning for her veto had become very clear in hindsight.

“As usual, the agenda for the Sala Trageri is overlong, so we will have to do some creative arranging. There are several agenda items which can definitely be combined into larger categories, and I’ve taken the liberty of doing so in the copies you are looking at.”

Daneli looked at her paper, written in Mara’s careful script. There were over fifty items, many of which she knew would take a lot of discussion. They included items such how the taxes that are collected from each family should be distributed, the new port, and who had access to it, and there were many disputes between neighboring families regarding land usage. One interesting item that caught Daneli’s attention was a proposal to change the Trageri divorce tradition. Some clans forbade divorce, but clan Trageri had allowed it pretty freely for a long time.

This proposal was to go back to forbidding it or greatly constraining the circumstances under which it could happen. She knew it was from an eldest who had three spouses leave to join a rival family. This sort of thing was very rare, and Daneli doubted that it would be enough to make the clan change the tradition.

They reviewed the schedule and agenda, and Daneli realized that she still didn’t really know what was expected of her. She figured she’d better ask, before she made a fool of herself. She’d learned the hard way that it was better to speak up and potentially look stupid than it was to stay silent, and be stupid.

“Mara, can I get a review of my role in the Sala Trageri?”

Mara smiled at Daneli. “Of course. Your first, most important role, is to attend the Queen. If she needs to speak with someone, you go get them. If she needs some documentation, you find it. That sort of thing.”

Daneli nodded. Mara continued.

“As you recall, when you reached the age of Wisdom, there was a ritual at the Sala Trageri to welcome you into the clan as eldest of your generation. There will also be a ritual during the

opening ceremony introducing you as Sulea Tala. And last, but by no means least, you will be given time each evening to entertain eldests and their offspring.”

Daneli knew that tradition compelled her to choose at least four of her spouses from within clan Trageri. It helped with clan cohesion, and the families with chosen offspring rose in status within the clan. Daneli knew that Mara had been one such spouse.

She nodded, saying, “Thank you, Mara, that’s helpful.”

“Your quarters will be next to the Queen’s, and you’ll be given one of the entertaining suites each evening.

Daneli nodded, and internally cringed. Five evenings of entertaining who knows how many eldests and their offspring. There were almost three thousand families in clan Trageri, and Daneli imagined that probably at least 300 of them thought of themselves highly enough to suggest that they offer offspring to Daneli. That was about 60 families per evening. She groaned.

“Are you OK, Daneli?”

“I’m fine, Mara, I’m just now realizing how many eldests are likely to want my attention.”

Mara smiled. “It’s alright, Daneli. We have a screening process. You will only have to entertain about 60 eldests with offspring. I’ll have the list and schedule for you tomorrow. That will give you time to do some research on the families. And don’t forget—if an eldest’s family has not made the list, and they approach you at some other time during the Sala Trageri, you can politely refuse to talk with them.”

Daneli nodded, wondering what the screening process was like, but she didn’t really care at the moment. Anything to reduce the number of eldests she’d have to meet and talk with was fine with her.

Her mind flashed for a moment to Kamila and her life. Eldest daughter of the King, destined to marry only one person, and that one a man chosen for her. She felt sad for Kamila in this moment, and realized she hadn’t thought of Kamila in a while. Her life in the North in general, and at the Warani court in particular, seemed almost to be a different life. The white rose pin sat in its box in a drawer in her room, and she hadn’t looked at it since just after the Tala Shari started.

“Let’s review the proposed schedule, shall we?” Mara’s voice brought Daneli back to the present. They were going to be in this meeting for a while.

Almost two weeks later, on the last night of the Sala Trageri, Daneli was sitting in a chair on a dais, with an eldest and one of her family's offspring sitting across from her. Daneli had a paper in front of her with line after line of family name, offspring names, and her notes, which in most cases were not especially copious.

This Eldest was obnoxious, as some of the eldests of well-placed families could be. This family had a history of placing spouses into House Trageri. Daneli was trying to ignore the eldest, and pay attention to the daughter of the family.

Her name was Liona Trageri Hopqua. She was attractive, tall, had a complexion the color of coffee with a little cream, and she had her head shaved—a tradition of women in her family. She was shy, and hadn't said much, but Daneli could see an occasional flash of something in her eyes that suggested that Liona was far more interesting than she appeared. Her eldest droned on and on about their family, the qualities of Liona, even though she was the youngest daughter, etc. Daneli was impatient.

"Eldest Hopqua, please be quiet for a moment, I'd like to have some time to talk with Liona. Liona, why are you interested in joining House Trageri?"

Liona looked directly into Daneli's eyes. "You." Daneli heard a gasp from the Eldest.

Daneli was stunned. That was not the standard answer. The standard answer was some variation of "I want to serve the clan," while Daneli could usually tell that the primary motivation was "I want to raise my status and that of my family," but no one would ever say that. She'd talked with almost sixty candidates so far, all had been pretty much the same.

"Me?"

Liona nodded. "I've heard a lot about you. You grew up in the North, but are comfortable here. You make friends easily, and from your short speech yesterday, it is clear to me that you care deeply about clan and country, while also caring deeply about each person in them. And, well, I just think I'd like you."

Liona added, underneath, a very quiet sense of attraction. Daneli had to admit she was intrigued, and surprised that Liona had done her homework. Most candidates knew a lot about their House, but only the barest outlines of who Daneli was. She turned to look at the Eldest, who had a very apologetic look on her face. Daneli imagined she thought that Liona had just ruined her chances. Daneli thought she would make sure she understood. Maybe if she spread it

around that Daneli preferred honesty, she might get some more interesting answers to her questions in the future.

She looked back at Liona, and smiled. “Thank you very much for being so honest, Liona. I like that a lot. You’ll be hearing from me.”

Liona smiled broadly. “Thank you, Sulea.”

“Call me Daneli.”

They got up, and she shook hands with Liona, then with the Eldest, who gushed, “Thank you for this audience, Sulea Tala. I look forward to meeting you again.”

Daneli for sure didn’t look forward to seeing Eldest Hopqua any time soon, but she did look forward to seeing the youngest Hopqua again. At the end of the evening, Daneli went back to her quarters, and took a long shower. She sat by the window, looking out on the farmland that bordered the conference center. She could see some trees in the distance, underneath a full moon.

She looked down at her list. She had seen sixty-three eldests and offspring. 35 men, and 28 women. She had to pick four from this list, eventually, but she would choose about fifteen to see again, and spend much more time with. Only three stood out, though. Liona, from Hopqua, who had been so honest, Derisi from Jero, who had the most peaceful, quiet nature of any man she had ever met, and Koleo from Burin, who she thought had the sweetest smile, and he was clearly a genius.

But there were others that she thought were worth a second chance, and she wrote her list to give to Mara, who would arrange how many ever additional meetings that would be needed. She mostly looked forward to being able to spend time alone with the candidates—the eldests always felt like a complete drag on the process.

Daneli had had a long conversation with Master Poera about the organization of the House. Master Poera had suggested that she find what she thought was a good guiding principle that everyone felt resonance with, other than just the standard principle of producing enough offspring to sustain the house, and working to make the House strong. She thought about the qualities of the people she loved and trusted the most, and those qualities included honesty as more important than convention or status, a kind of humbleness, and a kind of desire to learn and grow. These were her own guiding principles, taught to her by her father, and she thought that they would be good principles for her House.

She was sad that as Eldest, she would not be able to have children. It was one of the founding traditions of all of Trageri—eldests were responsible only for the family or House, and did not have their own children to dilute their energies. It meant that the women that she recruited to the House had to be willing to bear children, and the men willing to raise them.

There were always other options for men and women uninterested in bearing or raising children, or otherwise unable. They could become a teacher like her teachers, a priestess or male acolyte of Sabadora, or a number of other roles. Also, the House or family one is born into is always one's home, and some choose to simply stay at home, unmarried, but still contributing. She was proud of Trageri—that all people had choices, unlike the strict regimentation of Northern life. Even eldests could choose to abdicate their role and status, although that happened rarely.

She blew out the lamp, and tucked herself into bed. All that was left of the Sala Trageri was the farewell breakfast and ceremony, and then she had a couple of weeks to prepare for the Sala Red. The change of pace from her Tala Shari studies was nice, but she was already looking forward to going back to them.

On their way to the Sala Red, Daneli was riding next to Mara as they crested a hill, and she could see the large valley below with a broad expanse of farmland. They had traveled for two days so far, and at the end of today, they would have only one day until they reached Hasni. Tonight they were headed to House Sopha, a major House, one of the prime agricultural Houses in Trageri. Daneli thought “Another house, another eldest with offspring to offer.”

She was at least glad to be getting to know Mara better on this trip. As much as she loved her father, she had, at times, gotten envious of her Trageri siblings that had so many parental guides. Her mother had largely been useless to Daneli. The good thing was that she could make up for lost time. Mara had been a wonderful guide for Daneli so far.

“So, Daneli, tell me more about Warani. I am so curious about what was it like being a woman there.”

“Well, of course my father shielded me from so much. But it's pretty terrible. You are your father's to control, until you are told to marry someone, and then once married, you are your husband's to control. If he dies and you are still alive, you are your son's to control. Your only

leverage are the sons that you produce. If you were unlucky enough not to have a son before your husband dies, you are in deep trouble, as are any daughters you have. If you are a high noblewoman, you are likely to be sheltered somewhat by family. If you are a commoner..."

Mara shook her head. "Why do women put up with that?"

"I don't know, Mara. But my sister wants to be of Warani. I think she listens too much to my mother. And she converted, too."

"Converted? To their religion?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, my."

"I know my father will at least find her a decent man."

"Yes, I'm sure he will try. But, my bet is that when push comes to shove, Hila will give into her Southern roots, and come home."

"Really? She seems so much at my mother's mercy."

"I see in Hila a desire to please. She loves your mother, and desperately wants to please her. But she cannot, of course. When she sees the truth, she'll come home."

Daneli thought about that for a moment, and realized the truth of it. She hoped that Hila wouldn't have to go through too much in order to make that final choice.

They arrived at House Sopha, greeted very graciously by the Kala, and given a sumptuous feast, followed by a dance. Daneli loved to dance—it was a lot of fun, and it had been a long time since Daneli had a chance to dance. The rhythms of the drums were compelling. She wandered the dance floor, sometimes dancing with Sopha offspring, sometimes dancing with her house members. Finally, she exhausted herself, and excused herself to go to her room. On her way there, she literally ran into a young woman who was coming in her direction, rounding a corner in the hallway.

"I'm so sorry—I was tired, and not looking."

"Not to worry Sulea, I'm fine." As she looked at her, Daneli recognized the woman. She'd been introduced to her during dinner—she was the kalea of House Sopha.

"Well, I'm glad. And thank you for the warm welcome of your house."

"Of course you will always be welcome here." She smiled, broadly, looking directly into Daneli's eyes, and Daneli knew that it was the truth.

“Well, good night, Kalea Brao.”

“Good night, Sulea Daneli.”

As they passed each other in the hallway, Daneli got the feeling that Brao was going to be an important person in her life. She couldn't for the life of her figure out why, but it was a thought that would not be dismissed. Daneli tucked it away. Time would tell.

Hasni was an odd place, Daneli thought as they approached it. It was a collection of large and small buildings, with gardens and well-manicured fields surrounding it. The closest House was many miles away, and the closest family, called Hasni, had their dwelling about ¼ mile away. The family Hasni was the only family that belonged to no clan, and it was their role to take care of Hasni all year long, and host the Sala Red one week out of the year. Hasni was a very well-regarded family, and its offspring usually married into Houses, sometimes major Houses. And it was considered no dishonor for a member of a major House to marry into Hasni.

They rode through the gardens on the west side of Hasni, and found themselves finally in a circular path surrounding a central area. Several people left the building nearest to them, and joined them as they started to dismount.

“Welcome, Queen Raliro and House Trageri. We are glad you have arrived. Your rooms are ready.”

House Trageri, being the royal house, had a special set of rooms at Hasni. Mara had told her all about it. It was convenient to everything, but set apart—away from the crowds of people who would be at the Sala Red.

There were more than 2000 Houses, and each house brought not only the Kala and her diplomatic spouses, but also offspring and varied attendants. The Sala Red was a huge gathering. There were seven in the Trageri contingent—the Queen, Mara and Rogera, Daneli, her siblings Potera and Kori, and Master Garliri. Some Houses brought as many as ten.

They were guided to their rooms, and Mara showed Daneli the room she would stay in, as well as the beautiful and large lounge she would be using to entertain kalas and offspring.

“Mara, what do you use this room for when there aren't candidates to host?”

“You, my dear, are spoiling our fun! Most Sala Reds we have really great parties at night.”

“You're kidding, really?”

“I am not kidding. You will be sad at all the parties you’ll miss because you’re busy hosting candidates.”

“Well, in a couple of years...”

“Yes, you can party to your heart’s content.” Mara smiled, and left the room. Daneli found her way back to the room she was staying in, and began to unpack her things. House Trageri was always the first to arrive, and the last to leave. Tonight they were having a small, informal dinner with family Hasni, as was tradition.

Daneli was amazed at all of the people arrayed in front of her. The Queen was in a chair, raised on a dais, with the eldest kala still living, Kala Quidim, sitting next to her. Unlike queens, who retired when their heirs came of an age to rule, kalas were kalas until death. Daneli was standing about ten feet to the side of the Queen, along with Mara and Rogera. To the other side of the Queen were three priestesses of Sabadora.

There were almost twenty thousand people at this Sala Red. She looked into the large group, some sitting and some standing. They were outside in a very large amphitheater behind the main bulk of the Hasni buildings. It had a large shell behind the front stage, which served to amplify what was spoken on stage. It was traditional that the opening and closing ceremonies were outside. It was a beautiful day, the sun shining brightly, the air winter crisp, but with no wind. It was perfect.

One of the priestesses came forward, and rang the ceremonial bell three times. When the reverberations finally died down, she started to speak.

“May Sabadora bless the next five days. May She be with us, may we hear Her voice, may She guide us in our deliberations. May each of us find Sabadora in our hearts and minds this week.”

She rang the ceremonial bell again, and then the Queen rose.

“Houses of Trageri, I now officially open the nine hundred and ninety-fifth Sala Red!”

The crowd cheered, and she raised her hands, and it died down.

“It is my great pleasure to introduce the Sulea Tala Trageri, Daneli.”

Of course, Daneli knew this was coming, and she had prepared a short speech, as was traditional. The Queen would give her speech later in the ceremony. Daneli stepped forward, and

she could see all eyes on her. She was surprisingly calm. The speech she was giving here was far shorter and less intimate than the one she gave at the Sala Trageri.

“Thank you, Queen Raliro Trageri. It is an honor to be here.” She turned toward the Queen, and bowed. “I am glad to stand in front of you, on this beautiful day of Anaga. I want to again thank family Hasni for their extraordinary hospitality.”

She paused, feeling her nerves rise up inside. She took a couple of breaths, and then continued.

“As always, the Sala Red is the entrance into a new year in Trageri. And, as always, it will be a year full of change, and growth, as we continue to become the people we are meant to be. I am honored to be Sulea, and humbled by the breadth and depth of hearts, minds, and experience gathered here today. Be well this week, be blessed, be happy, and find your joy.”

She was finished. She stepped back, and heard the applause. It seemed a bit more than polite, which pleased her.

There were other speeches, but she hardly heard them. She was busy trying to figure out what she did wrong and what she could do better next time. Eventually, the opening ceremonies were over, and it was time for lunch, then the first full session of the Sala Red.

The organization of the event was seamless. Everything worked very smoothly. There were six days of meetings. The first day was taken up by the ceremony in the morning, and then the first full session of the Sala Red, attended by each kala and her two diplomatic spouses. Each of the following four days had an open session in the morning, followed by lunch, and a short session where only the kalas could attend, and then the afternoons were full of committee meetings. Daneli had already been assigned to work with two committees: Northern Relations, which had not been a surprise, and transportation, which had been. Daneli didn't even know what the transportation committee would even talk about, but she would find out eventually. The last day had the last open session in the morning, and then the afternoon of closing ceremonies.

Each evening, there were banquets and parties put on by many houses, and Daneli would miss all of them. She would be entertaining kalas and their offspring. Like at the Sala Trageri, there was a screening process, but there were a lot more politics about who got on the list—and it was a much longer list. She would end up meeting with at least 100 kalas and their offspring. It felt daunting.

The next day, after a rather long evening talking to kalas of major Houses, she was sitting in the small conference room with several kalas, a few of whom she had met. She was glad that Kori was there with her—his role was to take notes. The kalas were sitting in assigned seats, so Daneli knew who they were. Mara had dropped on her just yesterday that she was to chair the meeting of the Northern Relations committee, and Daneli had had a panic attack right in front of her. It had been more than a little embarrassing, but Mara had been gentle and kind, and explained that she knew more than anyone in Trageri about the North, and how Trageri and Warani could get along.

Daneli had to admit that Mara was right, but she wished that she'd gotten a little more notice! She had the agenda in front of her, with items she thought it worth the group discussing. She looked up, and everyone she knew should be here was here, so it was time to start. She took a deep breath, and calmed her nerves.

“Hello, let's get this started, shall we? We have a bit of a packed agenda for this afternoon. The first agenda item, conveniently, is for me to give my report about the state of Trageri/Warani relations at the present time. After that, there is time for questions, as well as modification of the agenda as needed based on your reactions to my report.”

She started her report, which she had carefully organized. It started with the current border conditions, which were largely positive, with relatively free flow of people and goods across the border, especially toward the west, where Trevalian had much influence. She had gotten reports from the far east border, where House Joquin and Castle Duvale were on both sides of the river delta. The border there was quiet as well.

She then discussed her time at court, and ended with the fiasco that had been the King's demand that she become Princess Consort. She could tell from the reactions around the room that this had struck quite a nerve. She tried to temper it with details of Northern culture which made this sort of thing normal, but that hadn't really helped.

“That is the conclusion of my report. I'll now take questions, and entertain changes in the agenda items.”

The Kala from House Joquin raised her hand, and Daneli nodded for her to speak.

“Thank you, Sulea Daneli for this most enlightening report. I don't think we've had this much understanding of how the Northern nobles view us. I did want to add that my relations with Duke

Duvale have been quite friendly. Duvale is quite isolated from much of Warani. I don't even think that Duvale often goes to court."

"This is true, Kala Joquin. Duvale was not at court this year, and I had heard from Baron Gurosti that Duvale only attends when the King demands, which is basically never. In general, we can expect friendliness from just about all bordering territories."

The discussion continued and together they came up with a set of recommendations that to take to the open meeting tomorrow morning, when committees reported back. At the end Daneli was exhausted, so she went back to her room to take a nap.

She was awoken by a gentle shake of her shoulder, she turned in the bed to see Mara standing next to it. The lamps on in the room, because it was past dark.

"Oh, no! I slept more than I expected. What time is it?"

"You have only a bit of time before your next set of introductions."

Daneli groaned, and got up to sit on the bed. "I'm sorry, Mara. I guess I got wiped out by today's events."

"There is a lot going on, I know. You have no required activities tomorrow afternoon. I suggest you take a break."

"That's a good idea. I'll get dressed, and be in the lounge in a few minutes. Will I be late?"

"Not really. There will be something there for you to eat, my dear." Mara smiled, and left the room. Daneli quickly chose her outfit, washed her face, and went down the hallway to the large lounge area where she had entertained last night. The first three nights were entirely filled with major Houses. The second three were filled with minor Houses. As she walked in, she could see that there were already several kalas and their offspring gathered, and they smiled at her when she took her seat. She poured herself a little wine, ate a roll that was sitting next to her, and looked down at her sheet. Kala Serel was first—that was one of the few she had been looking forward to. She looked up to see the Kala standing, with a beautiful young woman next to her.

"Please, Kala, sit down. I have been looking forward to meeting you. I have the highest regard for you and your House—Master Garliri has been an incredible teacher to me."

She nodded her head. "Garliri has told me so much about you. He is very proud of you." She turned to the woman. "I would like to introduce Kalira to you..."

Daneli noticed that as the Kala described Kalira, Kalira was barely paying attention. She would look at Daneli for a brief moment, and then her eyes would wander to other things in the room. Daneli knew pretty quickly that Kalira wasn't anything like what Daneli was looking for, but given that this was House Serel, she wanted to give Kalira more of a chance. So Daneli asked Kalira the standard question, even though she was bored with it.

"Kalira, why do you want to join House Trageri?"

Kalira spoke with a haughtiness that made Daneli sit back in her chair.

"I don't know that I want to join House Trageri. I am, by far, the best catch available here, and if you want me, you'll have to convince me to join your House."

Daneli looked at the Kala, whose face was unreadable.

Daneli looked Kalira in the eye and said quietly, "I don't think that will be necessary. Thank you both for coming to speak with me. Goodnight." They got up, and walked away from the table. The Kala's face remained unreadable—Daneli couldn't tell what the Kala thought about what had occurred. She would have to talk with Mara about this—she felt, for some reason, completely unsettled by it. There were more kalas and more offspring, and none of them seemed at all what Daneli was looking for. She went back to her room, undressed, and stumbled into bed.

Five days later, she was again astride Galinsa, heading back home to House Trageri. By all accounts, it had been a successful Sala Red, but Daneli had not had an especially good time. Between her responsibilities at the meeting, and entertaining 125 kalas and their offspring, she was completely drained. She was glad that she had a few weeks off before the next term of the Tala Shari started.

She saw Mara at a short distance, and nudged Galinsa to speed up a little, and she caught up with her.

"Mara, can I ask you something?"

"Is it about Kalira Serel?"

"How did you know?"

"Kala Serel talked with me. She asked me to send her deep apologies for the behavior of her offspring. Apparently, their current crop of offspring, except the eldest, aren't so great, and the kala is having to mend a lot of fences so that some will want to marry into the House."

“The kala need not apologize to me, Mara. I just want to understand why Kalira’s response was so unsettling to me. It was as if I was back in the North, having to prove myself. It took me a moment to realize I have nothing to prove to her.”

“It is not surprising to me, Daneli. The contrast between living in the North, and living at House Trageri is stark. How Kalira spoke to you reminded you of your life of having to always prove your rank and status, which you haven’t needed to do at all for almost a year now. Give yourself some space, Daneli.”

Daneli nodded, grateful for the advice.

“So, were there any candidates that took your fancy?”

“I’ll be sending you the list soon. There were a few I’d like to see again, and talk to more.”

Mara smiled. “Good, I’m glad. There will be plenty of time to figure this out.”

“I’m a little worried that some of my favorites will end up being recruited away before I get a chance to talk with them more.”

“Are you kidding?”

Daneli was taken aback. “No, I am serious.”

Mara chuckled. “Daneli, if someone finds out that they are on your short list, they will not entertain any other possibilities until you have made your decision on them, believe me. Kalira is a complete oddity. Between the fact that you will head the royal House of Trageri, and your own very unique, and dare I say, attractive, personality, anyone in their right mind will wait for you.”

“Are you saying Kalira is not in her right mind?”

“Yes, I am.”

They both laughed.

Daneli ran downstairs, and saw her father and younger brother and sister in the large entryway to the House. She ran up to them.

“Father, Hila, Sile!” They all shared long hugs.

Her father said, “Daneli. It is so wonderful to see you! How is being Sulea Tala?”

She grinned. “I’m enjoying myself, father. I love it here.”

“I’m not at all surprised.”

“How are you? How are all at Castle Trevalian? How was the Northern court? How is mother?”

“Whoa! Slow down daughter.” They all laughed. “Look, we’re all tired and famished. Let’s get our stuff all upstairs to our rooms, settle in a bit, and we’ll all talk later.”

“Alright. Mara and Jeri made a welcome feast for all of you. It should be ready in about an hour.

“Alright, we’ll see you at dinner. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up, I promise.”

She watched them go upstairs, accompanied by one of the Queen’s spouses, and Daneli decided to go to the kitchen and see if anyone needed any help. A welcome feast was always a lot of effort, and since no Trageri House had servants, most of the House would have to be involved in preparing it. However, any eldest, except her, the youngest eldest, could generally opt out of this sort of thing.

The instant she walked into the large dining room, one of her siblings handed her a stack of plates.

“Lay these out, please, dear? And then after you’re done, can you set out the utensils and napkins?”

She nodded, and then started to work. She liked doing things like this—it made her pay attention only to the tasks at hand, and she could forget all of her varied worries. They didn’t all often eat together in this room—they had one meal per week in this room, and that was Sabbath dinner. There were two other small dining rooms, and people ate at different times and in different combinations. Her generation generally had three or four meals per week together, and she knew that the Queen and her spouses ate together a few times a week as well.

In this room, there were three tables to set. One table, the smallest one, had members of the family from her father’s parent’s generation: the Suha Fero, and her five surviving spouses, one of whom was her father’s mother. There was also Mother Worli, who was her father’s grandmother’s spouse, the only one surviving from her generation. That table was set on a small platform so that it was slightly raised above the others. Then there was the table at which she and her ten siblings plus her sister and brother sat. In between was the table with the Queen and her ten spouses, as well as her father and one other of his siblings, who was visiting the House as well.

As Daneli stepped up to the platform, she was reminded of how outside of House Trageri, her status was second only to the Queen. But inside of the House, she was simply one of the children. Eldest, yes, in preparation for being named Sula, but still just a child. Mother Worli, never an eldest, had more status in the House than Daneli did, and Daneli thought that was just about right. She felt that she had so much yet to learn.

As she was finishing setting the tables, varied members of the House wandered in, and either helped bring the voluminous amounts of food in from the kitchen, or do some remaining preparation of the room. Finally, it was all done, and everyone arrived and sat down. There was a veritable cacophony, with almost everyone talking at once. There was a hushed quiet when a loud clinking came from the head table.

Mother Worli, in her croaking, hesitant voice, said, “I welcome the son of this House, sent to the North for peace. I’m glad he’s home with us for a while.”

That seemed to give others permission to say things. Her father’s mother stood, with her wine glass held high. “Son, I know I speak for all of us. We have missed you so, and we are glad you are with us.”

Others toasted to him, and then Daneli stood. “Father, welcome home!”

At that, the meal began. She sat with Jeri on one side, and Kori on the other, her sister and brother across the table from them. She and Kori had recently gotten close, and she knew that he wished that he might stay in House Trageri. Daneli wasn’t sure about him as a spouse, though. She liked him, and respected him, but he didn’t feel like quite the right fit for her. She knew that he was being recruited by several major Houses, including Serel, and there were many places he could do well, but he could also stay at House Trageri, unmarried, if he wished. That was no dishonor, and she would be happy for him if that was what he wanted.

“So, love, how is it to see your family?” She turned to Jeri, who, after speaking, had put one of the delicious rolls in her mouth.

“I’m happy they are here. I won’t get to see my father very often—I doubt that I’ll have much reason to visit the North, and he only gets home once every few years.” She looked across at her sister and brother. “I’m glad you’re both here. And Hila, I’m glad you are visiting.”

Hila screwed up her face, and Daneli could see something was wrong.

“What’s wrong Hila?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, OK? Leave me alone.”

She looked at Sile, who sent her in thought, “It has to do with mother.” That didn’t really explain it, but at least she got a sense of what might be going on.

Jeri finished the roll, and said “I wish I could get to know your father better—he seems like he is a great father to you.”

“Yes, he is. He takes his duty seriously, even though he is in a culture where other men don’t do much in the way of parenting.”

Their whole table then got into a conversation about the North, and about women and men of the North. Her brother chimed in on occasion, but her sister was silent. On the whole, Daneli thought that the South had about as much contempt for Northern ways as the North did for Southern ways, which troubled her. As someone who had lived and experienced both, she could sometimes understand some of the Northern ways. Still, she hadn’t figured out why her older brother and younger sister had chosen to ally themselves with the North.

She helped clean up, then went up to her rooms and started to do some of her homework. She heard a quiet knock on the door.

“Come in.”

“It’s your father.”

“Hey, come on in, I’m just doing some homework.” Her father came in, and sat down in a chair not too far from her desk.

“What kind?”

“Genetics.”

“Genetics, eh? Like it?”

“No, not at all! But I need to understand some things.”

“Yes, there is a lot to understand.”

“Father, how do you stand talking with Northern nobles all the time, when you know what they refuse to acknowledge?”

“We don’t talk about that stuff, peach. We talk about cattle, and land, and marriage, and honor, and that sort of thing. They have their beliefs, and I have mine.”

“But father, it’s one thing to believe in their God King instead of Sabadora and Ruloto. It’s another to believe that the God King brought them here on a flaming chariot when what’s true is that we came in a ship.”

“Well, doesn’t the ship have a flame?”

“Father! You know what I mean.”

“Daneli, you have to just let it go. In your relationship with the North, which I hope you’ll continue to forge, you’ll need to just let some things go. What they believe is really of no consequence to us, at least not right now.”

Daneli nodded. “Well, I guess you are right. So how’s everyone?”

“Well, there is some good news. Your brother Sile is finally fed up with Warani, and plans to stay here from now on. And your sister...”

“I’m glad about Sile. He’ll find a good place here, I know. What happened to Hila? She refused to tell me.”

“Your mother made a big mistake.”

“And that was?”

“She promised your sister to Duke Durelli’s son.”

“WHAT!?! Why?”

“Durelli has become favored of the King, alongside Karina. The King asked your mother if she would promise Hila to Yorul, and your mother agreed.”

“Father, First, Durelli is days and days of travel away from either Trevalian or the court—it’s way out in the eastern mountains. Cold as hell—I hear it’s worse than Karina! Plus, isn’t Yorul...”

“He has problems, yes. Anyway, Hila refused, understandably, and her mother disavowed her, saying that because she refused, she has renounced her Northern affiliation. Everyone in Warani agrees.”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. Hila has no choice now but to live here.”

“I can see why she’s mad. She doesn’t want to be here.”

“Sile has promised to take her under his wing. She’ll be fine, but it will take her some time to get used to being here, and being oriented to the South. Also, your mother left the Castle. The King offered her quarters in the Palace, and she took him up on his offer.”

“Father, that sounds...”

“Odd. Yes, it is odd. Your mother and I never really speak much, and never tell the truth to each other, so I have no idea what’s really going on. It is strange, but I have to admit that I will not miss her.”

They talked for a while longer, then he took his leave, and she decided it was time to get some sleep. She got dressed in her pajamas, and doused the light.

Her father visited for ten days, and they got to spend a lot of time together. They rode in the rolling hills south of House Trageri, and her father regaled her of tales of his youth here. They talked about the North, and about diplomacy, and about the future.

They were sitting on some rocks, their horses grazing in the distance, when the conversation turned very serious.

“Daneli, the King has been making serious noises about the fact that I don’t prosecute those with The Gift. It has become a major bone of contention for him. He has even threatened to send examiners to Trevalian.”

“What did you say to that?”

“I explained politely that the agreement allows Trevalian to set its own policies around treatment of its subjects. The King does not think that this falls under the agreement. I refused to allow examiners. He was not happy.”

“Father, what will you do?”

“Continue as I have, Daneli. I can’t begin to execute those with The Gift!”

“I know, father. I just wish there was another way.”

He nodded. I’ve told the Queen about this, and she will bring up the idea of giving Trevalian some more military support at the next Sala Red.”

Daneli nodded. “That sounds like a good idea.”

“I think so.”

They sat in silence for a while, and then her father spoke.

“Daneli, I am so proud of you. I have heard from the Queen and your teachers about how well you’ve done so far. I knew you would do well.”

“Thanks, father. It seemed that I learned most of my lessons very early. They buried me in work until I yelled for help!”

Her father laughed. “That took a few weeks, didn’t it?”

She smiled. “Three. I hadn’t slept in days, I was behind, and I could barely move because Master Garliri was having me do three hours of intense sword and lance practice every day!”

Her father laughed again. “You did always think you could do everything by yourself!”

“Well, I’m glad I learned during the Tala Shari, and not later when I was queen.”

“They design the Tala Shari quite well, daughter.”

“I believe it.”

A few days later, she was standing outside of the House, watching her father ride back to Trevalian, with his small contingent. Hila and Sile were staying behind. She walked back into the house, to see Hila sitting on a bench in the entryway, looking dreadful. Daneli sat next to her.

“Hila, you’ll be fine here. You might even enjoy it.”

She said, quietly, “Why did mother promise me to that monster?”

“Hila, the King asked her to, and she didn’t have a choice.”

“But she could have refused! She knew how horrible it would be! And she must have known I would refuse.”

“Hila, she is a Northern woman. She obeys men. And she obeys kings, like all Northerners. That is what they do to survive. She had no choice, and she expected you to do that as well. But you could choose, because you are a Trageri woman, after all.”

“I wanted to be like mother. But I didn’t want to be that much like her.” Hila started to sob, and Daneli held her while she cried. Daneli was glad that Sile would be around to help Hila get used to reality in House Trageri.

CHAPTER 5: MEETING JOELLA

The entryway was scattered with bags, and people were scurrying around. Daneli was ready, but the others traveling with her to House Colera were not yet. It was the first leg of her travels during the fourth term of the Tala Shari, and her first stop was House Colera, a major house, and head of a clan famous for their sailboats and sailors. Colera supplied most of Trageri with sailboats. Colera had the biggest port in all of Trageri, and she was looking forward to seeing it.

She was traveling to Colera with a larger contingent than she would afterward. Masters Garliri, Poera, and Eta would be with her for the entire journey over the next three terms. On this trip, Rogera was coming, as were her siblings Hirio and Kolea. They were assisting Rogera on his diplomacy mission to Colera. Daneli had heard tidbits of a conversation suggesting that the Queen wanted to talk with the eldest of Colera about commissioning some of their sailboats for military defense against the North.

Daneli and her teachers would be in Colera for just a few days, and leave to continue southward toward House Seralo, their second stop. This term would be travel along the west coast of Trageri, and back, and then the fifth term she would spend time going through the center of Trageri. The sixth term she would travel down to Sur Rolero, and spend most of the term there.

“Daneli, are you ready?” She looked up to see Master Garliri, who was coordinating the group, looking at her with a worried face.

“Yes, Master Garliri, I’m all ready. I’ve even saddled Galinsa, although I’m worried that might have been a bit premature.” She smiled, trying to disarm him, but he clearly was too annoyed for that.

“Well, if I have anything to do with it...”

He strode away, looking purposeful. Daneli decided it was time to get some air, so she walked out front, where some of the horses and donkeys were tied up and waiting. They looked patient.

Eventually, everything was ready, and Daneli was astride Galinsa, riding south on the broad road that connected House Trageri and the clan environs and House Colera. It was a busy road, dust kicked up by the many travelers on the road this morning. They expected to arrive at House

Colera just after dark the next evening, and Master Garliri was trying to set a brisk pace so that they wouldn't have to travel far in the dark to their first stop, which was a minor house.

Daneli had probably seen more of Warani than Trageri in her life. She had traveled with her father to some duchies and baronies across the southern part of Warani, and, of course, she had traveled to the Winter Palace. She had not yet traveled anywhere in Trageri except to some clan families when she'd take visits before she moved, and to Hasni for the Sala Red.

One thing she had always found interesting that contrasted the North to the South—the North had plenty of places called 'inns' where travelers would pay to stay the night, and get a meal. In Trageri, hospitality was a very valued quality, and every family and House, even House Trageri, had ample guest space, and was happy to have guests whenever they showed up, even unannounced.

Her itinerary, from what she knew, had been quite well publicized, and an unannounced visit from the Sulea Tala would be impolite, even if welcome.

"Penny for your thoughts." She looked at Hirio, who had moved back to ride alongside her.

"Do I look that thoughtful?"

He laughed. "Yes, my dear."

"What's a penny, Hirio? Isn't that a strange saying?"

"Yes, it is. I have no idea what a penny is. Anyway, so what has got you so deep in thought?"

"I was thinking about my travels with my father in the North."

"Do you miss the North at all?"

"Not really. I miss my father and brother, and I liked the Castle—lots of fun places to get lost in. Dungeons and such."

"I'd like to see it someday."

"I'm sure my father would be glad for a visit by any of our House."

"I'd like to see a Northern court, too."

"You would not be welcome there, sadly."

"I know. But it would certainly be interesting."

"Indeed it would."

Later that evening, Daneli was sitting outside on a wide porch that overlooked the ocean. There were small lamps on the porch, giving it a nice warm glow. The breeze from the ocean was slightly cool and salty. They had just finished dinner, and Daneli was happy to have some time alone.

“Sulea Daneli?”

She looked up to see Kala Surfit looking at her. Next to her was a young man she had not met yet—a different offspring from the one she’d met during the Sala Red. She inwardly groaned, but outwardly smiled.

“Kala Surfit, hello, it is nice to see you again.”

“I hope that everything has been to your liking.”

“You have given us wonderful hospitality, Kala, I am grateful for it.”

“It is our pleasure to give hospitality to House Trageri at House Surfit. I wish to introduce you to one of our offspring, Meri.”

Meri said, “Hello, Sulea Tala Daneli.”

“Hi Meri.”

“I will leave you two alone.” To Daneli’s surprise, the Kala simply left, saying nothing in praise of her offspring. Daneli watched while he grabbed a chair, and sat down next to her, facing the ocean.

“I apologize for the intrusion. It was not my choice.”

“Don’t worry—I have to admit that this is the least intrusive experience of this sort I’ve had so far. At the Sala Red, Kala Surfit spent many minutes singing the praises of one of your siblings.”

He didn’t answer, and they sat in silence for a while. Surprisingly to Daneli, it was far from uncomfortable.

He finally said, “You like the ocean?”

“I always have. House Trageri is not close enough to the ocean to see it—one has to take a ride to the beach. It’s nice to just sit here and watch and feel the ocean.”

“Yes, it is a gift to be so close. I guess I take it for granted, since I see it every day.”

“What is your craft?”

“I am an apprentice to our Master Jerold. History is my passion.”

“What in particular?”

“Earth history, actually. I am traveling to Sur Rolero in a few months to study with the Masters there—they have many Earth historical books and documents.”

“That’s interesting. I know that Earth history is something that is a relatively new field of study. For many hundreds of years, I guess, people here wanted to create a completely new one.”

“Yes, but it is my theory that we can never really escape it—we need to understand it.”

Daneli nodded, and they talked for quite a while about the history of Trageri. From what she’d learned from reading *The Chronicles of Joella Trageri*, she knew he was right, escape from Earth’s history wasn’t possible. She decided, finally, to go ahead and ask the question that was hanging in the air.

“Do you hope to join House Trageri?”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Sulea, I have no illusions that a younger sibling of this minor house would have much of a chance among the candidates you are entertaining. I agreed to my eldest’s wish to meet with you because, well, she’s the Eldest. That said, I have much enjoyed our conversation.”

Daneli looked at him, and realized that she liked him quite a bit—she especially liked his honesty and humility.

“Meri, thank you for your honesty. If you don’t mind, I’d like to sit here on my own for a while.”

“Of course, Sulea. Have a good night.” He got up, and took his chair with him. She knew he would be surprised in a few weeks to get a message for further conversation.

The next morning, as the company was riding further south to House Colera, Daneli sought out Master Poera. She brought Galinsa along side Master Poera’s horse, and kept pace with her.

“Master Poera, do you mind a question?”

“Is this prompted by your conversation with Meri Surfitt?”

Daneli laughed. “How did you know about that?”

“I was sitting in the lounge inside, and saw the Kala and her offspring go outside to talk with you. On the Kala’s way in, I asked her who her offspring was. She told me something about him. Apparently, he is considered one of the best history students in all of Trageri.”

“I could tell.”

“So what’s your question?”

“Well... I’m realizing that making this decision is going to be harder than I thought. I have to pick four from families in clan Trageri—that leaves five to seven spots left. I’ve already chosen Jeri from our House. It is standard that House Trageri have spouses from major houses, but I have yet to meet one I like—all of the offspring I’ve met who I’ve liked so far come from minor houses.”

“You are afraid of picking too many from minor houses?”

“Yes. I don’t want to unsettle things too much.”

Master Poera sighed. “Daneli, you think too deeply sometimes.”

“Too deeply?”

“Yes. Trying to balance the country with your spouse choices is a bit much, don’t you think?”

“Well...”

“Daneli, yes, it has been tradition that eldests from House Trageri have chosen most or all from offspring of major houses. But remember—all of those who came before you were raised here, and met people from the major houses during Sala Reds and festivals for many years. You have only just met them, and further, most of them distrust you because you were raised in the North. It is not at all surprising to me that you didn’t like them. You are different, my dear, and it’s alright if you act that way!”

“So...”

“So, if all of your spouse choices come from minor houses, there will be grumbling, and shifts in alliances and such, but it won’t be a big deal. You’ll be queen, and the way you relate to the major Houses will be more important than whether or not they married you.”

Five months later, on their way home, Daneli’s butt was sore, and she could not have imagined a more welcome sight than House Trageri in the distance. It been a long and instructive five months—she was surprised at how little she’d really known about Trageri before the trip. Living between the North and House Trageri had meant that there was so much that she had missed.

And, she was hot. It was high summer, and it was already much cooler as they approached the coast again, it had been a brutal month of travel in the southwestern inlands. They had gone through parts of the jungle, and visited Houses that were responsible for coffee and bananas, and

other tropical crops that Daneli took for granted when she was in the South. And she'd seen the desert, where few Houses and families lived.

In a month, she'd be off again, but this time along the northern border, and eventually to the far eastern coast, before heading back for the Sala Trageri. She was beginning to see the Tala Shari as an endurance test. Could she make it through these years, learn what she was supposed to, organize her House, and manage not to melt into a puddle? She wasn't yet sure she would pull it off.

They arrived at the house, and were greeted by all manner of family members, mostly her siblings, but some of her parents as well, including Mara, who greeted her warmly as she dismounted Galinsa.

"Daneli, welcome home! I'm so glad to see you."

"I'm glad to be home Mara. All is well?"

Mara nodded. "All is well. Hila is even beginning to enjoy herself."

Daneli smiled. That made her happy. She greeted her siblings, and Jeri gave her a long kiss, and whispered in her ear, "I missed you." She missed Jeri as well, and looked forward to spending some time with her alone.

She gathered her things, and walked up to her rooms, dropping her bags on the floor, and heading directly for the bath, where she started the hot water going. She heard a knock at the door, and she went to open it. Mara stood there.

"Just wanted to let you know that we're having a welcome feast for you and a birthday celebration for Rogera at six."

"Thanks, Mara. That leaves me just enough time to get a nice long bath." Mara smiled, and turned and walked away. Daneli closed her door, stripped, and gratefully got into the bath, letting the hot water wash away her soreness and tiredness. She was looking forward to family and rest.

A few days later, she was lying on a blanket in a field, with Jeri next to her. They had ridden out an hour or so from the House, and were spending the day together with a picnic.

"So, Daneli, the one thing we haven't talked about are the other candidates."

"I know. I feel a little... uncomfortable talking to you about it."

"I've noticed. It takes up a lot of your waking energy, but we don't talk about it at all. It worries me a little, Daneli. Are you worried that I might overly influence you?"

Daneli turned and put her head on her elbow, and looked directly at Jeri. “No, no, that’s not it at all.”

“Then what is it?”

“I’m not sure. It just feels... strange. I’ve chosen you as a spouse, and that feels really good, and I have to choose others, and that feels, well, like a chore, frankly, but I have met a few that seem like they could be really wonderful. I think it’s that even though I fully understand the Trageri marriage tradition, I am still somewhat formed by the Northern tradition of marrying only one person. So it seems strange to talk with you about other spouses.”

“Get over it, Daneli.” Jeri was smiling, but Daneli could sense an underlying seriousness to it. Jeri was, of course, exactly right.

“OK, so... I have a short list of seven offspring from Trageri families, and a list of twenty offspring, all from minor houses.”

“I’m not surprised at that.”

“You aren’t?”

“Remember, I’ve met a lot of the offspring of the major Houses over the years, Daneli. Most of them... aren’t your type, let’s just say. You want people for whom status is not their primary consideration. But truthfully, for most offspring of a major House, status is primary. They are looking to marry up, and that’s what matters most.

“That sounds just like the North, Jeri. They only marry for status, or to seal agreements of one sort or another.”

“Well, the good thing is that for many minor Houses, that isn’t as important, nor is it for House Trageri. So tell me of your short list.”

She described the varied people on her short list, their qualities, and whether or not Mara had scheduled them for a visit during her break. It was traditional for all chosen spouses to get to meet candidates, and make their comments on them, and Daneli appreciated Jeri’s perspective.

“Jeri, I need to tell you something. It sort of falls into this conversation, but in a way it’s not really relevant.”

“What is it?”

“Remember I told you about Princess Kamila?”

“Yes, I remember that.”

“What I didn’t tell you is that I gave her an offer of marriage. One that she refused at the time…”

“But it’s always open, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Jeri, it is. I don’t think she’ll ever leave the North, and even though my feelings for her have faded somewhat, I still feel love for her.”

“I understand, Daneli. Why have you brought this up now?”

“A letter from her was waiting here for me when I got back.”

“Really?”

“Yes. She’s having a terrible time of it. Not that I’m surprised. She’s had one child so far, a daughter, which has been no end of trouble for her. I have replied to her suggesting that she could come here with her daughter, and be safe. I don’t think she’ll take me up on the offer, though.”

“A daughter, trouble?”

“Yes, having sons are primary. She needs to bear a son to be heir for her husband.”

“Barbarians.”

“Jeri, we need to respect their ways.”

“Why is that? Their ways are horrible for women.”

Daneli sighed. “I know, they are. But what can we do?”

“I have an idea.”

“And that is?”

“Let’s stop talking for a while.” Jeri leaned forward, and put her hand on Daneli’s cheek, and kissed her lips. Daneli relaxed, and let her thoughts drift away.

That scene with Jeri was replaying itself in her head as she sat on her horse heading toward House Joquin. She wasn’t sure why she was reminded of it—she left House Trageri two months ago, and she had decided on two more spouses, Liona Trageri Hopqua and Arlen Trageri Huron, who had both visited and spent significant time with Daneli and Jeri during her break. Jeri had been quite happy at these choices, which made Daneli happy as well.

She sniffed the air—she could smell the ocean, but it was subtly different. It was the Far Ocean, on the eastern side of the continent, not the familiar Near Ocean of the west. It had been

an interesting trip so far—they had traveled down the river on a barge for miles and miles, and had encountered some Northerners along the way. They took off to go south for a while, and had been traveling overland in the expanses of eastern farmlands for the past few days.

They would spend a couple of days at House Joquin, then head south along the coast for a while, then head back to House Trageri via an inland route that would take them north of the savanna and desert of the far south.

A couple of weeks later, their contingent had just arrived at House Werni, a minor House leading a clan primarily engaged in fishing. The Kala, who Daneli had met at the Sala Red, came out of the front entrance, surrounded by several others of her house.

“Welcome, Sulea Tala Daneli Trageri, we are honored by your visit. My spouses will show your company to the guest quarters. Also, I must speak with you immediately on an urgent matter.”

Daneli nodded, and indicated to the others to take the belongings to their rooms, and she went inside with the Kala.

“Come with me, we can find privacy in the library.”

They entered a small room with high walls that were covered in bookshelves filled with books. It was much smaller than the Trageri library, but it was no less well taken care of.

“Sulea, please have a seat.”

Daneli nodded, and sat in a chair facing the Kala. She was mystified at what this could be about.

“Sulea, yesterday, a messenger came from House Trageri to bring you an important message.”

Daneli’s heart started to beat quickly.

“What happened?”

“The messenger said that King Gasri has nullified the agreement between Trageri and Warani.”

“What?”

“Let me give you the accompanying note, Sulea.” She handed Daneli a piece of paper, and she could recognize Mara’s careful script. It read:

“Dear Sulea Daneli, Sorry to interrupt your studies, but you must return home as soon as possible by the most expedient route. We learned from a messenger sent from Castle Trevalian that King Gasri has unilaterally nullified the agreement between Trageri and Warani. He is using your refusal to marry his son as one reason, as well as the refusal of your sister to marry Duke Durelli’s son. The precipitating factor, however, seems to be your father’s refusal to execute a man who has been accused by examiners to have The Gift. We may call a Sala Hoira, to determine next steps. We don’t expect King Gasri to immediately try anything, but we are getting prepared. See you soon.”

The Sala Hoira was an emergency meeting of the kalas of all major Houses to determine policy and solve specific problems. It was a relatively rare occurrence.

Daneli looked up at Kala Werni.

“Thank you, Kala. I have a question.”

“Please, I want to help in any way I can.”

“What is the most expedient method to get back to House Trageri from here?”

“Sailboat, for sure. You can make that voyage in about six days, far shorter than overland.”

“How would I arrange such a sailboat?”

The Kala smiled. “Leave it to me. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you so much, Kala.”

“Anything I can do to serve the Sulea Tala. Let me take you to your rooms, where you can rest a bit before dinner.”

Daneli nodded. She realized she’d need to show everyone the note as soon as possible. She was interested to hear Master Garliri’s response. She was a little surprised that they were recalling her—but then she realized that she was the expert on Warani, and they would want her opinion on how to proceed. She had no idea at the moment what would make the most sense.

They walked upstairs to the guest suite and she saw Masters Garliri and Poera sitting on couches near the window that looked out over the ocean.

Master Garliri said, “Daneli, your room is that one over there, we put your bag on the bed. I imagine you’ll want a bath before dinner?”

“Yes, indeed, but I have something much more urgent first. Where is Master Maxi? I need to tell you all something important.”

Master Poera said, “I’ll go find him. I think he was visiting someone he knows here.” She walked out of the room, and Daneli sat down next to Master Garliri.

“It’s starting, Master Garliri. King Gasri has unilaterally nullified the agreement.”

“He can’t do that!”

“I know, but he did.”

“Why?”

Daneli handed Garliri the note, and heard him swear under his breath. He looked at Daneli, and shook his head sadly.

“King Gasri is making a huge mistake.”

Daneli said, “I don’t think he sees it that way.”

Masters Poera and Maxi walked into the room, both looking worried.

Daneli simply handed over the letter, and they each read it in turn.

“Kala Werni has offered to arrange travel by sail, which she says can get us to Trageri in six days.”

Maxi said, “That is correct. I’ve done it several times.”

Garliri said, “Ugh. I hate sailing. I get seasick. But it certainly is faster than any other option.”

Daneli said, “Sorry Master Garliri. I’ve never sailed, so I might get sick, too.”

They discussed the situation a little while longer, and then Daneli excused herself, so she could get a bath before dinner. She realized that it might be the last relaxing evening she would have in a long while.

That evening, as she sat on the wide porch at House Werni overlooking the ocean, Daneli wondered idly whether she could get someone to build a beach house for House Trageri. The coast west of the House was still within Trageri clan territory, and it was far from unheard of for Houses to have second, or even third dwellings. Some families even had many dwellings scattered over wide territories. She hadn’t realized how much she loved the ocean until her first sojourn along the southern coast. This ocean had a slightly different look—it was lighter in color, and much calmer. She knew there were uninhabited islands off to the east.

“Sulea Daneli.”

She turned around in her seat, to see the Kala Werni standing there.

“Hello Kala Werni.”

“I have arranged passage for you. One of our clan passenger ships is in port. The captain, one of my siblings, is happy to bring you as fast as he can to Port Trageri. He says that the weather should be fine. He and his crew will be ready to leave tomorrow at first light.”

Daneli stood up, facing the Kala. “This kindness will not go unremembered, Kala Werni. Thank you for your service to Trageri.”

She inclined her head. “You are most welcome, Sulea. I will leave you to your quiet time now.” She turned and left. Daneli sat back down, feeling a lot of respect for Kala Werni, and wondering how House Trageri could repay her.

Daneli thought back at dinner. Werni was a solid House, but the clan was somewhat insular. The Kala had not introduced her to any of the offspring of the house, although she’d met several during dinner and afterward. It was clear that they were all most interested in what happened in Werni. Master Poera had said that most eastern coast Houses married either within their clan, or, at most, to another eastern House. No one from a House on the eastern coast had ever married into House Trageri.

Well, there were other ways to repay favors than marriage. She’d just have to figure something out. She thought about asking Rogera when she returned home.

The port at Werni faded away as Daneli watched. They had quite efficiently been brought from House Werni to the port, which was bustling with early-morning activity. They had boarded the sailing ship, called *The Constitution*, which apparently was a historical name from Earth. Daneli didn’t know what it meant, but she figured that she would learn during her studies at Sur Rolero.

The ship was larger than she expected, and had many sails. It could hold as many as fifty passengers, but there were only the crew and her own party on this trip. Master Garliri was standing next to her looking a little green.

“Master Garliri, are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine, Daneli. The seasickness...”

“Is there anything we can do to help?”

“The captain gave me a brew.” Master Garliri raised a bottle with some sort of brownish liquid in it. “He said that if I drink it regularly for the next day or two, it will ease the seasickness. It hasn’t kicked in yet, though.”

“I’m so sorry. I wish there had been a different way.”

He reached out and patted her on the shoulder. “It’s fine Sulea, don’t worry about it.”

“Master Garliri, what do you think King Gasri will do now that he’s nullified the agreement?”

“I don’t imagine that he will do anything right now, although it’s hard to predict.”

“Do you think he wants to take Castle Trevalian back?”

“Of course, but who would he give it to? There would be incredible internal fighting within Warani to be the one to get that duchy. Trevalian is key territory. I’d think the King wouldn’t want that kind of internal strife. I’m not sure what the King is thinking, honestly. I wish I could figure it out.”

Daneli wished that they could have a mole at court, and she thought immediately of Kamila. She tossed that idea aside—there was no real channel of communication, and now that the North and South were officially enemies, getting word back and forth would be quite difficult.

“Sulea, I’m going to lie down for a while.”

“Of course, Master Garliri—take care.”

Daneli watched him walk carefully alongside the railing, then down the stairs leading to his quarters. She felt for him, and she was also glad that it seemed that she did not get sea sick. In fact, she loved being on the ocean.

“Sulea Daneli?”

She turned to see the captain of the ship standing next to her.

“Hello Captain. This is a wonderful ship.”

“Thank you, Sulea. I thought that perhaps you would want a tour?”

“I would love that, Captain.”

“Come this way.”

He led her to the front of the ship, that he called the “bow.” It was fun to stand on the small platform jutting out from the front of the ship. She could really feel the fast movement of the ship, and the motion of the sea. She looked down, and saw many shining fish swimming just ahead of the ship.

“We call those shipfins. They are native fish, and always accompany ships in the Eastern Ocean. Like most fish in the ocean, they are inedible.”

“What distinguishes the edible fish from the inedible fish?”

“Our forbears brought a large number of species of fish, most of whom died in the ocean, for lack of the right kind of food, or because the composition of the water was too different than on Earth. A few species, however, were able to adapt to fit the environment, and multiplied greatly. It is those fish we can eat. Any native fish are inedible.”

“How do you find the fish to eat?”

“That’s a good question. We use bait made from the offal of cattle and sheep. It is something that would not have worked as bait on Earth, but it is very attractive to them, and repulsive to native fish.”

Daneli was surprised by this information, somehow. She hadn’t learned this on her trip to the Near Ocean, but she hadn’t actually talked to anyone who knew fishing that well. Being in a different environment was a daily reality for these folks. Because most Earth plants and animals had taken to the land so well, this was something that people in the rest of the continent didn’t have to deal with. No wonder no one in Warani fished! That was one mystery of the North that she finally solved.

They kept walking, and he took her to the bridge, where there was a big wheel, which he explained was for steering. There were a few instruments that looked a little bit like clocks, which he explained measured their speed, and things about the ocean and air. One was a compass, which told them which direction they were heading in.

“Mostly, navigation is easy—we follow the coast, and never lose sight of it. Early in my career, I crewed Werni’s one exploratory ship, which was trying to map the islands east of the coast. It was then that the compass, and this thing over here, called a sextant, was necessary.”

“What does the sextant do?”

“The sextant can measure the distance between two objects—the sun and the horizon, for example, or the position of a star. Using this distance, and knowing the time of day, you can figure out where you are.”

Daneli just nodded. She could grasp the concept, but the particulars were a bit beyond her. They then went back outside, and the Captain explained the sails to her. He explained the four masts, and the varied sails rigged to the mast.

“These ships used to be called ‘Schooners’ on Earth, although the rigging of these is modified for our conditions. The winds on the oceans here are stronger than those on Earth, so the sails need to be a little smaller.”

They ended the tour at the rear, or “stern” of the ship, where he pointed out the large rudder that was driven by the wheel on the bridge.

“Thank you Captain, this has been an educational and enjoyable tour.”

“You are welcome, Sulea. Don’t hesitate to ask any questions that arise. I’m generally on the bridge.”

She nodded, and he walked toward the bow, while Daneli stood for a while watching the ocean. She remembered belatedly that she had some homework to do, so she went back to her quarters, grabbed the books and papers, and found a nice spot with a chair outside, and went to work.

Daneli was sitting, rather uncomfortably, in the carriage bringing them from Port Trageri to the House. She rarely had to ride in them, and always hated their closed-in feeling. They had had to leave all of their horses at Werni, because the ship couldn’t carry them. The horses were on their way in a cargo ship, something also arranged by Kala Werni.

The carriage slowed and stopped, and Daneli looked out to see the front entrance of the House, the carriage door opened, and they spilled out into the yard in front. Varied family members came to greet them, and there were hugs and kisses all around.

She saw Kori coming out of the house, and he greeted her, and said, “Mara is convening a meeting at this moment, and she wants you to be there. It’s in the upstairs conference room. I’ll take your bag to your rooms.”

“Thanks, Kori.” She handed him her bag, and then walked at a brisk pace inside the house, then upstairs and down the corridors to the conference room. She saw that Mara and the Queen were already seated. She found a seat, and just after her came Master Garliri and Rogera.

Mara said, “We’re also expecting Master Juri Trageri Hopqua, who Daneli has not yet met. She is head of the Clan Trageri Guard, and assistant to Master Woren Huro of the Trageri military, who has been informed of the situation.”

At that moment, a tall, rather imposing woman, with long hair tied behind her head walked into the room.

Mara said, “Welcome, Master Juri. I was just explaining to Sulea Daneli that you would be joining us.”

Master Juri bowed slightly. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Sulea Daneli, although I wish the circumstances were better.” She then bowed more deeply in the direction of the Queen.

“Queen Raliro, it is a pleasure to serve you.”

“Thank you, Master Juri, please be seated.”

The Queen said, “So, dear ones, we are faced with some possibility of violence from King Gasri and the North. How serious is this situation?”

Master Garliri spoke, “I don’t think it’s that serious, my Queen. The biggest target I can see is Castle Trevalian, but it would likely start some very serious internal struggles if the King were to take it over.”

Daneli said, “Maybe we should let him.”

There was a silence in the room, and Daneli kept going.

“The King has unilaterally nullified the agreement. This means that he sees Castle Trevalian as Warani territory, and it will always be a target, either for him, or other Warani nobles. My bet is that right now, there are five different dukes and barons conspiring to take over Castle Trevalian, first, to seize that land, and second, to become favored of the King. My mother is now living at the Warani court. The agreement is over. Let’s bring my father and brother home.”

Daneli could see that there were nods from many in the room, and the Queen was watching her with a considering look. She was the first to speak.

“Sulea Daneli, you are wise for one so young. I appreciate how your knowledge of the North serves to inform you, rather than inflame you. I agree wholeheartedly. Any comments?”

Master Garliri spoke next. “I agree as well. The hope for peace that we had when we sent our young Jorli to Castle Trevalian is gone now with the action of the King. There is no purpose in him being there, and in constant danger.”

Everyone assented. The Queen said, “Master Juri, please send a contingent of guard, as large as you deem necessary, to bring my sibling and his son home.”

“Yes, my Queen.” Juri stood and left the room.

The Queen said, “We will meet again to discuss issues of defense against the North. But I would wait until my sibling and his son are back to advise us. I also want to bring Master Woren Huro in as well. He’s stationed at some distance, and needs to be called here.”

As the meeting broke up, the Queen took Daneli aside.

“Daneli, I’m sorry to have interrupted your travels.”

“It is no problem, Raliro, I’m glad to be here. This seems as important as my studies at present.”

The Queen nodded. “Thank you for your wise counsel. And, of course, welcome home.”

Daneli smiled, and they shared a hug. Daneli left the room to go back to her rooms, and take a well-deserved rest.

CHAPTER 6: BECOMING QUEEN

Fourteen days later, Daneli was outside in the garden, pacing. She worried about her father and brother, and wondered what was taking so long. The trip from House Trageri to Castle Trevalian was about five days, at a medium pace, three at a fast pace. Daneli imagined that the guard would take only three days. Daneli figured it would take two or three days to get all arranged to leave, then another five days to get back. To her mind, that meant that they were three days overdue.

No one else, even Master Garliri was worried. She agreed with him that it was in King Gasri's best interest to just let her father, brother and staff leave, but it didn't stop her worrying at all.

She heard footsteps on the gravel path, and she turned to see Jeri walking toward her, a wide smile on her face.

"They're back?"

"Yes, love, they just arrived."

"Yippee!" Daneli laughed and ran to hug Jeri. "I was so worried."

"I know, I know. Come, let's welcome them home."

They walked back to the house, which was in some amount of chaos. The whole House seemed to be downstairs in the entryway, or outside in the front yard, helping to arrange things. She saw her father talking with Mara, and she ran up to him, and they hugged.

"I'm so glad to see you, father! What took you so long?"

He laughed. "You were worried."

"Of course, I didn't know what kind of nefariousness King Gasri might have had in mind."

"Well, you'll hear all about it, peach. There is a lot to tell."

Mara said, "We're going to give them a few hours to get settled, and have our welcome dinner, then we'll meet with the Queen right afterward."

"Well, I promised to help Kori cook the welcome dinner, so I'd better get to the kitchen. See you later, father."

Before she went back to the kitchen, she found Quero, and gave him a big hug.

"I know this wasn't what you expected, Quero."

“Duke Soldaro will be very disappointed. We had the betrothal ceremony just a couple of months ago. The wedding was scheduled for next summer.”

“Are you disappointed, brother?”

He smiled. “Honestly, not so much. I was sort of looking forward to one day being a duke. But I wasn’t really looking forward to getting married to one woman, even though she was nice.”

Daneli smiled. “Well, get settled, brother. I have to go help cook dinner.”

She went back to the kitchen, to see Kori beginning to dress some chickens, and two of her other siblings bustling around in the kitchen. He looked up.

“Ah, Daneli, just in time...”

The wonderful dinner was not helping her stay awake during this meeting with the Queen and her father. Mara, Rogera and Masters Garliri and Juri were also in attendance, as was Master Woren. She got up to go to the sideboard and pour herself more coffee.

The Queen said, “Jorli, we’re glad you are home. We are sorry that the peace had to end this way, but that is King Gasri’s responsibility.”

“Well, of course, to hear him tell it, it is our fault. The truth is, Raliro, I think we were naïve that this peace could last. They saw our willingness to enter into an agreement with them as a sign of weakness and an inability to win a war against them. And they have spent some time building their offensive capabilities, so they imagine they are in a good position to win now. But they have no idea what we are capable of.”

“So what is next?”

“Frankly, nothing. I think it is worth our while to beef up the defenses on our side of the river. We should continue to allow travel and commerce across the border, unless something happens to suggest we shut it down. The North depends more on goods from the South than vice versa, and I don’t want us to do anything to provoke them.”

Daneli asked, “Father, do you know who will take over Castle Trevalian?”

“Yes, I do. The King has ceded Castle Trevalian to Duke Karina’s son, Remiro.”

Daneli immediately thought of Kamila and said, “Remiro? Who will then be heir to Karina?”

“Karina has two more sons. The next eldest, who is already married, will become his heir.”

“How did you find this out?”

Her father laughed. “We sent a messenger to the Winter Palace, to let the King know that we were leaving, and the castle was his. A few days north of the castle, he ran smack into a large contingent of the King’s forces, and almost got killed before he explained his message. They were on their way to take the castle. Needless to say, they waited until we left.”

The room was silent. The fact that they had narrowly averted disaster hung over them.

Master Woren spoke next. “Well, given that the King now has a sizable contingent at Castle Trevalian, I think we should recreate the river defense barrier to the west.”

Master Juri said, “I would like to re-activate our spy network—we haven’t felt the need of them since the end of the last war, but given that there are now no Trageri living in Warani, we need to get information somehow.”

Daneli saw many nods. “Master Juri?”

“Yes, Sulea.”

“How does this spy network work? Are there people who are loyal to Trageri in the Warani?”

She laughed. “No Sulea Daneli. There are people loyal to silver in Warani. We have traditionally paid our spies handsomely. Usually, they are younger sons of minor nobles. It’s amazing how much intelligence you can get from those boys. And they never know it is us. We pose as agents from other duchies and baronies, so they think it is internal intrigue. I doubt that they would accept silver if they knew it came from Trageri.”

The Queen said, “Make it so, Masters Juri and Woren. Let me know if there are resources you need to bring to bear. We will make sure that these issues are highlighted in the agenda of the Sala Red, and there may be adjustments that the kalas wish to make later.” She turned to Daneli’s father.

“Jorli, what of the people you brought with you? What are their needs?”

“I brought only those in my employ from Trageri, Raliro, and they are all going to go back to their respective Houses and families. But Quero...”

“Quero?”

“Quero is twenty-three, and was betrothed to the daughter of a Northern duke. He is not especially upset, but it may be difficult to find him a House, given how old he is, and the fact that he had renounced his Trageri citizenship. I’m not sure that staying here in the House unmarried will be the right thing for him.”

Mara said, “Well, he is the offspring of House Trageri, as well as a fine young man. There are likely Trageri clan families that would be overjoyed to have him. That is not commonly done, but it is not unheard of. I will make some quiet inquiries.”

“Father, how is mother?”

“I have no idea, Daneli. Once she left the Castle, I heard nothing from her. I would have seen her at court soon, but now, I don’t expect we’ll have a way to know how she is.”

The meeting broke up, and Daneli walked back to her rooms, thinking about Kamila, who was now bound to become Duchess Trevalian. She liked the idea that at least Trevalian would be a much more pleasant climate, and that Kamila would be, in a geographic sense at least, closer to Trageri. But Daneli knew that the pressure to bear a son would be even more intense than before.

It had been an exhausting two and a half months since she’d had her studies interrupted. She had hurried home from Werni by sailboat, had meetings and preparations to do, traveled with the House Trageri contingent to Hasni, and had been in meeting after meeting of the Sala Hoira. She then had to travel back to Trageri for the traditional beginning of the Sala Trageri. Daneli had barely had time to get her bearings at each point in time.

At this moment, Daneli stood about thirty feet from the Queen, her mind on anything but what was happening now. It was the opening ceremony of the Sala Trageri, and they were standing on the dais in front of the eldests and others from families of clan Trageri.

Her mind was wandering, and she tried to pay attention, because soon she would have words to say. She noticed a man that somehow didn’t seem like he fit. He was standing at the end of a row, wearing the traditional colorful garb of one family or another—she didn’t know which. But it didn’t look like he was comfortable in those clothes, and he kept looking around. She decided she was using him as an excuse to not focus on the ceremony, so she dragged her mind back.

It was the Queen’s turn to get up, and give the standard welcome. Daneli watched her rise from her chair, and move forward. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of movement, and she watched the man she had seen earlier step into the aisle and quickly walk forward toward the Queen. Daneli couldn’t figure out why he was doing that. All of a sudden, something clicked inside her, and she moved as quickly as she could to intercept him. She realized that she was too far away as he took out a long dagger, and plunged it into the Queen’s

chest, and left it there. She arrived in time to grab and tackle him, and they both fell to the floor, as chaos reigned.

He struggled and hit her several times in the head, but she managed to get in a few punches herself, and eventually many others helped pin him to the ground. She got up to go to the Queen, who was surrounded by people. Daneli was given space to get closer to her. The Queen's head was now resting in Mara's hands, and Rogera was holding her body, blood was on his shirt, and he was sobbing uncontrollably. Daneli could see that she was dead, killed by the assassin's blade.

Daneli was overwhelmed by grief, and confused about what to do. She looked for Master Garliri, who was at the moment with the assassin. Mara and Rogera were with the Queen. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Sulea, come with me, please." It was Master Poera, and several people she recognized as part of the House guard. She followed them in a daze, and they walked back to the main part of House Trageri. They went into the small lounge in the front of the house.

Daneli saw Master Juri. She said, "We must protect you, and House Trageri, as quickly as possible. We will be beefing up security here. For a while everyone who travels on the roads will have to show evidence of House or family affiliation. There will be guards surrounding the house until we get an idea of what might be going on, and which House or family is responsible."

Master Poera then spoke. "Daneli, we must move the ascension process forward. Queen Raliro is the first queen to be assassinated, but she isn't the first to die before the end of a Tala Shari. The Sala Hoira will be called, and the kalas assembled will judge your readiness to rule. Should they decide that you are ready, you will be made queen at the Sala Red."

Daneli nodded again, and felt completely numb. This was not the way it was supposed to be, not at all. She sunk into the couch, and just let the sounds around her dim into the background. She was bereft of any impulse to do anything. She felt a familiar arm around her shoulder, and a familiar voice in her ear. Jeri.

"Love, let's get you to your rooms, OK? You are injured, and in shock."

She looked at Jeri, who had put a washcloth on her head, and when she took it away for a moment, Daneli could see the blood on it. When did that happen? She was totally confused. She

allowed herself to be helped up by Jeri and Sile, who appeared out of nowhere. They guided her up to her rooms, and she felt Jeri undress her, and put her into bed.

The next morning, she woke up to see Jeri fully dressed in bed next to her. The whole events of the last evening came back to her in a rush. The Queen assassinated... She sat bolt upright in bed, and felt a little dizzy, and felt the wounds on her head throb.

She remembered that last night the guard thought that another House or family did this. She couldn't understand why they thought that. The North had been using assassination to solve problems for hundreds of years, and the South had no such tradition. If it were a Northern assassination—it might be a preface to a military attack, not just an end to itself. She got up, and started to dress quickly.

Jeri woke up, and sat up in bed. “Love, what’s going on?”

“Jeri, they have it all wrong. They think the assassination was from some other family or House in Trageri—it wasn't. It was directly from King Gasri. I know it. I need to talk to the guard.”

“OK, I'll come with you.” They went downstairs, and saw a group of guards in the entryway.

Daneli asked, “Do you know where Master Juri is? I need to speak with her immediately.”

“Certainly Sulea, I'll go get her.” The guard scurried off, and returned in a few minutes with Master Juri.

“Sulea, how can I be of service.”

“Master Juri, what made you think this was an assassination from another House?”

“Two things: I talked with Kala Seralo a while ago, who expressed to me her concern about some Houses she felt might be thinking about trying to take over House Trageri. Second, we have now learned that the man is from House Kitta.”

“House Kitta? Where is that?”

“It is a very minor house in the northern forest.”

“How far from the border?”

“It's on the border, Sulea. But...”

“This is not what it appears Master Juri.”

“What are you saying?”

“The Warani have a long history of assassination—sometimes, it is an end to itself, but most often, it is a means to an end. Two hundred and ten years ago, the King of Warani assassinated Duke Szeri, who had been a barrier for the King to invade Trageri. Once the Duke and his son were assassinated, they took Szeri with a tiny guard contingent, and that was used as a major staging ground for the war on Trageri.”

“You think the North did this?”

“I am sure the North did this, Master Juri.”

She could tell Master Juri didn't really believe her, and that was frustrating. There was nothing she could do. She couldn't order the guard, she didn't have the authority.

“I'm not so sure, Sulea, but I will take your comments under advisement.”

Daneli nodded. “Thank you, Master Juri.”

Master Juri left, and Jeri said, “Hey, let's get you some breakfast, huh?”

“I'm not really hungry.”

“I don't actually care. You're going to eat something.”

Daneli gave in, and it turned out she was famished. Eating helped her gain her perspective, and by the time she was finished with breakfast, she felt almost human. She realized how much there was to do. The Queen had to be buried, the Sala Hoira convened, preparations made for the Sala Red... Daneli felt overwhelmed, and then remembered she was far from alone. She had all of Trageri to help her through this.

The Queen's body was lying on the marble slab. She was dressed in a simple white garment made of cotton. The Queen's spouses were encircled around the body, holding hands, and chanting what was called the chant of life. It was written collectively by the spouses, as a celebration of Raliro's life, and an introduction of her to the universe.

The funeral rites of a queen and an ordinary person were pretty much the same. Their body was laid for a time on a marble slab, and loved ones circle around to chant. Others stand in concentric circles around the center circle. At the end, the body is taken to a place in the forest, or in a field, and buried there, deep in the ground.

It was a somber day. The Queen had been assassinated two days earlier, and things at House Trageri had been in utter chaos. The Sala Trageri was canceled, and preparations were being

made to travel to Hasni for the Sala Hoira. So far, there didn't seem to be any more threats, and no Houses seemed to be making noises about taking over. Daneli guessed that a proposal of that sort could be brought to the Sala Red, but she doubted it would get very far.

The funeral broke up, and people walked slowly back to the House, where a meal was waiting for them. The house was full of guests—the Queen was well-loved, and many people came as quickly as they could. There would also be a memorial at the Sala Red, to remember the Queen.

She looked up to see Master Garliri walking over to her.

“May we speak, Sulea?”

“Of course, Master Garliri. What would you like to discuss?”

“In private, Sulea.”

She nodded, and they went upstairs to her rooms. They sat in chairs in her small parlor.

“Sulea, I know that you've tried to convince Master Juri that this was a Northern assassination.”

“I have. Do you agree?”

“I do. Master Juri seems unreasonably hard to convince, and I'm not sure I know why.”

“Well, she did say the assassin came from House Kitta.”

“He was dressed in clothes from House Kitta. He was not from House Kitta.”

“How do you know? I thought he committed suicide.”

“He did. By a Northern method—a tooth filled with cyanide. His clothes didn't really fit him—they were clearly made for someone else. And further, the assassin didn't realize that someone from House Kitta wouldn't be welcome at the Sala Trageri.”

“Did you tell Master Juri this?”

“I did. It didn't matter.”

“What can we do?”

“Right now, nothing. When you are queen, we can address this fully. That is what I really wanted to talk with you about. There are rumblings that some other Houses will challenge House Trageri's royal status because of the Queen's assassination at this particular time—before you were named Sula.”

“That was one of the things Master Juri cited as a possible reason for a Southern assassination.”

“No, I think this is just opportunism. In any event, you must put away any shred of doubt in yourself, Daneli. At the Sala Hoira, you must act as if you are already queen.”

“But Garliri...”

“Think about when you were at the Warani court—and how hard it was to exert your authority as Sulea. This will be harder. Very few have been named queen who were younger than twenty-five, and many would like any excuse not to name you as queen, since they see you as a Northerner.”

She nodded.

“And remember, Sulea, I will always be at your side to help you.”

“Thank you, Master Garliri.”

He left, and she sat for a while, thinking about the future, until her stomach rumbled. It was time to get something to eat.

The next day, Daneli was sitting in a conference room with Mara and Rogera to discuss the preparations for her examination at the Sala Hoira. Mara had pushed Daneli to arrange for time to spend with spouse candidates at the Sala Red.

“Daneli, tradition holds that at the queen’s coronation, she is accompanied by her spouses. I know that this is going to be different, but you need to organize the House very soon.”

“I agree. What are we to do with the five choices I’ve already made?”

“I have made sure that they will all be present at the Sala Red.”

Daneli nodded. “Thank you, Mara.”

“So let’s talk about the examinations, shall we? The first part is hearing testimonials from your teachers about your fitness to rule. I have talked with all of them, and they are unhesitating in their support for you.”

Daneli nodded, remembering her conversation with Master Garliri.

“The second is testimonials from other House members about your fitness as Kala of Trageri, and Queen of Trageri. Several of my spouses will speak, as will I.”

“Third, they have assembled people from around Trageri who have met you, and have a comment about your ability to rule. This is challenging. We have no idea who the kalas will

choose—we have no say in that. Since this is you, I'm not especially worried, but there could be a wild card or two.

“Fourth is their examination of you. You will stand in front of them for as long as they want you to, and ask you questions. It could be anything. There isn't much point in preparing for it—they are likely to be subjective questions.”

Daneli nodded. One thing she had done during last year's Sala Red was take copious notes on the things varied kalas said, so she got an idea of what was important to which House. She'd expanded on those notes, and she intended to study them in depth before the examination.

“I think I'll be prepared, Mara.”

Mara smiled, and Daneli realized that she hadn't seen Mara's smile in days. She'd missed it.

“I am sure that you are ready for this, Daneli. I just wish it hadn't happened this way.”

“As do I, Mara.”

They left the conference room, and Daneli went back to her rooms to finish packing. As she was putting some shirts in her bag, there was a quiet knock on her door.

“Come in.” She walked into the parlor. The door opened, and Sile poked his head in.

“Daneli, can I talk with you?”

“Of course, Sile. What's going on?”

“Hila... she's demanding to be able to travel North to see her mother. She is refusing to listen to me or father about the current situation.”

“Do you think I can help?”

“Yes, I do. She listens to you more than anyone.”

“OK, I'll try. Let's go.”

They walked together to Hila's room, which was the room Daneli used to stay in when she visited. She knocked.

“Hila, it's Daneli.”

She heard a quiet, “Come in.”

She opened the door, and saw Hila sitting in one of her chairs, her usual prim and proper self. Daneli closed the door behind her, and sat in the chair next to her.

“Hila, how are you?”

Hila started to cry. “I hate it here! I want to see mother!”

“You cannot. If you try, you would be killed, Hila.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, I do.”

“You do?” Hila looked at Daneli, who swore she looked surprised.

“Of course I do, Hila. I love you. We all do.”

“But I never see you.”

“Hila, I’m sorry. I know it’s been hard. I’ve been away so much, and then all of this happened, and there is so much to do. I promise I’ll try to do better. Do you want to come to the Sala Hoira with me?”

“Sala Hoira?”

“That’s the examination to figure out whether I’m fit to be queen. I’d like it if you were there. Father and Sile are coming.” She actually hadn’t asked Sile, but she was sure he would come.

“Oh, alright, I’ll come with you. Will I ever be able to see mother again?”

“I don’t know, Hila, I wish I did. So start packing! We’re leaving tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be ready.” Daneli saw a look of determination on Hila’s face. Daneli felt better. She left the room, and saw Sile waiting outside. She waved for him to follow her back to her room.

“Willing to come to the Sala Hoira?”

“Sure! Why?”

“I told Hila you were going. It seemed a good idea at the time.”

Sile laughed. “I’ll get myself ready.”

“I’ll go tell Rogera to expect two more in the party.”

She walked down to Rogera’s room where the door was wide open. He was packing.

“Rogera?”

He looked up. “Yes, Daneli?”

“My sister and brother are going to accompany us to Hasni tomorrow.”

He smiled. “That’s a great idea, Daneli. I’ll make sure adjustments are made.”

“Thanks, Rogera.”

She went back to her rooms to finish packing, a feeling of accomplishment rising inside her.

Daneli sat with Jeri, Mara and Master Garliri in a small ante-room to the large hall where the council, fifty kalas of major Houses elected every fifth Sala Red, were about to examine her. It was a three day affair. On the first day were testimonials by her teachers, her family, and people she had met about her fitness to rule. Starting tomorrow, the kalas would examine her, asking her questions. That might continue until the third day. In the afternoon of the third day, they would vote. She needed a vote of 30 of the council to be chosen queen.

If she didn't get that majority, several kalas would become candidates for queen, and there would be a process of electing the next queen, and the honor of being a royal house would leave House Trageri. Daneli would become kala of Trageri in any case. Since House Trageri had been the royal house for all of the history of Trageri, it would be a staggering blow to the House to lose that honor, and a huge change to the politics of the country.

The door opened, and someone beckoned her into the room. Daneli walked in, and looked around. In front of her were rows of seats, where the kalas of the council were now mostly seated, with a few on their way to their seats. In the front row sat the four kalas who made up the executive committee, the committee on which the queen generally sat.

Daneli was shown to a table facing the kalas that had only one seat. She sat down, facing them. There was a small area with a chair to one side—she expected that was where the witnesses would sit to speak.

Kala Solano, who was the chair of the committee, rang the large bell sitting in front of her on the table. The room became silent.

“We are called here to make a momentous decision because of the tragic loss of Queen Raliro Trageri. Welcome Sulea Tala Daneli Trageri, to the Sala Hoira.”

Daneli said, “Thank you, Kala Solano. I regret the occasion of this examination, and its necessity. Please proceed.”

The Kala seemed a bit surprised by either the brevity of what Daneli said, or what she said—Daneli couldn't tell.

“I introduce Garliri Serel Trageri, who joined house Trageri twenty-seven years ago as Master of Arms.”

Daneli saw Master Garliri walk into the room, and sit in the witness chair.

“Master Garliri, please describe your knowledge of Daneli Trageri.”

“I have known Daneli since she was born. I was dispatched to Castle Trevalian when the agreement between Trageri and Warani was made. I assisted the then Duke Jorli Trageri Trevalian, and then was assigned to Daneli as her arms teacher when she turned eight. I have been her teacher and adviser ever since.”

“And how would you judge her fitness to rule?”

“She is one of the most gifted leaders I have had the privilege to work with.”

“Really? Even though you’ve worked with Queen Raliro, and Duke Trevalian?”

“Even so. She is young, but she has all of the qualities that will make her a very good ruler.”

There were other questions, asked by various kalas. Daneli had a notebook, and she was taking notes on which kalas asked which questions. She thought it might come in handy later.

The rest of her teachers said much the same as Master Garliri. She was struck by one particular exchange between Master Poera and Kala Serel.

Kala Serel asked, “Master Poera, you have been responsible for Daneli’s training regarding Southern Tradition, yes?”

“Yes, I said that already.”

“Given that she was raised in the North, can you state unequivocally that she knows as much as any Sulea would about our traditions, culture and religion?”

“Of course I can’t. How could she? She visited House Trageri about once a year for a few weeks at a time between the time she was six and nineteen. She has been in Trageri now for almost two years, and has been a very diligent student, but she could not possibly know as much as someone raised here.”

“And you still think she is fit to rule? I find that hard to believe.”

Master Poera laughed, surprising everyone in the room.

“Kala Serel, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“No, go ahead.”

“Do you know why Northerners will never invade during Anaga?”

The Kala was silent for a moment. “Of course I don’t.”

“Daneli, why won’t Northerners ever invade during Anaga?”

Daneli said, “It is their holy month of Cresto—the month the God King brought them here on a flaming chariot. They are busy with festivals and such. To invade during Cresto would be sacrilegious.”

Daneli noticed that you could have heard a pin drop in the room. Poera spoke again.

“You see, Daneli could learn much about our traditions and culture whenever she needs to from those around her. We, on the other hand, depend on her knowledge to keep safe from the dangers of the North. We no longer have an agreement of peace with Warani, so we cannot assume that we will be safe. We need Daneli’s leadership right now, Kala Serel.”

Daneli figured that she got at least five votes from what Master Poera had said. Kala Serel looked embarrassed. Daneli had already figured out that Kala Serel had it in for her, and the fact that she was one of the executive committee meant that she had extra chances to sabotage the examination. But so far, she hadn’t had any luck.

There was a break, and then several of her parents spoke on her behalf. There was another break, and then an assortment of people, most of whom she barely knew, were brought in to speak. It was clear that they had stacked the group with people who were doubting her fitness. Master Poera had warned her, and she was trying her best to not take any of it personally, or even especially seriously.

They broke for the day, and Daneli took dinner in her room, alone. She needed time to think before tomorrow’s examination. She had taken copious notes, and she noticed that from the questions asked, most of the kalas were pretty clear about their preference. It was clear that all but one kala of the executive committee were against her ascension. The one that wasn’t was very much on the fence. She had a lot of people to convince.

The next day, she was sitting in the chair again, in front of the fifty kalas.

Kala Solano rang her bell, and said, “Are you ready, Sulea Daneli Trageri?”

“I am ready.” She steeled herself for the barrage.

At first, the questions were suspiciously easy. Questions like “What is the characteristic of a major House? How could a minor House become a major House?” etc. Then they started in on questions of Sabadora, and she figured they didn’t realize she’d been a follower of Sabadora her whole life. Then, they took off the gloves.

Kala Serel asked, “Sulea Daneli, do you know the story of Queen Kalia?”

“No, Kala Serel, I don’t.”

“You don’t?”

“I’m sorry.”

“The story of Queen Kalia is considered one of the most important lessons in Trageri history.”

“Kala Serel, as you might remember, my studies were interrupted, and I have not yet been able to get back to them.”

“I see. And when do you expect to return to them?” Daneli had walked right into that one. She internally kicked herself, and regained her balance.

“Kala Serel, we both know I won’t get back to my studies. And if that’s the point you are trying to make, that I am unfit because I have not completed my studies, you have made that point. I don’t think it’s a valid point, however.”

“And why is that?”

“Two reasons. One, I know how to get information I need, when I need it. The hallmark of leadership is not how much one knows, but knowing how much one doesn’t know, and knowing how to learn what you need. Second, the Tala Shari process has only been in place for a hundred years. There were many queens before me that did not even have as much training as I have now.”

There was a lot of murmurs and grumbling, and Daneli thought she’d scored some points. The questioning went on, going from one topic to the next. Then, a kala who had not spoken at all before, asked a question.

“Sulea Daneli, those in Warani insist on denying our origins. What do you have to say about that?”

“That they are idiots?”

A laugh went around the room.

She kept going. “Sulea, you and I know that it is not really that they are idiots, but that they are forcibly ignorant. But I still am not utterly convinced, from what you’ve said already, that you haven’t suffered from that ignorance, and fully understand the ramifications of our origin.”

“Kala, yes, you are right, it is forced ignorance. Can I tell you a story that might help?”

“Of course, Sulea.”

“I know why people of the North don’t fish. I know that sounds, well, like a strange little thing, but it explains a lot about the attitude and understanding about where we come from.

“I learned during a sea voyage that most of the fish that our forbears brought with them could not survive in the ocean—a stark contrast to what happened on land, where virtually all plants and animals thrived. I’m not a scientist, so I can’t tell you why this is. I was told that a few species of fish did adapt and survive, and have greatly multiplied. I learned that in order to gather up those fish, fishermen use unusual bait—offal from land animals, which the fish really love, probably because they have Earth compounds that they have a hard time getting elsewhere.

I always wondered why Northerners didn’t fish. I realized that in order for them to fish, they would have to, in a sense, admit to the scientific reality of their origins each day, as they gathered up cattle or sheep offal to bait the fish.”

The room was very quiet again. Something in the room changed, she could sense it, but she couldn’t identify it. Everyone had their shields up, so she wasn’t getting any thoughts or feelings. There were more questions, and most of them were relatively easy to answer. And the ones that weren’t she had some good ways of explaining how she would find out how to answer them.

Finally, it was time to break for the day. She didn’t know whether there would be more questions tomorrow or not. She went in search of Jeri because she wanted company. Master Garliri told her that Jeri was waiting for her in her rooms. Daneli smiled. Jeri sometimes knew her better than she knew herself.

The next day she learned that the kalas were deliberating, and she would be called when a decision was made. She hung out with Jeri in the many gardens of Hasni, and time seemed to be slowing to a crawl. Finally almost as the sun was setting, she was called into the room, along with all of the members of her House that were present, and a number of guests.

The table was no longer in the room, and she was told to stand, pretty much where the table had been. The kalas of the executive committee mostly looked grim, but that was not at all universal among the kalas. Daneli didn’t know what it meant. Kala Solano rang the bell.

“Sulea Daneli Trageri, we have examined you. 31 kalas have voted for your ascension to queen. 19 kalas voted against. You will become queen at the Sala Red, in one week’s time.” Daneli let out the breath she realized she’d been holding for a long time.

There was applause, and her family was all of a sudden around her, congratulating her. She was in a daze, and she wasn't exactly sure if she was happy or not.

Later, she was sitting with Master Garliri, Mara, Rogera and Jeri in one of the small lounges of their suite.

Mara said, "Thirty-one. That was close."

Garliri said, "I'm not surprised. Given the tenor of the questions to me, and what I'd heard from others, it is a testament to Daneli that she passed."

Daneli said, "Well, the entire executive committee had it in for me, I'm sure."

Rogera said, "I would believe that. I mean, calling the eldest of a family that you visited on your way somewhere to explain why you weren't fit to be queen?"

Daneli said, "Anyway, I'm glad it's over, and I'm happy for House Trageri that I passed."

Jeri said quietly, "And for yourself?"

She turned to look at Jeri, and could feel the tears flowing, tears she hadn't felt able to shed before now. "I wanted Raliro to guide me. I wanted time to learn. I don't really feel all that ready to be queen, yet."

Jeri held her, and she allowed herself to let go into the pain and grief of all of it.

CHAPTER 7: LOVE AND MARRIAGE

They had been back from the Sala Red for three months, and Daneli was still completely overwhelmed. Being queen was both easier and harder than she had expected. She had a lot of help, and there was a lot she didn't have to do anymore, like help cook and clean. She hardly minded that. But she was bombarded with requests of all sorts from everyone, and she was having a hard time prioritizing.

She had spent hours and hours with Suha Fero, who had been kindly advising her on all the varied aspects of being a queen. She also had to spend time with the final group of candidate spouses: there were five or six spots left to fill. And, of course, she needed to spend time with her selected spouses, and get to know each of them better.

She was sitting alone in her parlor. She had refused to take the queen's official quarters, it felt disrespectful to her somehow. Mara and some of her parents were adamant that she was being foolish, but she couldn't get herself to do it. She knew that she would eventually relent, but it wouldn't be for a while.

She heard a quiet knock at the door.

"Come in."

The door opened, and Daneli was surprised to see Masters Juri and Garliri — she worried something was happening.

"Please sit down. What's going on?"

Garliri said, "Nothing to be worried about, my Queen." Daneli still couldn't quite get used to being called that, especially from Garliri.

Garliri continued, "Last night, Master Juri got a message sent from family Regli."

"Family Regli—they are right on the border—their house is on the road from the western bridge."

"Yes. They have guests, guests that they don't know what to do with, but you do."

"Excuse me?"

"Duchess Kamila and her two daughters, one a newborn."

Daneli was stunned. "What? How?"

Juri said, “From the messenger’s report, she was wounded very badly. She was clearly helped to the border by someone from Castle Trevalian. She is still bedridden.”

Daneli was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “Master Juri, thank you, and please thank the messenger. Can you leave Master Garliri and I alone?”

She inclined her head. “Of course, my Queen.” She left the room, closing the door.

“Ah, Garliri, my youthful love affair is coming back to bite me.”

He laughed. “It was only three years ago, my Queen.”

“Yes, but what a three years that has been, eh?”

He nodded.

“I was serious in my offer, Garliri. She is welcome here, and will be my spouse. I just have to figure out what all this means. Will King Gasri use this as an excuse to invade?”

“I think it rather unlikely, especially since she has had only daughters. You know what happens...”

“Yes, sadly I do. Master Garliri, will you accompany me to family Regli? I want to bring Liona, as well.”

He replied, “Of course. I would like to talk with Master Juri, and have her assign a guard detail.”

“Yes, that’s fine. I’d like to leave first thing tomorrow.”

He nodded, and left the room. She realized belatedly that she had never told Mara about Kamila. All of her chosen spouses knew.

She got up, and went to find Mara. She ran into Rogera in the hallway.

“Rogera, do you know where Mara is?”

“I’ll get her, Daneli.”

“Thanks, I’ll be back in my rooms.”

She walked back to her rooms, and started to take out her travel bag, and figure out which clothes to bring. There was really no need to bring anything formal—she’d just bring standard traveling attire. As she was getting her clothes out, she heard a knock, and heard Mara’s voice.

“Daneli, I talked to Master Garliri...”

Daneli went into the parlor, where Mara was standing.

“Please sit, Mara.”

“Why are you going to family Regli?”

“There is a story I need to tell you.”

Daneli told Mara the story of Princess Kamila, leaving out nothing.

“Oh, Daneli, this is more complicated than you understand.”

“I know it makes our relationship with Warani more difficult.”

“I’m not talking about that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Kamila as your spouse.”

“I have told all of my chosen spouses about Kamila. None of them, not even Jeri, was concerned.”

“It’s that she already has two children.”

“So?”

“When you are officially married to her, her eldest daughter will become Sulea.”

Daneli’s mouth opened, and then closed again.

“Oh. That’s a problem, isn’t it?”

“Yes, a big problem. It was bad enough that you were named Sulea as a half-Northern daughter, and your ascension to the throne was less than smooth. A full Warani daughter, even with The Gift, will not be accepted by the kalas to be Sulea, I can guarantee you that. It would likely sway enough kalas to decide that another House become royal after your reign, given what many see as the undue influence of the North on our House.”

“What if we waited until another daughter is born of the House before I officially marry her?”

Mara looked at Daneli with a stunned look on her face.

“That’s brilliant, Daneli. It is not common that spouses are added later, but it is not unheard of. That would work, although frankly, I’d like you to wait until two are born, the Eldest and an alternate.”

“I can accept that. She will be a guest of our House until then.”

“Daneli, do you really still love her?”

“I do. She is truly an amazing woman. You’ll see when you meet her.”

“I hope she hasn’t been too traumatized by her situation.”

“She is a strong one, Mara. And she escaped.”

As they galloped down the northern road toward Regli, Daneli looked around her. Master Juri had given them a contingent of twenty guards, most of whom were from families along the border. Daneli thought it was overkill, but she bowed to the wisdom of her military advisers.

She had spent last night with Liona, and they stayed up late talking about the implications of Kamila's presence in their family. It seemed that the idea of having Kamila as a spouse hadn't raised any issues before, but now that it was a reality, there were some concerns from her chosen spouses.

The official marriage ceremony hadn't even been planned yet, because Daneli still hadn't had time to spend with all of the remaining ten candidates. And now that she was riding off to Regli for a few days, that delayed the calendar further. When she left, she could tell that Mara was rather annoyed.

Since she would not marry Kamila for at least a year or two, everyone would have time to get to know her. And she was confident that they would come to love her, and be happy that she was a part of the family. She didn't quite know how she would explain it all to Kamila—but she knew Kamila would eventually come to understand it.

Regli was a long day's travel away, and it was fun for Daneli to let Galinsa gallop as fast as she wanted to. It had been too long since she'd ridden Galinsa, and far too long since they had really run together.

Finally, they reached the dwelling of Family Regli, right along the road. She could see the road heading toward the river. They all dismounted.

"My Queen! It is such an honor to have you visit such a humble family as Regli!"

She saw a tall, lithe woman walking toward them. She assumed it was the Eldest of Regli.

"Eldest Regli, thank you so much for your hospitality, and the hospitality you have given to your guest."

"I have to admit I don't quite understand why you came, my Queen."

"It is a personal matter, Eldest. Can I please be taken to her?"

"Indeed. Follow me. I'll get my spouses to show your party their quarters."

"Thank you, Eldest."

As Daneli followed the Eldest, she took in the details of Family Regli's dwelling. Much of it looked to be relatively new—they had added on a lot to the earlier central part of the dwelling. Daneli imagined that as the family closest to the bridge, they were involved in a lot of cross-border trade.

They climbed some stairs, and the Eldest opened a door. A pre-teen girl was playing with a small child. A baby was in a cradle nearby.

"This is our youngest offspring, Hiki. Hiki, this is Queen Daneli Trageri."

The girl jumped up and bowed. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Queen Daneli."

Daneli smiled. "I'm glad to meet you Hiki."

The Eldest pointed and said, "That is her older daughter. I don't know her name."

Daneli hesitated for a moment. "Her name is Daneli." In the one letter that Kamila had sent Daneli, she told Daneli that she'd named her eldest daughter after her.

The Eldest looked at Daneli strangely. "I see."

"It's a long story, Eldest. Where is Kamila?"

The Eldest pointed to a door on the other side of the room. "She's in there, my Queen. My spouse is with her. You can knock."

Daneli walked to the door, and knocked quietly. The door opened, and a man answered. The Eldest behind her said quietly, "Rewori, this is Queen Daneli, here to see our guest."

He bowed, and exited the room. Daneli walked in.

She saw Kamila, who seemed to be sleeping. Her face was bruised and swollen, and she had bandages on her forehead. Her left arm was splinted, and outside of the blankets. She had clearly been beaten very badly, perhaps almost fatally.

Daneli pulled a chair close to the bed, and sat in it. She looked at Kamila, who seemed right now to only be a shadow of the self that Daneli remembered.

Daneli took Kamila's right hand in hers, kissed it, and said softly, "Kamila, it's Daneli. I'm here to take you home."

Kamila stirred, and her eyes opened. At first Daneli wasn't sure that Kamila recognized her, but then a broad smile came across her swollen face.

"Daneli..."

“I’m here. Everything is going to be fine. We’ll get you back to House Trageri, where you can heal, and your daughters will be taken care of.”

She smiled again, and Daneli saw a tear fall from her eye. Daneli bent down, and gently kissed the side of her head where the tear was.

Daneli heard a quiet, “Thank you,” from Kamila’s lips. Kamila started to say something, but then there was a knock at the door, and Daneli got up to open it. The Eldest motioned her to leave the room, and she closed the door.

“My Queen, this is Master Devlin, a physician. He’s been looking in on Kamila, and he needs to examine her again.”

“Of course, go ahead, Master Devlin.” She stepped out of his way.

“Queen Daneli, it is nice to meet you. I don’t think I ever expected to.” He smiled broadly, and put out his hand. She shook it.

“Thank you for taking care of my friend.”

“Of course. I’ll be done soon.” Master Devlin walked into the room with Kamila, and closed the door. Daneli walked to the cradle, and saw the baby sleeping.

Daneli whispered, “Eldest, I’m not a baby expert, yet.” She smiled. “How old do you think she is?”

“My Queen, she can’t be more than a week old. I expect that Kamila was beaten only a day or two after the birth. The doctor has said that she hasn’t even yet recovered from the birth.”

“How did she get all the way here?”

“They arrived in a wagon full of trade goods, driven by a woman who did not say her name, and said she had to hurry to sell her trade goods and get back to Castle Trevalian. We bought the goods, and also sold her some Southern goods to save the woman some time, and give her cover. She was worried that she might be suspected of helping Kamila escape.”

“Do you wish to be reimbursed, Eldest?”

“No, not at all, we’ll made a decent profit.” The Eldest smiled.

“Very well then, thank you, again for all that you’ve done.”

Daneli thought that Kamila must have had other help from the Castle, and she hoped that no one would suffer because of this.

The doctor left the room and came toward them.

“My Queen, Eldest, Kamila is getting better. I would say that if you have a good solid carriage with a smooth ride, she should be ready to travel the day after tomorrow. I’ll want to check in on her again at least once before you leave. I will also give you my notes to give to your physician at House Trageri.”

Daneli said, “Thank you Master Devlin.”

He nodded and left. Daneli went back into the room with Kamila, who was sitting up.

Daneli said, “Ah, you can sit up!”

Kamila’s voice was quiet.

“Yes, but I need help.”

“I’m here, Kamila, and I can take care of you. We should be able to leave in a couple of days.”

“I’m so glad to see you. I knew you’d come.”

“How could I not?”

“So how is it being queen?”

“You know?”

“There was an agreement between my husband and the King. The King gave him Castle Trevalian. In return, my husband was to arrange the assassination of the Queen. I tried to leave when I found out about that, but I couldn’t arrange it. When I got here, and I asked for Daneli Trageri, they talked about Queen Daneli, so I realized that you inherited the throne.” Kamila smiled.

Daneli said, “I wish it was that easy. There was a huge examination and all. I barely passed.”

“Somehow, I doubt most people characterize it that way.”

“Anyway, how did you finally arrange to escape?”

“I knew that if I bore another daughter, I would be in deep trouble. Remiro was worse than anything I could have imagined. After I bore Daneli, he beat me, as if I was in control of the sex of my offspring. So I knew that I needed a contingency plan. One of our servants, Hissa, and I were quite close, and she had always encouraged me to escape. She had recently befriended a servant named Jema.”

“I always like Jema. We used to conspire against my mother together.”

“Jema hated the fact that Remiro was now Duke Trevalian. She liked your family. She and Hissa figured it all out. They had a trader friend, who would take me in her wagon. If it weren’t for them, I fear I’d be dead now, Daneli. I owe them everything. I hope nothing bad comes to them because of this.”

“Kamila, let me know if you think of anything we can do for them.”

Kamila nodded, then was silent.

“Do you need anything?”

“I think I need to rest more.”

“Do you want me to help you lie down?”

“Yes, thank you, Daneli.”

Daneli helped Kamila lie down, and arranged her pillows and blanket. It was the closest Daneli had been to Kamila in a very long time, and she was a little surprised at how much she was feeling at the moment. She stroked Kamila’s hair.

“You rest. I’ll be back soon.”

Kamila nodded, and closed her eyes.

Daneli stayed for a little bit, then got up and left the room.

Rewori and Hiki and a young man were in the adjoining room. Hiki was giving the infant a bottle of milk. The older daughter was in a crib, sleeping.

Rewori said, “My Queen, I would like you to meet another of our offspring, Kemla.”

Kemla looked to be about eighteen. He bowed. “It is nice to meet you, Queen Daneli.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Kemla.”

“Kemla has also been helping take care of the guests.”

“I want to thank you all for your generous hospitality.”

“You are welcome, my Queen. I understand dinner is ready. Hiki and I will stay here, while you eat with your party.”

“Thank you Rewori. She’s sleeping now. I’ll be back later.”

Kemla said, “My Queen, follow me.”

They went down to the large dining room, where their family, and Daneli’s party were beginning to sit down to eat. Daneli was showed her chair on the dais with the older members of the house, which felt strange, but she knew it was to show her the most respect they could.

The Eldest gave a speech of welcome, and Daneli gave an effusive speech of thanks, and then the meal began.

Three days later, she was sitting next to Kamila in the carriage, on the last leg of the journey back to House Trageri. It was too long to do in one day at a carriage's pace, so they had stopped at House Suli. It was a convenient stop, because she had already chosen Ulio Suli as a spouse, but she hadn't seen him since his visit to House Trageri two weeks ago. She hadn't had time to send him a message. It was nice to see him again, and she could tell he was very pleased to hear the news. He was concerned about Kamila, and the three of them had taken a meal together, which had been very nice. He would be arriving at House Trageri in a few weeks.

She decided she'd rather ride with Kamila, even though she hated to ride in carriages. They had added a bed to the inside of the carriage, and Daneli sat on one of the remaining seats.

"Daneli, Ulio is such a sweet man. I find it hard to believe there are men like him in the South."

Daneli laughed. Ulio was sweet, but she didn't think he was any sweeter than most. In fact, one of the things Daneli liked about him was his assertiveness.

"Dear heart, if you find that hard to believe, you will spend your time in Trageri constantly surprised."

"Are you still serious about marrying me?"

Daneli hesitated. It was a subject she had wanted to wait for a bit to answer.

"Yes. But it will have to be different than I expected."

"Because of my children?"

"Yes. If I married you at the same time as I married the rest, your daughter Daneli would be named Sulea. But that can't be, Kamila."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"It's funny, it sure did surprise me."

They laughed.

Kamila asked, "So what will happen?"

“You will be a guest of House Trageri until the first two daughters of my spouses are born. Then I will marry you. By Trageri tradition, previous children of spouses take their positions not from their ages, but from the date of marriage.”

“That sounds quite reasonable. So what can I do as a guest of House Trageri?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know that in Trageri, everyone has a role. You don’t have people just hanging about like Northern noble women, doing nothing. What can I do?”

“Well, first, you will heal. After that—it’s really up to you. You can spend time figuring out what sorts of things take your fancy, and then you can apprentice to a Master, and learn the craft.”

“What are my options?”

“What do you mean?”

“I assume that men and women take up different crafts.”

Daneli smiled. “You would assume wrong, Kamila. There are women who are in the military. My spouse Jeri is an engineer, women are diplomats...” Daneli was quiet a moment, pondering the notion of Kamila as one of her diplomatic spouses.

“What?”

“Just thinking. Anyway, really, you can do whatever you want to, although you are encouraged to do something that will help House Trageri in some way.”

“I guess I will be spending a lot of time raising my children.”

“Er, no, not really.”

“What?”

“Ah, Kamila, there is so much for you to get used to. Children are raised collectively. The whole house will raise the children, although men take the leading role in raising children.”

She was quiet a moment. Daneli reached out and took her hand.

“Are you OK?”

Kamila said, quietly, “I’m not sure I can get used to having my dreams come true, Daneli.”

Daneli couldn’t help but laugh. “Kamila, nothing around here is perfect—it’s just different.” Daneli sobered. “I know this is way better than you’ve been used to. I’m glad you are here, Kamila, I really am.”

“I am too. I missed you Daneli.”

“I missed you too.”

They kissed, and Daneli felt a wave of love, and remembered again how much she had missed Kamila. Daneli had been busy in the Tala Shari, picking spouses, and becoming queen, but she had thought of Kamila often. She also realized that a talk with Mara was at hand. She wasn't sure how she was going to juggle all of these relationships with her spouses.

They arrived at the House, which had been prepared in advance, since a few of the guard had galloped ahead. Daneli helped Kamila to her room, and Liona, who had taken a special shine to little Daneli, took her to the children's wing, which at the moment housed only two of her siblings who were under 14. At 14, called the Age of Wisdom, a child was given a room in the main part of the house.

As Daneli left Kamila's room, she ran into Mara.

“Welcome back, Daneli. I hear the trip was uneventful.” Daneli sensed a bit of sternness in the voice.

“Yes, it was. And you'll be happy to know that I gave the official offer to Ulio Suli, who accepted. He'll be here in a few weeks.”

“I'm very glad to hear that. And I have arranged visits from the remaining candidates during the next four weeks. I expect a completed list of spouses by the end of Elemb. An Aedrin service is quite auspicious.”

“But the end of Elemb is only...”

“...six weeks away. Yes. Daneli, we've talked about this.”

“I know, Mara. I'm sorry.”

“Your trip to Regli delayed things.”

Daneli took a deep breath. She knew that Mara was only doing what she felt she needed to.

“Alright. We'll get this done, Mara. I apologize for dragging my feet.”

Surprisingly, Mara smiled, and put her arm over Daneli's shoulders.

“Dear Daneli, you have not been dragging your feet. I have been pushing you to move very quickly, and you have actually been quite reasonable about it. It just feels that this moment, when we lost a queen and our House leader by assassination and we don't have the full House contingent, we are weak as a House. I don't want that to last too long.”

Daneli nodded. “I understand. I don’t want this House to even appear weak. I already am fairly sure about my final choices, I just need these visits to make sure.”

“How was seeing Kamila again?”

“It’s wonderful, Mara. I love her deeply.”

Mara smiled. “Then I am glad she is among us.”

“Can I ask you something a little personal?”

“Of course.”

“How much time did you get to spend with Raliro?”

Mara smiled. “Go talk to Master Poera. She’s a better one to explain it all. I promise.”

Master Poera poured her some tea. Daneli was sitting in one of the small parlors in the downstairs of the house, having a long-awaited talk with Master Poera.

“So, Daneli, what is on your mind?”

“I’ve finally made all of my spouse choices, and I’m happy with them, and they seem quite happy with each other.”

“From what I have heard, you have chosen exceptionally well.”

“Thank you, Master Poera — that means a lot coming from you.”

“You have some concerns?”

“I don’t quite know how to put this...”

“You are worried that your spouses won’t get enough of your attention, and you feel like you’ll be juggling a lot, especially with those with whom you are sexually intimate.”

Daneli could feel her mouth dropping open.

“Um, yes, exactly.”

“That’s the problem with being eldest, or queen, you know. You are so used to people explaining to you that the world revolves around you, that you can’t really see that in fact, it doesn’t.”

“Huh?”

“Daneli, as you well know, your spouses will have their own relationships with each other. That’s necessary if they are going to produce offspring.”

“Right...”

“Remember *all* of you have nine spouses, not just you. Um, ten spouses, that is. You did make the final decisions, but they all had input, and I know you took that input quite seriously.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t have chosen Quin except that Liona, Jeri *and* Kamila asked me to, and Derisi and Holo were pretty borderline to me, but I got a lot of feedback that they would be good fits. Oh, and I wanted Karena, but several spouses didn’t take to her, so I didn’t end up choosing her.”

Exactly. You didn’t do it solo. You took people’s opinions into consideration, and the chosen spouses spent a lot of time with the candidates. That’s the way it’s supposed to work, Daneli. Kamila’s presence is a bit of a wild card, but from what I’ve been hearing, she is increasingly winning hearts among your spouses, and, might I say, your parents as well.”

Daneli knew this to be true. Kamila had been at House Trageri for only six weeks, and even not completely healed she was already getting to know everyone, and making herself useful around the house.

“Do you feel better now?”

Daneli laughed. “Yes, Master Poera, I do. Thank you so much for your advice.”

“You are welcome, Daneli. You know that we need to start arranging the wedding. It’s only a couple of months away. You should have a meeting with Priestess Ganeli in the next week or two, to begin the planning process.”

Daneli nodded. They said goodnight to each other, and Daneli went up to her rooms. She was spending the night with Kamila, the first one in a while. She was looking forward to it. She stopped by Kamila’s room, and saw that she wasn’t in it, so she assumed she’d be in her own rooms. As she walked in, she heard splashes in the bath. She walked into the bathroom to see Kamila soaking within a mountain of bubbles. When Kamila saw Daneli, she giggled.

“I can’t seem to get enough of these baths, Daneli.”

“It took me months before I got used to having them.” Daneli started to strip off her clothes. A bath with Kamila would be fun.

“Constant running hot water—how do you do that?”

Daneli got into the large tub, sitting across from Kamila.

“Well, I’m not an engineer, but I think it works like this: We get our running water from wells, the water is heated from energy from the tiles on the roof—they get that energy from the sun.”

“Why is it that Warani doesn’t have any of this?”

“Because they don’t want it? I can’t think of any better reason.”

“I think they don’t want it because they think it’s evil.”

Daneli said, as she sunk further into the suds, “Hardly feels evil to me.”

“Daneli, I need to ask you something.”

“Sure, what is it?”

Daneli could see her hesitating.

“I... I... oh, my, this is difficult.”

“Kamila, there is nothing you could ask that would bother me, really.”

Daneli watched Kamila take several breaths.

“Daneli, you know that this whole lots of spouses thing is a little strange to me. I’m getting used to it, and all but, it’s a challenge.”

Daneli said, “I remember when Jeri was my only chosen spouse so far, and she called me on the fact that I had a hard time talking about spouse candidates with her. I knew it was my Northern upbringing. Do you know what Jeri said?”

“What?”

“‘Get over it.’ Surprisingly, it was helpful.”

Kamila laughed. “Yes, I guess I need to ‘Get over it!’ So, Ulio...”

“You want to sleep with him?”

Kamila raised an eyebrow. “How did you know?”

“A guess. So, you want tips on how to approach him?”

“NO! Anyway, he approached me.”

“And?”

“What do you mean, *and*?”

“I’m confused Kamila. Ulio approached you, you want to sleep with him, what are we talking about?”

She was silent for a moment.

“Are you saying it’s OK?”

“Kamila, you can sleep with anyone you want to, spouse or not. As long as they are of age, and you’re not closely related. That’s the Southern way, my dear.”

“You mean...”

Daneli inclined her head. Kamila finally said, “It will take me a while to get used to this.”

“There is one thing.”

“That is?”

“Well, in Ulio’s case, this isn’t an issue. But if you ever want to sleep with a man that isn’t one of our spouses, you have to take extra special precautions. Your children are an exception because our marriage brings them into the family. But...”

“I get it. That makes sense. I don’t imagine that it will present itself.”

“You never know.”

“So, another question.”

“Fire away.”

“You aren’t supposed to have any children.”

“That is correct.”

“So...”

“There is minor surgery that all eldests have. I had it when I came of age.”

“Surgery? What is that?”

“You don’t know about surgery? Where they put you to sleep, and carve stuff out of you, and sew you back up?”

“Oh, my! I would never trust a Northern doctor with that.”

“Well, anyway, they took out my uter... womb.”

“Really? Does that bother you?”

“I’m a little sad I can’t have children of my own, but I understand why this is the tradition.”

Kamila said, “I knew before I came that the Trageri was very different than the Warani. I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around how different it is.”

“Is it still OK that you’re here?”

Kamila smiled, and moved to lie on top of Daneli, wrapping her legs around Daneli’s hips. She kissed her.

“Does that answer your question?”

A few days later, Daneli ran upstairs to Kamila's rooms, having just spoken to Master Garliri. She knocked, and heard, "Come in!" She walked in to see Kamila reading a book.

"What's that you're reading?"

"Burbota's history of Trageri."

"Ah, good book for you to read."

"It's an eye opener, for sure."

"So, I have news."

"News?"

"You know those spies I told you about?"

"Yup."

"We heard something interesting from two of them. They told the same exact story, so we trust it."

"And the story is?"

"There was a big funeral for you at the Winter Palace. You and your baby were said to have died in childbirth. Your older daughter was said to have been sent to Monastery Triesta for fosterage. The interesting thing is that the gossip is that your husband beat you to death and killed your daughters."

"Well, isn't that interesting? My bet is that Remiro told the King that I ran away and took my children with me. My father didn't believe him, and figured he had actually beat me to death, and killed my daughters. He almost did, really. But Karina is still in the King's favor, so he was willing to cover it up."

"That certainly makes the gossip make sense. So anyway, you are officially dead. No one is going to invade Trageri to get you back. I have to admit to being relieved."

"It feels weird to be dead." Kamila laughed.

"So..." Daneli hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Did you sleep with Ulio yet?"

"Daneli!"

"Just curious."

"I don't have to tell you, do I?"

“Of course not.”

“Then I will take a lady’s prerogative.”

“Kamila, there aren’t any ‘ladies’ in Trageri!”

“I might be the only one.” Kamila grinned, and they both broke out laughing.

“OK, love, I need to go have a meeting with Priestess Ganeli about the wedding.”

“Do me a favor?”

“Sure thing.”

“Ask her when would be a good time to meet with her.”

“You want to meet with her?”

“Yes. It’s time I officially converted.”

“Kamila, we don’t have ‘official conversion.’”

“What?”

“It’s not like the religion of Warani. There isn’t any conversion, really. You just do what you want to do.”

“Well, I want to talk with her anyway.”

“OK, I’ll ask her.”

Daneli left to go down to her meeting. She wasn’t really looking forward to this—the ceremonial stuff was not her favorite part, and she knew that a wedding took all day. One year that she visited, she was dragged to a wedding of a prominent family in clan Trageri. She had only been twelve, so it wasn’t a surprise she had been bored to death. But she vividly remembered it took all day, and most of the night.

She walked through the chapel, and into the back, where the priestess had her office.

“Hello Priestess Ganeli.”

“My Queen, hello, please sit. We have a lot to talk about, don’t we?”

“Yes, I guess we do.”

“So, do you understand the wedding ceremony?”

“In outline. I’ve only been to one, and I was twelve.”

“Well, the first part is a ceremonial opening. I’ll have that written out so you can read it beforehand. It includes words from me, from Mother Worli, and Suha Fero. Then, each family or

House will present their offspring to House Trageri. Then Mother Worli will accept, then you will accept.”

Daneli nodded.

“Then there are the vows. Have you all been working on the vows?”

Daneli groaned. “Not yet. I’ve been too busy.”

“You need to start soon, my Queen.”

“Alright, I’ll arrange some time for all of us to meet.” Daneli took out her notebook and started to write some notes.

“You will each say individual vows for the group, and then the unison vows.”

“Alright.”

“Then there are the pair vows.”

“Pair vows?”

“You don’t remember this part?”

“No.”

“Each pair of you says vows to each other.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, my Queen.”

“But that’s…” Daneli tried to do the math in her head, and failed.

Ganeli said, “45 pairs.”

Daneli groaned. “That must have been the part where I ran screaming from the wedding.”

Ganeli laughed.

“This part can actually be quite emotional. There are standard vows—but you can all choose different ones, if you’d like.”

“What are the standard vows?”

“One says: I vow to know you, and love you, and keep our relationship sacred, as all are sacred. The other repeats it.”

Daneli kept writing. “Those are nice. OK, keep going.”

“Then, after the vows, there is the blessing of each of you, and of the whole family. That first involves me, and then each of the guests get to come up and give their gift and a blessing.”

“No wonder this takes all day.”

Ganeli laughed again. "You will enjoy this, my Queen, I promise."

"Is that it?"

"No, it's far from over."

"What's next?"

"The fun part. The party."

"Ah, the party!"

"But then there is after the party."

"After the party?"

"There is the official blessing of the bodies. It's only the ten of you and me, no guests are present."

"Explain?"

"The ten of you will sit naked, in a circle, for Sabadora's blessing of the bodies. It is meant to bless any children this union will produce."

"Naked, eh?"

"Does that bother you?"

"No, I've seen most of my spouses naked by now. It just kinda strikes me as funny for some reason."

"Do you know about the wedding night tradition?"

"I've heard a little bit about it from Jeri. She said she's willing to orchestrate."

"That's good. It's good to have someone besides you take charge of it. OK, that's it. Please make sure that you all meet to write your individual and unison vows, and decide if you'll change the pair vows. I will get all of you scripts of the ceremony in a few weeks."

"Sounds good."

"I think we're done for now, then."

"I have a couple of things."

"Yes?"

"First, Kamila would like to meet with you. She said she wanted to 'convert' and I explained we didn't really have conversion."

"Alright, I'm happy to speak with her. I'll arrange it."

"Thanks. And secondly, about Kamila..."

“You want her to somehow be included in this ritual but not officially?”

“Yes. All of my spouses already consider her one of us. And it feels really strange that she can’t be a part of this ceremony. I understand why, but...”

“I have been considering this carefully, and I think I have a solution, but I do have to run it by Mara first.”

“What is it?”

“The crux of the issue is that Kamila already has two daughters. Of course, marriage to a spouse that already has children is extremely rare, but it does happen. When someone with children officially becomes part of a House, her children come with her, by date of marriage, and their age determines their position.”

“Right, that’s the problem.”

“Kamila is an exception, though—her children are not of Trageri. I think we can choose not to recognize them as hers at the time of the wedding.”

“But then they won’t have a family.”

“Well, this is where it gets interesting. Adoption is not as uncommon as marriage with children, and adopted children are *always* outside of the line of succession. House Trageri can adopt them at any time after the wedding.”

“Will this work?”

“I think so, precisely because Kamila’s children are *not* of Trageri—this would never work if they were. Mara has to approve the plan, however.”

“I think Kamila would agree to this. She trusts us to treat her children as part of our family no matter what. I’ll ask her.”

“Don’t talk with her yet—I don’t want to get her hopes up. I hadn’t brought this up with you because I needed to speak with Mara about it first.”

Daneli nodded. “OK, I’ll wait. Let me know.”

It was four days before the wedding, and Daneli woke up hearing an insistent knock on her outer door. She turned in the bed to see Liona still fast asleep next to her. She got up, put on a robe, and went into the parlor, and answered the door. Four of her parents, including Mara, were standing at the door.

Mara said, “We’re moving you to the queen’s quarters. No arguments, Daneli.”

Daneli started to say something, but the look on Mara’s face made it clear that nothing that Daneli could say would change things. These were, after all, the Queen’s spouses, and if they wanted her to move into Raliro’s old rooms, then Daneli could hardly argue about it.

“Alright, I give in. Let me get dressed. Liona is here, too.”

“We’ll start in this room, and in your study.”

“OK.”

Daneli went back into her bedroom and closed the door. She could see that Liona was getting up.

Liona smiled as Daneli approached her. Liona said, “I heard Mara and Feraci talking about this last night. I’m not surprised.”

“And you didn’t warn me?”

“Why, so you could find a way to avoid it? No, Daneli.”

Liona got up from the bed, and put her arms underneath Daneli’s robe, encircling her.

“Dear heart, you have to give in. Raliro is dead, and you are queen. I know that reality hasn’t quite sunken all of the way through you, but it has to, at some point.”

Tears started to flow freely from Daneli’s eyes.

“I miss Raliro, Liona. And I hate that I couldn’t prevent that man from killing her.”

“You still feel responsible, even though you know that there isn’t anything you really could have done?”

“I should have known she was in danger.”

“Daneli—I know that only time will heal this, and nothing I say will make an immediate difference, but there is just no way you should expect that of yourself.”

Daneli nodded, and Liona gently wiped the tears from her face with her fingers.

“Daneli, let’s get you moved.”

Daneli nodded again, and started to dress.

Four days later, Daneli was standing in a circle with her spouses, holding hands. They were dressed in simple white tunics. Some of her spouses, including Holo, Quin, Arlen and Kamila, wore simple long skirts, the rest of them, including Daneli, wore pants. They were all barefoot.

The wedding was taking place in the gardens east of the House. There were hundreds of guests—the marriage of a queen was a rare event indeed—although this wedding was really no different than most weddings in Trageri. The circle they were standing in was strewn with flowers, and there was a circular trellis with vines outside of their circle. Outside the trellis, the guests were standing.

Mara had assented to Ganeli's plan for Kamila's participation in the wedding, and Kamila had wholeheartedly agreed. The ceremony to bring little Daneli and baby Hissa into House Trageri would happen tomorrow afternoon. Each of the spouses had already been ceremonially given to the House—her father had been a proxy for Holei Gasri in giving Kamila to the House. Daneli couldn't help but wonder about what Gasri would think if he knew.

Priestess Ganeli was in the center of the circle, and started to speak again, bringing Daneli to the present moment.

“We will witness the words you will speak to each other at this time.”

Daneli had taken time, as all of them had, to memorize their vows. It was Daneli's turn to start.

She said, “I vow to lead with love, kindness, humility and a sense of humor, knowing that all of you have things to teach me. I vow to place your welfare, our children's welfare, and the welfare of this House above my own.”

Jeri was next. “I vow to continue to give my talents and time to House Trageri for its well-being. I pledge to love each of you, prod each of you every once in a while, and be present to any of you at times of need.”

The rest of the vows of her spouses were similar. As she listened to Kamila's vows, she remembered their conversation about them. They were sitting up in bed, practicing.

Kamila said, “So where's the obeying?”

“Obeying?”

“Yeah, you know, I had to vow to obey when I married Karina.”

“No obeying. Who would you obey?”

“You, who else?”

Daneli laughed. “Spouses don't need to obey the eldest. That's not the way it works.”

“People obey you.”

“Well, not really. I ask them to do things, and most of the time they do them. But that’s not the same as obeying. If they have an objection to something I’ve asked them to do, I want to hear it. I don’t want blind obedience. Besides, I do plenty of things other people ask me to. Am I obeying them?”

“So here I am, just vowing to love you, and support you and all the spouses, etc. That’s sort of, well…”

“What?”

“Loose.”

“Loose? Like you want chains or something?” They laughed together.

Daneli realized that Ganeli was indicating that it was time for the unison vows already. She had missed a few of the individual vows. She had heard them all earlier, but she felt bad that she’d let her mind wander.

They all spoke, “We vow to love each equally, listen to each equally, care for each equally, speak to each equally, and create a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts.” This was the standard unison vow. Daneli never quite believed this vow exactly. She found it hard to imagine that it would be possible to love each of these ten people equally. She would love them, that was sure, but her love for each would be different.

As Priestess Ganeli rose her hands into the air, the ten of them let each other’s hands go, and formed a line, with Daneli next to the Priestess.

Ganeli said, “Each of you has something to say to each other. Ulio, you are first.”

Ulio stood a few feet away, facing Daneli. He looked rapturously happy. She dropped her filters, and she could feel the force of his joy—Daneli couldn’t help but being infected by it. He reached out his hands, and Daneli took them. He looked directly into her eyes, and smiled.

“Daneli, I vow to know you, and love you, and keep our relationship sacred, as all are sacred.”

“Ulio, I vow to know you, and love you, and keep our relationship sacred, as all are sacred.”

They kissed briefly, and Daneli released his hands. He moved to stand in front of Arlen, and they said the same vows to each other. Watching them, and being able to experience their thoughts and feelings, Daneli was overcome by emotion, and could feel the tears streaming down her face. She wondered whether everyone felt this at their wedding in Trageri.

When Kamila came to stand before Daneli, it all she could do to keep her composure. Jeri, who had come before Kamila, was a familiar love, there was a kind of deep comfort that they had developed with each other over many years, and saying the vows felt like some sort of cementing of something that was already there. Kamila, on the other hand, was, in a sense, a new love, and saying the vows to Kamila, and hearing and feeling them from Kamila was incredibly emotional.

Finally, the vows were all over, and Daneli felt some amount of release.

Priestess Ganeli moved in front of the line of them, and said, “It is my great honor, in the name of Sabadora, the Wise One, to pronounce you married to House Trageri.”

Shouts and cheers went up all over. The priestess raised her arms above her head again to ask for quiet. Chairs were brought so that the spouses could all sit down, finally—this next part was supposed to take a couple of hours or so.

“Family, guests, this is the time to bring your blessing, and gift.”

Her father was the first in line, and he carried a bow and a quiver of arrows.

“Daneli, my lovely daughter, here is a bow and a quiver of arrows to replace those you lost during your travels. They are handcrafted by the best bow and arrow maker in all of Warani. I know how much the bow means to you, and how much you enjoy shooting practice, and you will need some distraction now that you are married.” A laugh went up from her spouses and the audience. “I wish you and your spouses the best, and I am glad I will be around to see this House grow as you all grow.”

Daneli nodded, and smiled at her father. Next was Mara, who had a box full of 11 exquisitely etched glass candle holders.

She said, “As you all hold the light for each other, and the light for House Trageri, may these be a reminder of this day, and the blessings of Sabadora on our House.”

This went on for a long time. Some gifts were for one or a small group of her spouses, others were for all of them. By the time the last gift-giver was done, there was an enormous pile of gifts to one side of them—Daneli thought it would be several wagon loads worth.

The sun was beginning its descent, and Daneli knew there was a short break before dinner. She could see the huge tent that had been put up for dinner in the field beyond. Several Trageri clan families had come to the wedding to assist in all of the preparations—it was too much for

just their House to handle, especially since 11 of them were out of commission because they were the object of the celebration.

Daneli decided to briefly go upstairs to her rooms, to relax for a minute, and get out of the crowds now milling around them giving their personal congratulations. She ducked out, and walked toward the wing with her rooms. On the way, she ran into people who kept congratulating her. Finally, she closed the door to her rooms, went into her bedroom, and lay down on the bed. She was overwhelmed, mostly. It had been a grueling day of vows and blessings and rituals, and Daneli was emotionally drained.

After a while, she heard a quiet knock on her bedroom door, which was open, and saw Derisi standing in the door. She smiled at him. He moved to sit on the bed next to her.

“I have been given the duty to come get you, dear. Are you ready to come to dinner?” He placed his hand gently on her cheek.

She and Derisi had spent a lot of time together lately. He wasn’t one of her diplomatic spouses, but because he came from one of the more prominent families of clan Trageri, he had been incredibly useful in helping her navigate some sticky clan issues that were hounding her at the moment. She had always liked him a lot, and although she wasn’t generally attracted to men, she appreciated his body, and had learned that he was great at cuddling.

“Ah, yes. Thanks Derisi.”

She got up, and took his hand, and they walked together outside and to the large tent where there was a table for them set up high on a dais. Daneli saw that all of her other spouses were seated. She and Derisi took their places, he somewhat toward the outside, and she in the central chair.

Jeri was next to her, and whispered in her ear, “You didn’t really think you were going to get away with being gone too long, did you?” Daneli then felt a little nibble. She couldn’t help but giggle.

The evening and night went by in a blur, as dinner was served, then the amazing desserts, then the dance party. Finally, Daneli found herself taking off her pants and tunic, and sitting in a circle with her spouses in the chapel. She’d had several cups of coffee, since she knew that it would be a long night—there was no such thing as sleep on a wedding night.

Priestess Ganeli was also nude, save a necklace and her headdress, which was finely crafted with feathers and had several depictions of Sabadora. She was carrying a bowl of water in one hand, and had a feather which she dipped in the water. She first stood over Daneli, and sprinkled water on her head.

“For Daneli: blessings from Sabadora for your leadership of this House, your love for your spouses, and your commitment to their children.”

She then moved next to Arlen, who was sitting next to Daneli. “For Arlen: blessings from Sabadora for children you may bear from your belly, your love for your spouses, and your commitment to House Trageri.”

She moved next to Derisi, who was sitting between Arlen and Garisi. “For Derisi: blessings from Sabadora for the children that come from your seed, your love for your spouses, and your commitment to raise all of your children.”

As the ritual went on, including later a series of blessings for all of them together, Daneli felt a strange combination of somberness and giddiness. She couldn't quite reconcile them. She knew she didn't really need to, but she felt it was an interesting combination that she'd never felt before.

Priestess Ganeli said, “You are all blessed by Sabadora. Go in peace. Enjoy your wedding night.”

They arose, embracing each other and the priestess. They grabbed their clothes, got dressed, and walked to a tent that was set quite far out in a field. Unlike the tent that housed the party, it had sides, and you couldn't see inside.

The Trageri wedding night tradition, from Daneli's point of view, could on its own manage to damn the Southerners in the eyes of Warani. Not that it bothered her at all—she quite liked the idea, once Jeri explained it. Her parents' generation would sit guard outside of the tent, while she and her spouses lay about on pillows inside, talking, cuddling, having sex, doing whatever it was they wanted to do together for the next few hours until sunrise. There were several games, including games of truth-telling and games of pleasure. Jeri had explained that the tradition was meant to bind them together as a group—as a House. It wasn't going to happen all at once, but it was an important component to the process.

As they walked close to the tent, Daneli could see her parents sitting in chairs, some were by a nice fire that was burning, others were in a group around the tent entrance.

Mara was the ritual leader for her parents. She took Daneli's hands, and said, "Daneli, Arlen, Derisi, Garisi, Holo, Jeri, Kamila, Liona, Meri, Quin, and Ulio—it is your wedding night. We stand guard so that you know none will disturb you. Be one together until the sun rises."

They all nodded, and walked into the tent. Daneli heard Mara tying the tent door closed.

CHAPTER 8: SUR ROLERO

Life as queen had become fairly routine over the last few years. During most of the year, Daneli had a very regular schedule, broken only by the Sala Trageri and Sala Red during Anaga. In addition, during Aedrin, she and her spouses would retreat to a house Daneli had managed to get House Trageri to build by the ocean.

Each morning, she would have a briefing with one of her three diplomatic spouses, Liona, Kamila, or Quin, over breakfast in her parlor. Which one she would speak to on each day was determined by them—she trusted them to figure it out. Generally, most days had one topic that was foremost to deal with—either clan related, Trageri-wide, or it dealt with Warani. Liona dealt mostly with clan related issues, and she sometimes brought Derisi along. Quin was in charge of inter-clan relationships and things dealing with Trageri as a whole. Kamila was assigned to things relating to Warani. These days, luckily, it was primarily trade issues.

By the time they were done doing business, it was generally time for the family lunch, which was shared by whatever spouses were around and not too busy. She had time to herself for most of the early afternoons, and these days, when she wasn't catching up on reading, she was out riding, or doing archery practice. Sometimes she spent time with Little Daneli or Hissa, and she enjoyed that immensely. In the late afternoon was when she most often had meetings with this visiting kala, or that master who was passing through. Then, in the evening she'd have dinner with some House configuration or another, sometimes with guests of the House. Her evenings were family time—time with one spouse or another, although she did get one night out of eleven to be by herself.

This morning, she was just finishing washing up and dressing for the day, when she heard Quin say softly from the parlor, "I'm here, Daneli, as is your breakfast."

She said, "Almost ready." She combed her hair, just freshly shorn a few days ago, and walked into the parlor. Breakfast for both of them was arrayed on the table.

They kissed good morning, and she said, "So, dear Quin, what's on the plate for me today?"

"Master Kateri."

"And who is that?"

“I don’t know. All I know is that he’s here, and Mara said that you needed to meet with him, and that it was more important than anything else. He traveled from Sur Rolero.”

Mara had lately been making noises lately about preparing for a trip to Sur Rolero, but Daneli didn’t really know why. She had been slated to spend one of her periods of the Tala Shari there, but that had been derailed when Queen Raliro was assassinated. She remembered vague things both her father and Raliro had said about Sur Rolero, but she hadn’t thought that there was anything particularly important that she needed to go there for.

“Well, perhaps all the mystery around Sur Rolero will be solved, then.”

Quin nodded.

“Is that all?”

“You’ll meet with him in an hour. In the meantime, I have several contracts for you to sign related to our trade deal with House Corina. In addition, we should spend a few minutes discussing the House’s trade agreement with Family Regli. My understanding is that House Suli would like to have a say in the agreement, since that family is of their clan.”

“I can understand that. Have you talked with Ulio?”

“Not yet.”

“How about if the two of you figure it out?”

He smiled. “My pleasure, Daneli.”

They ate and talked for a while, and Daneli signed the contracts. There was a knock at the door, and it opened to reveal Mara and a tall, dark-skinned man, with a bald head whom she’d never seen before. She assumed that must be Master Kateri.

“Daneli, Quin, this is Master Kateri, from Sur Rolero. He needs to speak with the Queen in private.”

Master Kateri bowed. “My Queen, it is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. Queen Raliro always had good things to say about you.”

Mara said, “Quin, is there anything else Daneli needs from you?”

“No, Mara, I need to go do some things anyway. See you later, Daneli.”

Mara and Quin left the parlor, and Mara closed the door behind her.

“Well, Master Kateri, please sit. It is nice to meet you, and I’m curious as to what brought you all the way from Sur Rolero.” He sat in the chair facing hers.

“Well, my Queen, this is something that you would have learned in due course in your time at Sur Rolero when you were to visit during your Tala Shari. You do need to come down to Sur Rolero sometime in the next month. It will become clear why after I’ve explained.”

“Well then, go ahead Master Kateri.”

“Queen Daneli, I have lived and worked at Sur Rolero for my whole adult life. I grew up in House Solano, and gave up any possibility of marriage because I wanted to dedicate my life to Sur Rolero, and what it means. I imagine that because you were brought up in the North, in Warani, you have only outlines of the truth of our origins.”

“Not so, Master Kateri. I’ve read the *Chronicles of Joella Trageri*, as well as several other books and documents related to the founding of this colony.”

“Ah, quite so. I apologize for my misunderstanding. Well, then, you know that Sur Rolero is the location of most of the original documents relating to Earth, and the early history of Capella IV.”

“Yes, I do. My spouse Meri has studied there.”

“Of course! How could I forget that Meri is your spouse? Forgive me, my students call me absent-minded.” He smiled, and Daneli realized that she liked him.

He continued. “There is something important about Sur Rolero that you do not yet know, and is known to only a very few people in Trageri. Sur Rolero is the site of the only communications device that allows us to be in contact with colonies on other planets, as well as ships in transit.”

“What? Communication with other planets? How is that possible? I have to send a messenger to get a message to the family down the road!”

“That is, my Queen, a choice of the founders of Trageri—to limit the technology use particularly for communication and transportation. The founders felt that those two uses of technology, alongside the technology of war, were the primary reasons for the demise of Earth. They didn’t want the same thing to happen here.”

“So there is a technology that allows us to contact people that are millions of miles away?”

“Billions of miles away.”

Daneli could hardly wrap her mind around this. It was a good thing that it was Jeri’s night tonight—she might be disappointed to be spending most of her time with Daneli explaining these things.

“So Trageri, particularly the queen, has been in contact with these other planets for a long time?”

“Yes, my Queen—for the history of Trageri.”

“I see. So it is time for me to make my acquaintance with some of them?”

“Yes, my Queen—it has been too long since a Queen of Trageri has been in contact. In particular...” He hesitated. Daneli got the sense that there was a doosey coming.

“In particular?”

“Two hundred years ago, during the first war with Warani, the queen at the time, Gorela Trageri, sent an unusual request to the other colony which was also founded by the same group as ours.”

“Other colony? That wasn’t in Joella’s *Chronicle*.”

He sighed. “Joella’s *Chronicle* is a bit, shall we say, biased. There was a large group that stayed behind on Earth waiting for a colony planet they could have to themselves, which they got about twenty-five years after we left. They all are genetically related to us, they all have The Gift, and are socially similar, but not the same.”

“I see. And that request was?”

“For more colonists. She felt that if there were more colonists, with experience with better technology, that we would be in a better position against Warani. Remember, at the time, it looked as though Warani might win.”

“Yes, I know that.”

“But they didn’t send colonists, did they?”

“Actually, they did. They sent a ship full of colonists, as well as the plans for the laser weapons.”

“I know we’ve built the laser weapons, but I never heard of the colonists.”

“They aren’t here yet. You see, they were very, very far away. They will arrive in about five years.”

What her father had told her all that time ago finally clicked into place. She still didn’t really understand it, but some things were beginning to fit.

“How many colonists?”

“Fifty thousand.”

“Fifty thousand? That seems like a lot of people to try to integrate into Trageri, especially if they are... different than we are.”

“Agreed. But you have time to plan. You must talk with Captain Jessup.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s the Captain of the ship that’s coming. Every queen since Gorela has talked with him.”

“What? Could he live that long?”

“No, he didn’t really live that long—time is going much more slowly for him in relation to us.”

Daneli shook her head. “We can talk to them, just like I’m talking to you?”

“Basically. It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

“Well, Master Kateri, you have given me a lot to think about and deal with.”

“I know, my Queen. I am here to assist you in any way, as well as to escort you to Sur Rolero.”

Daneli took a deep breath, and started to figure out what she would need to do in the next few days to get ready for a trip South. She’d learned that sailing ships were far faster than overland travel when the weather was right.

“Master Kateri, thank you so much, and I will make sure that all of your needs are met while you are staying at House Trageri. Please feel free to ask anything of us to make your stay more pleasant. I will be working on the travel arrangements, and timing, and will keep you apprised of our departure date.”

He nodded, and they both rose, she escorted him to the door and downstairs, and she went in search for one of her spouses. It was going to be a busy time; so much for her routine!

Later that evening, Jeri and Daneli were sitting in her parlor having tea.

Daneli said, “I don’t understand, love.”

Jeri smiled. “I know this is not your strong suit. You’ll have to just trust me on some of this.”

“OK, so let’s go over this again. The faster someone travels in relation to an object that is basically at rest, the more time passes for those at rest than those moving.”

“Right.”

“That makes no sense to me.”

“I know. Just trust that it’s true.”

“So five years have elapsed on their ship, while two hundred have elapsed here.”

“Yes.”

“And Captain Jessup communicates with one queen or another about once a week, and that is equivalent to us communicating with him once a year?”

“Yup.”

“He must be getting bored, although I did give him a three week break.”

Jeri laughed.

“I think I understand why Gorela requested the colonists. I’m not sure why the other colony agreed.”

“I think they wanted to be able to re-connect the two colonies.”

“But two hundred years have now elapsed on the other colony, too.”

“Yes, this is true.”

“Why is it that we can communicate instantly, but not travel instantly?”

“Oh, my love, do you really want that explanation?”

“Yes!”

“There is a device they use at Sur Rolero called a ‘superimpositor’”

“A super *what?*”

“*Superimpositor.*” I did learn all about it today from Master Kateri, although I’ve understood the theory behind it for a long time. Anyway, it’s called that because the device uses something called ‘superimposition’ to do the communication. It takes advantage of the fact that if some elements are together, then separated, it’s possible to know the state of these separated particles very far away from each other.”

Daneli put her face in her hands. She had studied some physics during the Sala Trageri, but hadn’t gotten very far beyond the behavior of arrows fired into the air. That she could grasp, but superimposition? She sighed. It was a good thing that advanced physics wasn’t a requirement to be queen.

It was her, and all of her spouses habits not to be shielded, or filter, when they were in each other’s presence, without non-spouses around. Jeri clearly could sense her distress, and Daneli

sensed love and support coming from Jeri. Jeri moved closer to Daneli on the couch, and put her arm around her.

“Love, I know it’s not my official role, but if you would like me to come to Sur Rolero with you...”

Daneli felt a sense of relief. “Yes, Jeri, that would make a huge difference.”

Jeri smiled. “I didn’t just suggest that out of pure altruism, you know.”

“I know, you’ll get to see the devices and such.”

“Yes. I’m looking forward to it. So are we all going?”

Daneli laughed. “I know it might seem that way. Liona is staying home, to hold down the fort. Meri will be taking her place on the trip, since he is so familiar with the issues. Quin is coming, as is Kamila, and you are coming. That’s only 5 of us.”

“Alright, well, I’d better make sure I clear my schedule. How long will we be gone?”

“I talked with Master Garliri, poor soul, who has been in contact with Colera, and gotten us a fast ship. We should be there in four days. We’ll be at Sur Rolero for a few days, then back. We’ll probably be gone for about two weeks.”

“Master Garliri, ‘poor soul’?”

“He gets seasick.”

“Ah. I see. Yes, poor soul. I’m looking forward to being on the ocean again—it’s been a long time for me.”

“Well, it’s been less time for me, but I’m looking forward to it too.”

Daneli looked down to see Jeri’s hands deftly unbuttoning her shirt. She slid her arm underneath the fabric of her shirt to lightly caress Daneli’s breast. She whispered in her ear, “Are we done yet, my Queen?”

For some reason, the combination of Jeri’s assertive touch, and her calling her “my Queen” made everything except Jeri escape her mind.

“Yes, we’re done, for now.”

Jeri nibbled on Daneli’s ear, and whispered, “Time for bed.”

Two weeks later, she was in the bow of the ship with Quin and Kamila. Master Garliri had retired to his quarters, being quite ill. It was their second full day of being on the ocean. They were going around a small peninsula. They could see the docks, and a large House on a hill.

Daneli said, “Ah, there is House Huro. The house with the longest history of marrying into Trageri, until I changed all that.”

Quin said, “I don’t know that any of us mind, dear. I didn’t like any of the Huro siblings I’d met. I know that Kala Huro is taking it personally, but Feraci seemed to take it in stride. I’m not sure she liked any of the Huro siblings either.”

Daneli smiled and said, “Oh, well. I never got to visit it, unfortunately. I hear it’s quite beautiful.”

“One of the oldest Houses founded in Trageri. Older in construction than our current House.”

“Does Feraci go home often?”

“Yes, I think she tries to make it home once a year or so.”

Kamila said, “Another castle made of wood, with basically no obvious defenses. Is it really a castle, then?”

Daneli put her arm around Kamila and Quin. “You know we don’t call them that—even though our Houses are certainly as large, or larger, than Warani castles.”

The three of them talked for a while, then headed back to down to the mess, because it was about time for lunch.

Sur Rolero, officially, was the small peninsula upon which the center sat. As they disembarked from the ship, which was docked on the large wharf, Daneli took in her surroundings. Sur Rolero was off the tip of the desert, and it seemed very dry and desert-like. There were red rocks everywhere, and it was completely devoid of plant life of any kind.

As they walked toward the complex of buildings, Daneli noticed that they were unusual. That wasn’t too much of a surprise to Daneli, since it wasn’t a House or family’s dwelling. They were made of a kind of stone, and not wood, which was quite appropriate for the climate, and available materials—she imagined there wasn’t much wood within hundreds of miles of here. She could see two central buildings: one very large, which housed the library, printing presses, museum, and some Master’s offices, and the other building housed the communications devices

and associated equipment. Scattered around these two buildings were about a dozen buildings that ranged from quite small to relatively large. These were the dormitories and guest houses where visitors, students and Masters lived. All of the buildings, like all of Trageri, had roof tiles that gathered solar energy. Daneli also noticed an array of huge rectangles made of the same kind of tiles on one of the hills—she would ask Jeri about that.

Master Kateri guided them to one of the guest houses.

“My Queen, here is the queen’s dedicated guest house.”

“Dedicated?”

“Yes, my Queen—it is unoccupied when a queen isn’t here.”

Daneli noticed that it was one of the nicer buildings, both outside, and inside, as they walked into it.

It had a nice large kitchen, dining room, and accompanying lounge.

Master Kateri said, “My Queen, your rooms, and the rooms for your spouses and guests are upstairs. Let me show you.”

“Thank you, Master Kateri.”

They walked up the stairs, and he pointed to a small suite that was to the left.

“Here are your rooms, my Queen—a parlor and bedroom in back. The bath is off to the right.”

“Thanks—I’ll settle in. Can you show the rest of my group their rooms?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

Daneli walked into the back bedroom, and tossed her bags on the bed. She looked around, and felt like this was a nice place to spend a few days. She checked out the bathroom—it was quite well appointed. She was finally getting used to the fact that she could get a good hot bath anywhere in Trageri. Even Trevalian, which was the only Northern castle with plumbing, didn’t have a way to make water hot on demand.

She heard Quin’s voice, and she went out to her parlor.

“Dear, I have heard that a group of students are now preparing dinner for us in the kitchen downstairs, and we will be joined by a number of the Masters in residence at Sur Rolero. Are you getting settled in OK?”

“Yes, Quin, thanks. This is quite nice.” She couldn’t help but pet the new-ish fuzz on his head—he’d kept his head clean-shaven for a while, but he was now letting it grow.

He smiled. “You like my hair, eh? Anyway, this is nice, isn’t it? I’m a little surprised that you get a dedicated house—it seems a little...”

“Wasteful?” She dropped her hand, and slipped it into his.

“Yes, wasteful.”

“I wonder what the history of it is.”

“We can find out at dinner, I’m sure.”

“Of course.” Daneli smiled. “How much time do we have until dinner?”

“We have about two hours, I’m told.”

“Alright. I’m going to unpack, and relax a bit. I’ll see you downstairs, then.”

He nodded, and left the room. She closed the door to the hall, and decided she needed a bath.

Later, as they were finishing the delicious dinner that the students had cooked for them, they started to discuss the history of Sur Rolero. Daneli started the conversation by asking about the history of the dedicated guest house for the queen. Master Hiller, who was the current administrator of Sur Rolero seemed happy to entertain her questions.

He said, “Well, my Queen, the earliest queens actually lived here most of the time—the earliest Sala Reds were held here. I’d say it wasn’t until about seven hundred years ago that the queen mostly lived at House Trageri. That was around the same time as Hasni was created to house the Sala Red, since there were, by then, too many kalas to comfortably house here. Also, as the population moved northward, it became more and more of a hassle for people to travel here.

“For the past few hundred years, most queens spend no more than a few weeks here a year—but we still maintain the guest house for you.”

“Well, Master Hiller, just so you know, as Queen, I give you permission to use this dwelling when I am not here.”

“My Queen, I much appreciate the sentiment I know that goes behind that permission, but, in truth, we don’t need it—we have more dwellings than people, now.”

“I imagine that may well change in five years.”

He nodded. “Good point.”

“Master Hiller, from which family or house did you come?”

“I am from House Wirit. Once I learned about Sur Rolero, I wanted to come study here, and live here. I have been here ever since.”

Meri asked, “How did you become administrator?”

“I studied under the previous administrator, and she, for reasons I’m not quite sure of, thought I’d make a good administrator. So here I am.” He smiled.

They discussed the current status of Sur Rolero, and Daneli made a mental note to bring up the idea of increasing the resources available to it—that would be important in the coming years.

As they broke up after dinner, Master Hiller took her aside.

“My Queen, we have arranged your talk with Captain Jessup at 7 tomorrow morning.”

“Why so early?”

“It takes most of the day to have the communication with the Captain. In addition, that timing coincides with the right time on the ship.”

“Most of the day? I don’t understand.”

“Remember, time moves for them much more slowly in comparison to us. If he talks for one minute, that is forty minutes of our time.”

“How am I going to understand him? How is he going to understand me?”

“The device compensates—but it means there are long gaps in the communication from our perspective.”

“I see. Alright. I’ll make sure I’m ready.”

“Thank you, my Queen.”

The next morning, she found herself in a small comfortable room with little in the way of embellishments, sitting at a very simple desk, with a piece of rectangular glass sitting in a sort of metal holder in front of her. Nothing else was in evidence. Jeri was ready to explain how it all worked to her, but she finally realized it didn’t matter. She would have to take all of this on faith, depending on people she trusted, and go with what she was given. Somehow, she knew that at some point, Captain Jessup’s face would show in that rectangle.

She remembered the protocol as it was explained to her. It was extremely important that she not speak until he gave the signal that he was done. She would then speak, and it would take a while until she heard any response. She was also to signal when she was done speaking.

A small group of bright yellow bands appeared on the lower right hand corner the rectangle, and the clear glass was replaced by what looked like some sort of seal. Daneli bent forward to look at it. She couldn't quite tell what it was—it was mostly symbols. She sat back, and waited. About ten minutes went by, and the yellow bands expanded and collapsed, with a rhythm she could not decipher. Finally the yellow turned to red, and the face of a man appeared, and he began to speak.

“Queen Daneli, it is a great pleasure to meet you. I have heard of the unfortunate events that occurred, and mourn the loss of Queen Raliro, who I had gotten to know. I know that you have been brought up on all of the relevant information—this is mostly just so that we get to know each other.”

His accent was quite strange, and it took a minute for Daneli to get used to it. He had a rugged face that she thought somewhat handsome. He sported a graying mustache and small, trimmed beard, and had a skin color roughly akin to her own—a light brown. His hair was long, and tied behind him. When he was done speaking, he signaled by clasping his hands in front of him, and sitting back. The red bands became green, and moved as she started to speak.

“Captain Jessup, I am pleased to meet you as well. Of course, all of this came as quite a surprise to me—and there has been much to learn, so I'm not sure that I'd say I'm brought up on *all* of the relevant information—but I'm working on it. How has the trip been?”

She almost forgot the signal. It was a good thing that there was more give on her end, since time was moving much more quickly for her. She clasped her hands, and sat back. The green bands became yellow again. His face was frozen, and she knew that the device was taking his much more slow response to her and somehow collapsing it. The door opened, and Jeri came in bringing some tea.

“Hey love, it will be a few minutes—I figured you'd like some tea—one of the students has been assigned to meet your food and beverage needs for the day.”

“Thank you, dear heart. Have you been learning a lot?”

“Yes, it has been a lot of fun.” Daneli could see her beaming, and sense how much fun she was having.

“I'm glad. Although I know I will never truly understand how this works—it is quite fascinating.”

“I understand you are to talk with some of the colonies tomorrow.”

“Yes, with Daraelia, our sister colony, ‘New Texas’, ‘New Chalcedon’ and ‘Catania.’ Apparently, Trageri used to have contact with as many as twenty of the colonies.”

Jeri said, “Yes, my understanding is that many colonies seem to have either lost the capacity to use the superimpositor, or purposefully stopped. I also know that Captain Jessup is bringing a refresh of the device for our communication with Daraelia—otherwise, we would too eventually lose the ability to communicate with them.”

The yellow again turned to red, and Daneli saw the Captain’s face re-animated.

“The trip has been uneventful, Queen Daneli. We have done some mapping of the star systems and interesting stellar phenomena that we’ve encountered along the way. We’ve also been working on a group of food crops that we heard were unable to be grown on Capella IV so far, and we have solutions—you’ll be glad to hear that you’ll be able to grow sweet potatoes, corn, and tomatoes as well as other crops, soon after we land.”

Daneli, of course, had no idea what those foods were like, so she didn’t know whether she should be looking forward to them or not. But she did appreciate that they had been working on the problems.

“In addition, we’ve had a number of children born during the trip, and a number of people die—this is standard for a trip of this duration with this many people aboard. We are all looking forward to being back on solid ground. Speaking of that—have you begun plans for our settlement?”

He clasped his hands, and sat back. Daneli wished she had a better answer for him.

“Captain Jessup, I have just recently been given possession of the notes that Queen Raliro had taken on possibilities of settlement. Unfortunately, the situation here is a bit different than it was when she wrote those notes. As you know, we are no longer at peace with Warani, thus settlements in the North are unlikely. However, we still have plenty of room in Trageri, and I know that several Houses have been mapping and exploring the many islands around our continent to see if they would be amenable to settlement.” She clasped her hands, and sat back.

She knew she would have a little time for a bathroom break, and to get up and stretch, so she took it. She returned with time enough to sip her tea for a bit. When his face returned, she could tell he looked concerned.

“Queen Daneli, I do understand that things are in a bit of disarray because of the assassination of Raliro. And, also, forgive me, but although it will be five years for you, we will arrive in the Capella system in about three months—we have been involved in arrival preparation for at least two months now. We do expect some degree of chaos upon our arrival, but it would be good to know that there were plans in place on the ground. I would hope that you might be willing to speak with me more often than once a year? Anyhow, is there anything I can tell you that will assist your process?” He sat back, clasping his hands. Daneli thought they were clasped a bit tightly.

She took her time to respond—she knew that he’d hardly notice that she did.

“Captain Jessup, I do understand your concern, and, frankly, I share it. I was just told about this two weeks ago—before your breakfast!” She actually had no idea what time it was on his ship, and figured she was wrong, but she assumed he’d get the drift.

“Also, be assured—we orchestrate gatherings as large as your colonists contingent quite often—with food and lodging for all. In any event, although it is quite a journey for me to come down to use this communicator, I am willing to meet with you twice a year to update you on our progress.

“As to what I need to know from you—I’m imagining you’ve spoken to previous queens about your colonists social structures and expectations? I’ll be reading all of the transcripts.” She sat back, hands clasped. She got the sense that it would be a long time before he answered, and she went in search of some lunch.

The rest of the conversation was of a similar tenor—he was concerned that there wasn’t much planning done, she was trying to make him feel better. In the end, she wasn’t sure that she succeeded, but she promised to speak with him in six months, and to have concrete information for him. That task daunted her, but she had some degree of confidence that she could accomplish it, with help from her spouses and House.

She walked back to the guest house with Jeri—Meri was happily spending his time at the library. Kamila and Quin were making dinner for the five of them. It would be nice to have a meal with just her spouses. As she and Jeri walked into the guest house, Daneli could smell something wonderful cooking. She popped her head into the kitchen, to be greeted by Kamila shooing her out.

Daneli asked her, “Love, is there time for me to have a nap?”

“Yes, yes—dinner won’t be ready for another hour or so.”

“Perfect. Thanks.” Daneli realized she really needed the nap, and went upstairs to her rooms.

Later, as they were all sitting together having dinner, Daneli started the conversation she knew she needed to eventually have with all of her spouses.

“Well loves, I need your help rather desperately. We have five years to figure out how and where to settle fifty thousand new colonists. On my plate is to read all of the transcripts so I understand what they are expecting, and how they will want to live. I need to come back to Sur Rolero in six months with some concrete plans.

“The biggest thing is that we have to tell all of Trageri about this—soon. Very, very soon. I can’t do anything about the fact that all the previous queens saw fit to withhold this information from everyone. But I’m the one left holding the bag.”

Kamila said, “When we get back, you should talk to Suha Fero.”

“I did already, actually. What she said made sense—she was following what the earlier queens had, and sort of passing the buck. She knew they would not arrive while she ruled. In all honesty, if I knew they wouldn’t arrive for twenty or thirty years — I’m not sure I’d take the risk to tell everyone, either.”

Quin said, “The Sala Red is only three months away, Daneli. Tell all of the kalas then, and have the information flow from them. In addition, we can set aside several sessions to begin to hash out plans.”

Daneli nodded her head. “Yes, Quin, that makes a lot of sense.”

He followed up with, “And, we should make sure that each Sala Red after this one has a full day to discuss preparations—an extra day. The kalas won’t like it, but you can hold over their head the prospect of the chaos of fifty thousand colonists without a home.”

“Thank you Quin, that’s helpful.”

Kamila said, “I think you should convene a committee of kalas—separate from the executive committee—larger, to help handle the planning.”

Quin said, “Yes, that’s a great idea—I can imagine some candidate kalas for that. We should choose them from all over Trageri—and make sure we include all Houses with critical roles.”

They discussed their planning, and Daneli felt a lot better—she would have the help of her spouses and her House, and, eventually, a lot of people in Trageri. She would not be alone.

She sat in a chair next to Master Hiller, who was looking at a man with blond hair and lighter skin than she'd ever seen. He looked bored, as well. He was the representative of the colony called "New Chalcedon." She had had only the shortest time to read a summary of what was known about the colony. It was one of the earlier colonies— started a few years before it was clear that Earth would become uninhabitable. It was funded by a devout family of extraordinarily rich people, and was designed as a very conservative theocracy. She imagined that they might find Warani to be much more in line with their ideas than Trageri.

Because in their experience, representatives of New Chalcedon did not communicate well with women, various male Masters had spoken with this colony for hundreds of years, always in the presence of the Queen. Master Hiller would do the communication, and Daneli would watch—on the sideline, away from the screen so that the other could not see her. Unlike in the case of Captain Jessup, this communication was completely synchronous.

"Master Hiller, it is nice to see you again."

"Thank you, Mister Gerald. I hope all is well with you and your family."

Daneli noticed that this "Mister Gerald" had an accent different than Captain Jessup's—but not any easier to understand.

"Yes, it is, thank you. I do appreciate your contact with us, as this will be the last year we maintain our superimpositor."

"Last year? Are the elements fading?"

"Oh, no! The device works fine. Father God has given us a clear signal that we must cease all communications and trade with all other colonies. He has told us that it pollutes our thoughts and souls. We must remain pure. At year's end, in a few weeks, we will be destroying all of our off-world communication devices."

"I see."

"And please communicate to all colonies, and any ships that might come by your system, that our system is now off-limits."

“As you might know, Mr. Gerald, we are quite far away from any trade routes. But I will pass on your statements to any we might communicate with.”

“Thank you. May I ask you a question, since this will be the last communication between our colonies?”

“Certainly, Mr. Gerald.”

“I am an historian—one of the few we have here on New Chalcedon. History is not especially well-regarded, here. Anyway, I was reading back over the transcripts of communications between our colonies, and I noticed that about seven hundred years ago, you abruptly switched from having a woman, your ‘queen,’ talk with us, to having a man, always called ‘Master’ talk with us. The current theory is that your society finally saw the damage that female leadership could do, and became a patriarchy, as is proper.”

Master Hiller looked at Daneli and smiled a conspiratorial smile, sending her the thought “I’m going to love this.” He looked back at Mr. Gerald.

“Is that what you think, Mr. Gerald?”

He laughed. “No, actually, that’s not what I think.”

Hiller sent her, in thought, “Damn, I guess I won’t get to enjoy this too much.”

“What do you think?”

“I think that your matriarchy has gone on fine, and you just switched your strategy of talking with us. I can’t seem to convince any of my colleagues that this is the truth, however.”

Master Hiller got up from the chair, and motioned for Daneli to sit in it. She raised her eyebrows, and he sent “He’ll appreciate having the evidence.” She nodded.

She moved to sit in the chair facing the glass.

“Hello Mr. Gerald, I am Queen Daneli Trageri, fifty-sixth queen of Trageri. It has become customary when talking with New Chalcedon to have the administrator of Sur Rolero, or a designated representative, should the administrator be female, to talk with you in the presence of the queen. It seems that the communication goes on better that way.”

He looked at her, frowning somewhat. “I see. Well, I guess I will win that bet. Not that any of my colleagues will be happy that I was right.” He seemed to be trying to unsuccessfully hold a scowl on his face.

“It is nice to officially meet you, Mr. Gerald, and I guess it is appropriate that we sign off the communication in this way.”

“Yes... well, we will be praying for your eternal souls.”

“We wish you the best in all your endeavors.”

The screen went blank. Daneli looked up at Master Hiller.

“They seem as bad as Warani.”

“No, my Queen, they are far worse than Warani. They would find Warani lacking. Someday, when you get some spare time, you should read the book Master Quinta wrote about them around one hundred years ago. It will give you nightmares.”

Her communication with their sister colony Daraelia had been with a friendly woman, who surprisingly didn't have a lot to say, or ask, but gave her condolences on the assassination of Queen Raliro, and said that she looked forward to further communication. Her discussion with a representative of the colony “New Texas” was uneventful and ultimately uninteresting.

She had a quite lovely conversation with one of the leaders of Catania, a water world about five months away by spaceship, and 3 years of time would elapse on the planets while in transit, Master Hiller had explained. They had opened up the possibility of actual contact and trade, using the ship that Captain Jessup was bringing with him. Catania, at present, had also not developed technologically, save what they needed to live in a world almost entirely covered in water, so they, like Capella IV, had no space ships of their own.

Catania was not a matriarchy like Trageri, but it was an egalitarian society, and most of the current leadership council were women. Daneli thought that contact with Catania would not be a bad thing for Trageri.

By the end of the day, Daneli was overwhelmed with things that she knew she needed to deal with. She tried to remind herself that there was plenty of time, and she'd have lots of help. But she knew that she, in the end, had to try to hold all of these things somehow together.

They spent two more days at Sur Rolero, spent in meetings with Masters Hiller, Kateri, and a few others, getting their feedback on plans and ideas. She was looking forward to the trip home. She would be spending it mostly in planning and working with her spouses for the Sala Red. She would have to carefully write her speech for the opening private session with the kalas.

Daneli had decided that she wanted to bring all of her spouses, as well as Mara and Rogera, to the Sala Red. They were having an informal dinner in their quarters the evening before the opening of the Sala Red.

Mara asked, “How is the speech preparation going, Daneli?”

“I’m done, Mara. I’ve practiced it, and there isn’t much more I can do.”

“I’m sure it will be great, Daneli.”

“I wish I had the same confidence you do, Mara.”

Derisi said, “Well, Daneli, I’ve heard it, and I know it’s great!”

Everyone laughed, and Daneli gave Derisi an appreciative grin.

Daneli actually had two speeches to write—the first, and easiest, was the speech during the opening rituals. That one would be short and sweet, and full of platitudes. The second one, however, where she told all of the assembled kalas about the coming ship, was far from easy to write. She had to assure them that she, as young and inexperienced as she was, could lead them through this process. She had full confidence that House Trageri could lead the effort—she just lacked confidence in her own leadership abilities.

The next afternoon, she was sitting in the large inside auditorium, where 2008 kalas were arrayed in front of her. The executive committee, who had met in session the day before, and had heard the news, shared the dais with her, and were to her right and left. It was finally time. She had her eyes closed for a moment—centering herself, taking a few deep breaths. She could sense the impatience in the room. She opened her eyes, and began to speak.

“Welcome, kalas of Trageri, to the nine hundred and ninety-seventh Sala Red. We are at a very important moment in time. I will cut to the chase. I have astounding and life-changing news to share with you today.

Two hundred years ago, Queen Gorela, faced with the potential defeat of Trageri by Warani forces, contacted our sister colony, Daraelia, to ask for assistance.” Daneli heard the murmurs start in the room. She knew that most in this room knew nothing about the sister colony. She went on.

“You know already of the laser weapons—we got plans for them at that time. In addition...” She paused, and took a breath. “In addition, Queen Gorela and Daraelia agreed to have Daraelia

send a large group of colonists to Trageri. These colonists were to assist with our conflict with Warani, as necessary, and, more importantly, re-create our relationship with Daraelia, which was severed when Joella Trageri left Earth with a large group of our people.” More murmuring. She was sure they were completely confused by now, as she had been.

“I’m told that because of something called ‘time dilation,’ these colonists will be arriving here, on Capella IV, in just under 5 years.” Unlike Warani, everyone in Trageri knew that their planet was called Capella IV, but it was generally just called “the world.”

“These fifty-thousand colonists will join Trageri, and we need to plan for their arrival and settlement. For reasons that I understand, the previous queens kept this information largely to themselves. I just found out about it almost three months ago, and went down to Sur Rolero to be in contact with a man called Captain Thomas Jessup, who is the captain of the ship bringing the colonists. I thought it most prudent to bring this to you, the kalas of Trageri, in order for you to find the best way to send the news throughout your clans.

“This is a momentous as well as dangerous time. We must balance the needs of Trageri tradition with the needs of the colonists arriving. As well, we must decide, as kalas of Trageri, the nature of our relationship with Daraelia. Daraelia has evolved somewhat differently over the more than one thousand years we’ve been separated.

“Your first task will be to elect a small committee of ten kalas to be the primary planning committee for this settlement process. That committee may, at its discretion, convene sub-committees as needed. I will not chair, nor be on this committee, but it will report to me on a monthly basis. House Trageri has set aside offices and housing in our compound for this committee’s use. I have faith that we can, as leaders of Trageri, make sure that this is a process which will enrich Trageri, the colonists, and our world as a whole.”

She sat down, and the room erupted in chaos. She was expecting that. She waited a minute or two, then picked up the gavel, and banged it. After the fourth loud bang, the room finally quieted down.

She said, “Books are now going around, which include all of the details that you need to know about these colonists and our sister colony. We will break for sixty minutes, and return to take nominations for this committee.” Her spouses and some others were busy giving out books,

which had taken weeks to create, with much help from the Masters and students at Sur Rolero, where most books in Trageri were printed.

She got up to walk out of the room, and back to their suite. She wanted to spend a little time with her spouses before the kalas reconvened. As she was walking, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned around to see Brao Sopha, now Kala of House Sopha, sibling of her spouse Garisi. They embraced.

“Brao, it is so nice to see you! I’m so sorry for the loss of your kala last year.”

She gave a slight bow. “Thank you, my Queen. It has been a challenge filling her shoes.”

“I’m sure that you have acquitted yourself quite ably.”

She smiled. “Thank you for your confidence, my Queen.”

“Was this just a social greeting?”

“Alas, no, my Queen. Forgive the interruption.”

“No problem—you are part of House Trageri, of course, now that Garisi is my spouse.”

“Thank you. I wanted to know what you thought of me nominating myself for the settlement committee.”

“Kala Sopha, it would frankly surprise me if no one nominated you first. Your house is well regarded, even though it is a minor house. You are quite well respected among the kalas. I would welcome your participation.”

“Thank you, my Queen. I have a particular interest in Daraelia.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I spent some time studying at Sur Rolero when I was younger, and when I heard about Daraelia, I was intrigued and interested. I have studied everything written about it so far, my Queen, and the opportunity to be involved in their settlement process is quite compelling to me.”

Daneli looked at Brao, who had this twinkle in her eye. Yes, Daraelia was something she was quite passionate about. She hoped that passion didn’t mean that Brao would be biased, or closed-minded in any way.

“Are you sure you feel you are not too partial to them?”

She nodded her head vigorously. “Yes, my Queen. I am quite concerned about the effect of Daraelia on Trageri. They are an intriguing people, but they are not of Trageri, and it’s important that we remember that.”

“Thank you, Brao. Sometime, I would love to have a much more lengthy conversation with you about that.”

“Of course, my Queen. Well, I have interrupted you enough. Thank you again.”

“Sure thing. See you later.”

Daneli watched Brao walk quickly back toward the auditorium. She remembered that when they met years ago, Daneli had regretted the fact that Brao was Kalea, thus ineligible to be one of her spouses. She shook her head, and walked back to her rooms. She had a brief meeting scheduled with Kamila and Quin before the meeting reconvened.

A little over a week later, Daneli was happily astride Galinsa again, riding on the last leg home to House Trageri after a Sala Red that would certainly stay in her memory for a long time. It seemed that the parties at this Sala Red had to be extra raucous to make up for the intensity of the realities they were facing. House Trageri had been able to host some of the best dance parties of the week, and she closed one with Houses Sopha, Surfit, Suli and Bulio, their “House Extended,” was the most memorable of all of them. How she’d managed to make it into bed with Brao was something she didn’t actually remember, but she certainly remembered enjoying their time together.

Daneli thought about Brao. Not only was she on the settlement committee, but she had been elected chair. They had already convened committees to determine the capacity of the islands, and to map out land that could possibly be given to groups of settlers to found families. It had been a good, productive Sala Red.

She turned to her right, to see Kamila sidle up to her on her mare. She seemed pensive, and Daneli could feel an emotion she couldn’t quite identify.

Daneli said, “Hi love. What’s on your mind?”

“I was talking with Jeri and Quin earlier...”

“And?”

“They seem to have found some extra-marital enjoyment this week. And I heard that you, Holo and Derisi did, too.”

Daneli sighed, ah, that was the feeling. Hurt and jealousy.

“Love, it’s something we both need to get used to. I felt guilty the morning after, and when I saw Jeri, she made fun of me, and told me that it was my ‘Northern attitudes.’ She was right—this is completely normal in Trageri, Kamila.”

Kamila was pouting. “That doesn’t make it easier for me, Daneli.”

“Well, maybe next time you need to find some extra-marital enjoyment for yourself.” Daneli smiled, and Kamila seemed to smile despite herself. Daneli sensed some humor creeping into her emotions.

Daneli went on, “Well, we did manage to accomplish a whole lot during this Sala Red. I will have plenty to talk with Captain Jessup about when I speak to him.”

Kamila sighed, and Daneli could sense her move on. “Yes, it was a very productive Sala Red. I do wish that I had a feeling for whether or when we should tell Warani of this.”

“I don’t know that they ever need to know, love. They won’t admit that it’s possible, and they will just ignore it, anyway.”

“Yes, I know. I just feels strange to have this major change in our lives happen, and have them have no idea it’s going on.”

“As long as they don’t do anything stupid and have to learn the hard way.”

“Well, there is that.”

“We’ll just have to see how this plays out—if we need to tell them, we will tell them.”

Kamila nodded. They talked amiably about the varied events of the Sala Red, until they arrived at the House, greeted by most of her parents, who had kept things going while they were away.

Daneli sat in the now familiar room at Sur Rolero, waiting for Captain Jessup to respond to her report. She had been able to let him know that all of Trageri now knew of their arrival, and plans were beginning to form for settlement of the colonists. In her earlier conversation with Captain Jessup, as well as with the colony Catania, it seemed that there would be reason to dedicate facilities for activities relating to space flight, so Daneli had started that process going.

She also explained the committees that had been convened, and the actions they were taking to work on providing a settlement plan, as well as plans relating to the discussions about use of technology in Trageri.

The bars went from yellow to red, and Captain Jessup's face, so much the same as it looked last time they spoke, animated. He had a smile for the first time.

"Queen Daneli, thank you so much for that report. That is quite heartening to hear, and I feel much better than I did last we spoke. You have accomplished a lot in a very short time, and I now have confidence that this will work out fine. I do have a question for you, something you did not cover in your report. When will you be telling the two other colonies of our arrival?" He clasped his hands.

Daneli took her usual minute or two to consider her answer to him.

"Captain Jessup, I don't know how much you have been told about the situation with Warani. You may or may not have been told that I actually grew up there, so I know it very well. Warani refuses to believe that we are a colony. They are under the sway of priests, who insist that their God King brought them here on a flaming chariot, and that the other people here in the world were brought by the God King's enemy, for the Warani to conquer. Telling them of your arrival will serve no purpose, since they would choose not to believe it—or believe that the God King's enemy was sending reinforcements.

"We have lost touch with Niyesh nine hundred years ago—we have no idea how they are, or what they are doing, and sending a ship across the ocean seems dangerous to us, so we have not done it. My understanding is that they did not speak our language originally, so it means we likely could not communicate with them in any event." She clasped her hands and sat back.

When he responded, his face had changed—he seemed somber, somehow.

"Queen Daneli, I understand the situation, and wish it were different. It troubles me that these three colonies are so out of touch with one another. But I guess, for now, there is not much to be done about it. Thank you so much for this report, and I will let you go back home, and continue your work. I look forward to speaking with you in six months of your time."

On her way back home, she was sitting in the bow of the ship with Meri, the only spouse that wanted to accompany her to Sur Rolero this time.

"So, Daneli, how was your conversation with Captain Jessup?"

"It was actually quite good, Meri. He seemed to be happy at the progress we've made in such a short time."

“I’m glad of that. He seems an interesting character. Daraelia sent us capsule biographies of every colonist, and I’ve read some of his.”

“They did? How?”

“The superimpositor can send text and images, as well as do the communication you’ve been doing. In order to be able to duplicate what we can read on the screen, the Masters and students of Sur Rolero had to build a new machine that is basically a printing press—so we can now make copies of what they send us.”

“How did they manage to manufacture the laser weapons without that new machine?”

“From what I heard, some student painstakingly transcribed the plans from the screen—just like the plans for the new machine, of course.”

Daneli shook her head. She still didn’t really quite get any of it, but she was very glad that she had spouses who did.

“Well, when can I get a copy of those biographies?”

“Daneli, you might want to read a few of them, but you’re not going to want to read fifty thousand! Wait until the summary and analysis is out—I was told that should be ready in about two to three months. Sur Rolero will send us a copy, I’m sure.”

Daneli smiled, and put her hand on Meri’s arm. “Yeah, dear, you are absolutely right. I have enough on my plate ready the transcripts of the conversations between Captain Jessup and the previous 9 queens!”

“How is that going?”

“I’ve barely gotten into the transcripts for Queen Gorela. It will be a while.

CHAPTER 9: LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Daneli was sitting in her parlor with some tea in the early afternoon, reading the old transcripts of the conversations of Captain Jessup and the varied queens, starting with Queen Gorela, the one who requested the new colonists 200 years ago. She was reading them sequentially, hoping to learn more about Captain Jessup and what he might be like—and, more importantly, how he and those who were coming with him might view Trageri. The transcripts were a tall stack of books—it would take her a long time to get through them all. The summary and analysis of the colonists biographies was also on her pile—it had arrived just a week ago.

Daneli had begun to learn how different their history had been to the history of the descendants of the second colony from their original enclave. Unlike Joella Trageri, who limited the technological capacity of the colony quite significantly, particularly in areas of transportation and communications, this colony had continued to advance technology, although they did their best to do so within limits, and more slowly than technology had advanced on Earth before they left. Daneli could hardly wrap her head around what kinds of things they might bring with them. Captain Jessup was clear that the colonists he was bringing would respect Trageri ways, but she knew there would be some serious disruption of things upon their arrival.

They were due in about four years. She wished that Raliro, who had spent a lot of time talking with Captain Jessup, would be there. Her two conversations with him had been interesting, and it was clear he was concerned about her youth and inexperience. She was concerned herself. She reminded herself that she had lots of help—including Suha Fero, who had spoken a fair bit to Captain Jessup during her time as queen.

She heard a quiet knock at her door.

“Come in.”

The door opened slowly to reveal a small girl poking her head in.

“Hi Mama Daneli. I wanted to show you this model I made.”

Quin was behind little Daneli, Kamila’s oldest daughter, and he opened the door fully. Daneli could see he was beaming.

He said, “She made a model of a wagon—one of a group of them.”

“Wow.”

“Everyone is impressed, right little Daneli?”

Daneli said, “Come here, little Daneli, show me the model.”

Little Daneli walked up to the chair where Daneli sat, and put the model out in front of her for Daneli to take. She took it from the child’s hands gently, and looked at it carefully. For a child of six, Daneli thought this was extraordinary work.

“Little Daneli, you have quite the talent!”

“Quin helped me.”

Quin said, “Only a tiny bit, little one.”

“Well, little Daneli, I am very impressed, too. We should put that in the downstairs lounge, and show it off!”

“Thank you, Mama Daneli.”

A loud knock at the door brought all of their attention up to the entrance. Masters Garliri, Juri and Woren were at the entrance.

Master Garliri said, “My Queen, I am sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s alright. Little Daneli, I’ll come by later—I want to see more of these models you are making.” She looked at Quin, and said, “Thanks, dear, for bringing her by.” He nodded, and took little Daneli’s hand, and they walked out of the room. Master Juri closed the door.

“I take it this is important. Please, sit down.” They entered into her parlor, and sat in chairs near her.

Master Woren said, “A couple of weeks ago, we heard some strange chatter about some sort of attack on the Warani Summer Palace. Our spies said that the King was certain it was a Trageri attack. Since our spies don’t actually know they are spies for Trageri, we did not tip them off—we just let it go. We were sure it must be some sort of internal struggle.

“Then, we heard that the Warani Summer Palace had fallen to these invaders, as well as Karina, and several other territories in northwestern Warani. And, we heard that they now knew that these people are not from Trageri—they said they speak a completely different language and look and dress nothing like Trageri. They say they have ‘terrible’ weapons. They are, of course mystified about where these people came from.”

“Niyesh?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What weapons do you think they have?”

Master Juri said, “I’d expect things like guns and cannons, perhaps more.”

Daneli said, “Well, yes, for Warani, that would be terrible. Well, I have to say I don’t feel all that badly for them.”

Master Woren said, “There’s more, my Queen.”

“Well, then keep going.”

“Yesterday, a messenger came across the western bridge, looking for the guard station. We’ve come back with him. He has a message from King Gasri, for you alone. Of course, we will not let you be alone with him.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s downstairs, waiting in one of the conference rooms.”

“Alright, I’ll meet you down there. I’m going to gather Quin, Liona and Kamila.”

They left, and she went to the children’s wing, where she knew Quin would be. She ran into Arlen, whom she asked to find Liona and Kamila.

Finally, they were all gathered in the conference room, the messenger sitting at one end of the table looking very nervous. Masters Garliri, Woren and Juri and Quin, Liona, and Kamila were all around the table, and Daneli was at the head of the table.

She looked at the man, who looked familiar to her.

“What is your name?”

“Hesero, my Lady.”

“Ah, Hesero, the one who escorted us from the Winter Palace to the border, what was it, seven years ago?”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Please call me by my proper honorific. I am Queen Daneli.”

“Yes, my... Queen Daneli.”

“So what message does King Gasri have for me.”

“He asked me to deliver it to you, and you only.”

“I’m sorry, Hesero. Tell me here and now what it is, or go home and tell the King you failed to deliver the message.”

Hesero was silent for a moment, looking around the room. He seemed to be considering his options.

“Very well. King Gasri would like you to come to the Winter Palace for an audience with him.”

Daneli laughed. “Why?”

“He didn’t say, Queen Daneli.”

“You are kidding me, right? Warani assassinated one queen, and he actually expects me to come to the Winter Palace because he asks me to? What kind of idiot does he think I am?”

“I’m sorry, Queen Daneli. This was his message.”

“Well, Hesero, go back to King Gasri, and tell him that if he wants to talk to me, he has to come here. He is welcome at House Trageri as a guest of the House at any time, and I am happy to talk with him. But I am not setting foot in Warani ever again.”

Hesero nodded, looking sheepish. She did not at all envy his task.

“Liona, will you see that Hesero gets a good dinner, and a guest bed? I imagine he needs some rest.”

“Yes, sure thing, Daneli.”

Daneli said, “I think we’re done here. I promised little Daneli a visit to see her models, so I think I’ll go do that now. Masters Garliri, Woren and Juri, will you please join me and my spouses for dinner tonight? I feel we have some things to discuss.”

They nodded, and the meeting broke up. As Daneli walked to the children’s wing, she felt someone next to her, and turned to see Kamila. She looped her arm around Daneli.

“Big doings in the North, eh?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“I bet I know what my father wants.”

“I do too. Help fighting. I imagine that with the superior weapons the Niyeshis have in comparison to Warani, King Gasri is looking at possible defeat for Warani. It would take a long time, but it’s quite likely. He has no ships to try and defend from further ships coming ashore, and swords, lances and arrows are not much of a match for bullets and cannonballs. But what I don’t understand is why in Sabadora’s name does he think we would help?”

“He probably thinks that we would be worried that if Warani fell, we would be next.”

“Well, when he comes to visit, we will have to disabuse him of that notion.”

“You are going to enjoy this, aren’t you?”

Daneli chuckled. “Yes, frankly. Do you want to see him, or would you like to opt out of your diplomatic role this time?”

“Oh, no, I can’t wait to see his face when you introduce me as one of your spouses.”

Daneli laughed. “You are terrible.”

Several days after Hesero left, another messenger had come telling them to expect the King in a week’s time. She wasn’t surprised he’d given in. The House had been in the quiet fervor of preparations for the visit. They all knew he would have a huge entourage, and they decided to use the buildings and guest houses generally reserved for the Sala Trageri for his visit. They would have a welcoming dinner in the large lounge that was usually reserved for House Trageri’s entertaining during the yearly meeting, since it had a very well equipped kitchen.

Daneli was, in fact, looking forward to this. She was 100% sure that the Sala Hoira, if she called it, would vote unanimously against aiding Warani. But she had no intention of calling it, since she was not going to suggest that Trageri aid Warani by sending any troops. Warani had been nothing but a thorn in their side for hundreds of years, and she imagined that the Niyeshis and Warani would be fighting for years. She looked forward to looking him in the eye, and saying “no” once again.

She had no idea what his reaction would be to the knowledge that his daughter was still alive, and in Trageri after all these years. She didn’t know whether he would be angry or happy. She did know that he would be shocked by the knowledge that Kamila was one of Daneli’s spouses.

Daneli was sitting in her study, looking over the map that Master Woren had made, showing the positions of the Niyeshi and Warani armies, and the territories already captured by the Niyeshis, based on the intelligence they were gathering. It actually didn’t look like the Niyeshis had brought a lot of troops with them over the ocean.

On the map were also indications of where the Trageri ships were posted, looking for any stray Niyeshi ships that might want to enter into Trageri. So far, there had been no sight of any Niyeshi ships, even though there were a few Trageri ships hanging out in the ocean not far from the Warani Winter Palace.

She heard a knock on her door, and she got up to go into the parlor. Kamila walked in. They shared an embrace.

“He has arrived. He brought—are you ready for this?”

“What?”

“One hundred guard and fifty servants. In addition, there are four dukes, and they each have a guard contingent... and servants.”

“Which dukes?”

“I don’t know yet. Likely Fregili, Trevalian and Durelli—the ones we know are favored right now, aside from Karina—but Duke Karina died in the attack. I don’t know who else.”

“What will it be like to see your previous husband?”

Kamila smiled. “Just as pleasant as seeing father.”

“Alright, so how are the dinner preparations going?”

“Just fine. Dinner is set for 7:00, not that my father will understand that. I’ve give Quin the task of explaining to the King when dinner is.”

They laughed.

“Does anyone need anything from me? I want to keep studying the materials Master Woren prepared for me before dinner.”

“Not at all, my Queen.” Kamila ran her hand through Daneli’s hair.

“Stop that—I mean calling me queen.”

“But you are queen.”

Daneli took Kamila’s hand and started to nibble on her fingers.

“I’m not *your* queen, I’m just your spouse.”

“Hmmm, yes, I guess that’s so.” Kamila grinned. “I’ll leave you to your materials, then.”

They kissed.

“Remember, dear heart, tonight, you are mine,” Kamila said.

“I remember. See you at dinner.” Kamila turned and left, closing the door, and Daneli went back to the intelligence reports and maps.

Daneli held the glass of wine high. She was standing in the center of a rather long table set on the dais, in front of a number of tables in the rest of the hall, populated by the King, and some

assorted nobles and their wives. There had already been a fair bit of mumbling and rustling when Kamila had walked into the room and sat down two seats down from Daneli. It was time for introductions.

“King Gasri, Dukes Fregili, Durelli, Trevalian and Khurel, and families, I give you the warmest welcome to Trageri, and House Trageri. I would like to introduce you to some members of our House. To my right is Suha Fero, Queen of Trageri before Queen Raliro. To her right is Mother Worli, the oldest member of House Trageri. I would like to introduce you to my spouses, Liona from Hopqua, Kamila from Warani...”

There was an uproar in the room, and Daneli had to pause for a moment. “... Quin from Borelo, Jeri from Trageri, Derisi from Jero, Arlen from Huron, Garisi from Sopa, Meri from Surfit, Ulio from Suli, and Holo from Bulio. I hope that you enjoy your time here, and our meetings are fruitful.”

She wasn't surprised by the uproar, really, but it was interesting to watch the consternation on the faces of many of the nobles present, most specifically King Gasri. Remiro seemed nonplussed about the whole thing, and she noticed that he was looking specifically at King Gasri. She imagined him trying to say to the King “You see? I *didn't* kill her.”

The King stood up, raising his glass. “Thank you, Queen Daneli for those introductions. I am surprised, but most pleased that my daughter Kamila is safe and sound. I as well hope that our meetings are fruitful.”

He sat down, and various House members, assisted by some of the servants of the King, started to bring out plates full of food. All of the preparation of the food and hall had been done by House Trageri, but Daneli could see that the assistance of the servants was helpful, given that all of her spouses were on the dais.

It was an uneventful dinner after that, and everyone went back to their respective quarters, agreeing to meet in the morning. Daneli was looking forward to that meeting. As she was walking out of the hall, she saw Kamila talking with her father, and she looked forward to finding out what he had to say to her.

Later, she was sitting up in bed, reading more of the transcripts of conversations with Captain Jessup, when Kamila came into the room. Daneli looked up. Kamila started to undress, and hopped into bed.

“Hey. How was the conversation with your father?”

“It was fine. He was actually happy for me, surprisingly. He said he knew that Remiro had beat me, and he was happy to learn that he’d not managed to kill me or my children. Remiro approached me, too.”

“And?”

“He was angry. I told him he didn’t have a right to be angry—he almost killed me. Somehow that didn’t seem to matter. And, of course, he had all sorts of horrible things to say about you and the Trageri way.”

“I’m *so* surprised!”

Kamila just chuckled.

Daneli said, “I wonder how tomorrow is going to go?”

“Tomorrow, my love, will wait until tomorrow.” Kamila grabbed the transcript book out of Daneli’s hands, and put it on the table next to her.

Daneli walked into the meeting room, to see Riva and Arlen setting out the breakfast things. They had done their best with Kamila’s help—taken some steaks out of the freezer and cooked them, made up some eggs and other things. Along with that was the standard Trageri breakfast food: rice porridge, fruit, coffee and breads.

Kamila and Liona were already at the table, and Daneli knew Quin was probably gathering up the Warani nobles to come to the meeting. She had asked Master Woren to prepare a little demonstration, if necessary—and she could see some guards outside the window stacking boxes and rocks into a broken-looking wagon. Daneli assumed that would be the target of the demonstration.

She heard voices, and looked up to see Quin walk in with the King and the four dukes.

She said, “Welcome, please take what you wish from that sideboard over there for your breakfast, and come sit at the table. I wish we’d been able to get some grot for you, but sadly no one here drinks it, so it’s not imported. There is coffee, however, our breakfast drink.”

The King nodded, and he and the other nobles uncomfortably gathered up their breakfasts, and sat at the table. Daneli could tell it was effort they weren’t used to.

When King Gasri finally sat down, he turned to Daneli.

“Queen Daneli, may I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why don’t you have servants? I see your family members doing everything.”

“King Gasri, everyone in Trageri has a chance to do something with their lives that has meaning to them. We all are equal, and we all chip in to do tasks that are needed around the House, like cooking, cleaning, etc. I enjoy cooking sometimes. You should try it—it’s quite rewarding.”

He and the dukes laughed heartily. He said, “Well, you *are* a woman, after all.”

Quin said, “Actually, the men cook just as much as the women do.”

“But why not have servants?”

Daneli said, “Do you think your servants wouldn’t rather be doing something else? Something that they might have fun with, or give them satisfaction?”

“They aren’t smart enough to know what that would be—I’m sure they get plenty of satisfaction doing what they do.”

“Is that so?”

“Servants are meant to be servants. They are raised to be servants, and will die servants.”

“I’ll make you a bet, King Gasri.”

“A bet?”

“Yes. Pick any servant. We will give them a choice. They can choose to stay here, and do whatever it is they want to do with their life, or stay with you.”

The King laughed. “Why do you think they would want to live in this Godforsaken land?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, I don’t.”

“OK, then, it’s a bet. Choose any one. Really, *any* one.”

“Alright, I’ll agree to this bet. I look forward to seeing the look on your face when you lose.”

A few servants had accompanied the King into the room, and Daneli had seen them take notice of the conversation. The King looked at each of them, considering, then picked one, a slight, young woman—maybe even a girl. She looked petrified.

Daneli asked, “What is your name?”

“Gilde, Queen.”

“Gilde, how old are you?”

“Eighteen years, Queen.”

“So, did you hear my bet?”

She nodded slowly.

“This is the question: You can choose to come and live in Trageri, where we have no servants, as you’ve seen. You could live here at House Trageri, or join another House or family. You could do whatever you want—you could learn how to read and write, and study history, or science, or politics. You could do what my spouse Jeri does. She’s an engineer—she’s learned how to make things work—like the hot water we have, and the lights. You would be free, totally. No one would tell you what to do, or what to be—you would decide. You would, of course, have to be a contributing member of a family, like we all are. But you would never be a servant again. You can choose that, or choose to stay with King Gasri.”

As Daneli said these things, she could see Gilde’s eyes go wide. She was silent for a while, mostly watching King Gasri, who had the most horrific look on his face. Daneli was appalled—he was trying to intimidate her! Gilde then looked around at the Southerners in the room, and as she did, Daneli noted a change in her demeanor. Daneli could hear that she’d made up her mind.

Gilde said quietly, “Queen Daneli, I wish to stay here. I never wanted to be a servant, but my mother and father were, and I had no chance to do anything else.”

The King was angry, Daneli could feel it emanating from him.

He shouted, “Well, she cannot stay here!”

“I’m sorry, King Gasri, you agreed to the bet. Mara, do me a favor and take Gilde to the main house?”

Mara nodded, and took Gilde by the hand, who was standing stock still in fear. Mara whispered to her, and they walked away.

“How dare you steal one of my servants!”

“You agreed to the bet, King Gasri. If you hadn’t been so damned sure that your servants don’t know any better, you’d not agreed to the bet. I guess you learned something today, didn’t you?”

“You tricked me!”

“There was no trick, King Gasri, and you know it.”

He silently fumed for a while, then calmed down. He said, “You are right, Queen Daneli, it was no trick. You won the bet fairly.”

Daneli gave him a little credit. He was smarter and more open-minded than he looked. She thought that was good information to have.

They talked amiably about varied things for a while, then everyone was finished eating. Daneli’s spouses and some of the servants cleaned the table of plates.

Daneli said, “Well, shall we begin this meeting in earnest? King Gasri, I imagine I know why you are here, but why don’t you tell me in detail?”

“Certainly. As you know, we have been invaded by these people—we don’t know who they are, or where they came from.”

Daneli said, “They are from the continent across the Near Ocean. They call it Niyesh. They were one of the three colonies from Earth founded on this world, that many call Capella IV.”

“What are you talking about?”

“King Gasri, I know that in Warani, you have been practicing purposeful ignorance about the origin of the people in the world.”

“Ignorance? We know what happened. Our God King brought us here on a flaming chariot. He wanted us to rule this world, like we had ruled our past world.”

“So where do you think we, or the Niyeshis, come from?”

The King was silent a moment. He then said, “I don’t really know, Queen Daneli. Our priests say...” He paused.

“They say?”

“The priests say that you, at least, were sent here by the God King’s enemy.”

“I see. You don’t believe that?”

“No, not really.”

“I’m happy to hear that. I would imagine that our story makes a bit more sense, no?”

He was silent, and the room stayed silent for a minute or so. Finally, he spoke.

“Queen Daneli, I am king of a land where the priests hold sway. You can’t believe what I had to do to convince our head priest that his presence was not needed on this trip. I cannot say anything that is blasphemous, and it would be blasphemous for me to say that your story is

correct. The truth is, at the moment I don't care. I have an enemy I don't know how to fight taking over our land."

"And?"

"We need your help to rid our land of them. As you can imagine, asking you does not come easily."

"Yes, I can imagine."

"We cannot match their weapons, and we have no ships. We will be overtaken by them in a matter of years, or perhaps even only months."

"What do you want from us?"

"Troops and ships."

Daneli was quiet a moment. Then she said, "Why is it exactly that you thought we would help? You have been trying to invade our territory for more than 200 years. We have never wanted to cross the river into your territory—it's yours, we don't want it. We've wanted nothing but peace and trade between our countries, but we have been faced with war. And, your most recent act against us was to assassinate our queen!"

"Queen Daneli, we did not..."

Kamila broke in, "Father, I know you did! I know that you agreed with Remiro to give him Castle Trevalian if he agreed to assassinate Queen Raliro."

King Gasri spread his hands. "Alright, alright. Yes, we have not been especially peaceful over these years. But it was because we needed more resources."

"King Gasri, I don't really understand why you think you needed to invade to get more resources, when you could have just asked us. But that is water under the bridge, isn't it? Anyway, if you heard that a foreign force had invaded southern Trageri, what would you do?"

"I don't quite know."

"I hardly believe that, but I'll take you at your word for now. How would you respond if we asked for your help?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"What we thought this invading force would do after they were done with you."

“Ah. So you think that we might help because we would be afraid that the Niyeshis would attack us after they were finished with you?”

“Yes, exactly. If you don’t stop them now, together with us, they will definitely overrun the border, and start taking over your territory.”

“No, King Gasri, they will not.”

He sat back in his chair. “What do you mean? They are very powerful!”

“We have the means to make sure that they do not go any further than the river border.”

“You mean your ships? How can they help if a horde attacks you on land?”

“Not just the ships, King Gasri. Just take my word for it.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t believe you. I know you have fewer troops than we do, and we’re being trounced at every conflict with them because of their better weaponry. And I *know* you don’t have any better weapons than we do.”

Daneli let out a breath, and she felt Kamila’s hand on hers under the table. Daneli leaned over, and whispered to Kamila, “Please have Master Juri start the demonstration.” Kamila nodded, got up, and went out of the room.

“King Gasri, I didn’t actually want to show you this, but I want you to better understand our position. Please take a look outside, over there. What do you see?”

“A wagon full of rocks and boxes and things. Why is that important?”

“You’ll see in a moment.”

They waited, and Daneli saw Master Juri walking to a position about 100 feet from the wagon. Kamila returned to sit next to her again.

“King Gasri, dukes, do you see that woman standing there?”

Several voices said, “Yes.”

“Wait a moment.”

Daneli watched as Master Juri raised a shiny silver cylinder, about the length of a short sword, which she pointed at the wagon. At one moment, a bright flash came out of the cylinder, and there was a huge crash, and the wagon was engulfed in flames and dust. When it settled down, they could all see that the wagon had been reduced to a pile of ash and coals. Daneli knew that Juro had used the very highest setting for the demonstration—she wasn’t quite sure of Juro’s thinking, but she trusted it.

Daneli looked at the King and dukes, who were silent. The King was ashen.

He said haltingly, "How... how long have you had that weapon?"

"One hundred years."

"One hundred..."

"Yes."

"How many...?"

"As many as we want."

"Then why...?"

"Why didn't we just wipe you off of this continent?"

He nodded, slowly.

"That's not what we do, King Gasri. We have no interest in killing people, or taking territory. We are happy, and at peace here, and that's all we want to be."

"But you could have..."

"Yes. I am told that twenty-eight years ago, after we had taken Castle Trevalian because of your incursions into our territory, a contingent of guard with these weapons were on their way to the castle to face the siege force you had arrayed against it. We had a choice, then. Slaughter hundreds of your troops, or ask to make an agreement for peace. We chose the latter."

She could see his confusion. The King could not wrap his mind around the idea that Trageri made the agreement from a position of strength, not of weakness.

"I see. So you don't need to help us at all, do you?"

"No, King Gasri, we do not. And we will not commit troops to help you."

"I understand. Frankly, if I were in your position I don't imagine I'd risk lives to help us, either."

"We could assist you a little bit, though."

"You could?"

"We can send two contingents of ships north. The first contingent will go to where the Niyeshi ships landed, and destroy them. That contingent will then stay about one hundred miles offshore, to make sure that no more Niyeshi ships are on their way. The second contingent of ships is already offshore near the Winter Palace. We will add some more to that contingent. They

will guard the southern coast of Warani, and the northern coast of Trageri from any new Niyeshi attacks. We bet that when no Niyeshi ship returns to Niyesh, there won't be any more coming."

"Why would you do this?"

"First, it protects us. Also, you can think of it as a gesture of friendship. Some leaders of Trageri will question this, and think it unwise. I can't imagine it will make things worse between us."

"What is it that you want in return?"

Daneli had thought long and hard about this, and had even asked a number of people for their opinion on her idea. All were positive about it.

"I want you to promise that instead of executing those who are accused of having The Gift, you escort them over a bridge to Trageri."

"That's all?"

"Yes, that's all. But you must make sure that all dukes, barons and earls also obey this."

The King looked like he was considering it, but Daneli knew there was no way that he would not agree. She didn't imagine that he cared whether those with The Gift were killed, or just sent to Trageri.

"The priests will not agree to it. Execution is the proper punishment for those with The Gift."

Kamila said, deadpan, "Would you have wanted me executed, father?"

The King had a stunned look on his face. "You have..."

"Yes. I've known for a long time. Master Harli, who you had executed, taught me about it."

Daneli knew that the King was doing some quick thinking in his head. Everyone knew that The Gift was made of a group of traits that were passed from parent to child, either on the male or female side. She realized how brilliant Kamila was in revealing herself. The King could not possibly refuse, since at some point, when one of the dukes wanted to turn against the King, which was inevitable, they would have a weapon against him—someone else in his family had The Gift, too.

"Alright, Queen Daneli, that is a reasonable exchange."

There wasn't much to talk about after that. The meeting broke up, and again House Trageri hosted the King to a dinner that evening. It was a bit less formal and sumptuous, but it seemed everyone enjoyed it.

The King and his entourage left the next day. That morning, Daneli went in search of Masters Woren or Juri. She found Juri first—she was talking with a group of guard who were standing around watching the King’s contingent get underway.

“Master Juri?”

“Yes, my Queen?”

“Would it be alright for me to accompany our vessels going to destroy the Niyeshi ships?”

“Well, there is a slight risk. Let me confer with Master Woren, and get his opinion on it.”

“Thank you. Oh, and by the way, that demonstration was quite nice, thank you.”

She inclined her head. “You are quite welcome, my Queen.”

Later in the day, Daneli was visited by Master Woren.

“Queen Daneli, I hear you would like to attend our force that will destroy the Niyeshi ships.”

“Yes, I would like to see them.”

“It will be a low enough risk that you can go, my Queen.”

“When do we leave?”

He chuckled. “Would now be too soon?”

“A little. Give me an hour?”

“That would do quite well, my Queen.”

He left her parlor, and Daneli went in search of one of her spouses. She found Quin.

“Hey, dear Quin, do you want to come with me to see the Niyeshi ships?”

“Er, not really, Daneli—I’ve got a lot to do here—little Daneli is cutting through her math homework like it was butter.”

Daneli smiled. “She does not take after big Daneli, does she? Alright, no problem. Do me a favor, and find me a couple of spouses who do want to come? Doesn’t have to be Kamila or Liona, but if they want to come, that’s great. And can you also tell Mara that I’m leaving in an hour?”

He nodded, they embraced briefly, parted, and Daneli went back to her rooms to pack a small bag for the trip. She imagined she’d be away for a few days. She heard someone come in, and looked up to see Jeri followed by Kamila.

“You two are coming?”

Jeri said, “Yes.” They both were smiling.

“Alright, pack up, sweets, we have less than an hour.”

A few hours later, Daneli, Jeri, Kamila and Masters Garliri and Juro were watching the sunset over the ocean. They were underway in the flagship that was a part of a rather large fleet of twenty ships heading north. She knew that some ships would be peeling off soon to head toward the waters near the Winter Castle.

As the sun set, the air got cold very fast, and they all went downstairs to be indoors. They were in the dining area, where food had been arrayed on one table. Daneli grabbed a plate and utensils from one end of the table, and helped herself to the food. Life aboard ship was more regimented than life in a House, and that it was only those who had a junior rank cooked and cleaned in the ship. Daneli also knew that people did not usually stay at a junior rank very long.

She sat down at an empty table, and Jeri and Kamila joined her.

Jeri said, “This is fun! I’m glad I came.”

Daneli smiled, and Kamila nodded, and said, “It’s nice to hang out with you some, Jeri—I feel like I hardly see you.”

“I’ve been busy finishing that solar project for Master Karini. He says that solar tiles will become about 30% more efficient with my modifications. And you all are busy with diplomacy and stuff.”

Kamila laughed. “Well, I guess that’s so.”

Daneli asked, “Jeri, why did you want to come?”

“I wanted to see what their ships look like—whether we can learn anything about their level of technology from looking.”

“I like that idea.”

They talked for a while about the House, spouses, and finally, Arlen’s pregnancy. There had been two boys born to the House so far—Liona had the eldest boy, Koren, and Garisi had just given birth a month ago to the next boy, Jorli, named after Daneli’s father. Arlen was due in just a few weeks, and she swore that she’s sure it will be the Eldest. Daneli figured that she’d believe it when she saw it. Jeri was pregnant as well, but was barely showing.

Daneli had been at both births, and hoped that she would be able to attend each one. It was traditional for the eldest to be with mothers at birth, although it was not a steadfast rule. Raliro had not wanted to be at births, but Fero before her had been at every one. Daneli, so far, enjoyed the process.

She was getting tired, and began to realize how much she had been through in the last few days. Tonight, luckily, was her night to herself, and she excused herself from the table, and went to her small quarters toward the front of the ship. It had a bunk, and a small desk, and had a tiny window at the top near the ceiling. She turned on the small lamp, got into her pajamas, and pulled out the volume of transcripts that she'd brought with her. She was reading the transcripts between Captain Jessup and Queen Faliza, who was the queen after Gorela, the one who requested the new colonists. Queen Faliza was very unhappy that the ship was on its way, and had tried hard to convince him to turn around.

It was Captain Jessup's opinion that the separation of the two colonies had been unfortunate. He had told Queen Faliza that he quite respected the ways in which they had limited technological use, and retained a kind of lifestyle that he felt envious of. He said he thought Daraelia could learn from them. One thing Daneli knew for sure—when this ship arrived, there were going to be a lot of things to juggle. She grew too tired to read, and she turned out the lamp and fell asleep.

She was awoken by the most delicious feeling—someone was kissing her neck. She swam awake to see Jeri, who was dressed, bending over her.

“Time to arise, my love.”

“What time...”

“The captain says we are about to bid the second fleet, the one that is staying near the Winter Palace, goodbye.”

“OK, I'll get up.”

“I might not let you, you look rather tempting there.” Jeri got up on the bunk, straddling Daneli.

“I take it the Captain asked you to wake me?”

“Yes, he did.” Jeri started to unbutton Daneli's pajamas.

“And how do you think he’ll react when he finds out you detained me instead?” Daneli was grinning.

Jeri said, bending down to kiss the center of Daneli’s chest, now exposed, “I could decide to risk it... However, that wouldn’t be so nice, would it?” Jeri sat up, and got off of Daneli.

Jeri said, “Tonight I’ll have you.”

“But it’s Arlen’s night.”

“Dear heart, Arlen is a whale, and doesn’t want to see anyone. Besides, is she here?”

“True. Kamila is, though...”

“I checked. Kamila had you three nights ago. We last spent the night together almost two weeks ago.”

“Has it been that long? You win, my love.”

“Right, so, hop to it, my Queen.” Jeri slapped Daneli lightly on her thigh, and walked out of her quarters, and closed the door behind her. Daneli doubted that Northern kings were subjected to such indignity. But she hardly minded. She got up, and dressed, and met everyone topside, where they were gathered to watch the two halves of the fleet moving apart.

Two days later, in the afternoon, she was in the mess hall, finishing up her lunch, when the Captain, joined by Masters Garliri and Woren, came into the room.

Master Woren said, “My Queen, we have sighted the Niyeshi ships. They seem to be all in the water—none are near the beach.”

“How many?”

“It looks to be about forty. They are large—they each could probably hold as many as a hundred soldiers or perhaps even more. We have seen no evidence that they have spotted us yet. I think that most of them must be empty of crew. This flagship will hang back, while several ships will move into the group. We hope to capture at least one ship with its crew. Anyway, I think you should come topside, my Queen. There will be much to see.”

She nodded, and followed them up, and saw that Jeri and Kamila were already observing. Jeri had a telescope she was looking into.

Daneli touched her shoulder, and said, “What say you about those ships, love?”

She dropped her arms with the telescope, and turned toward Daneli.

“They are definitely quite primitive in comparison to ours. No solar generating capacity, no obvious desalination pumps. The rigging is also relatively primitive. We could out-sail these ships quite easily.”

“Weaponry?”

“There are no obvious weapons, but they probably took them all with them, since they probably figured out fairly quickly that the Warani have no ships.”

“Ho, look there!”

The Captain pointed out one of the ships that was now in the process of getting rigged by a skeleton crew. There was no way that they could escape, but Daneli assumed that they would have to try, and hope that they would let them go. But that was not the plan.

Eventually, all of the ships had been boarded and inspected to make sure they were deserted, and the six crew of one ship were transferred to the flagship, while all of the ships were destroyed, one by one. Daneli looked on as one of the prisoners watched the ships be destroyed. The look on his face was unreadable, and she couldn't understand the thoughts that came her way from him, but his emotions were clear. For some reason, he was happy.

Master Woren had plans to bring their prisoners to the main guard center near Trageri, and pair them with some people who could learn and teach languages, so that at some point, they could communicate, and they could learn something about the Niyeshis. Once they learned the language of Trageri, and got oriented, they would be given options on what they wanted to do—Trageri did not hold prisoners indefinitely.

They decided to spend the day sailing westward, in case there were any other ships in the vicinity. They found none, and headed back to Trageri at sunset.

CHAPTER 10: INQUEST

“Push!” Sateri, House Trageri’s midwife, had her hands underneath Arlen, who was squatting in the birth pool. Ulio was holding Arlen up in the pool. All of the spouses were either around the pool, or in the room doing one thing or another. Daneli was sitting next to the pool, close to Arlen.

Arlen’s labor had been long and arduous. At one point, the midwife called in Master Ulester, the House physician, and head of the Trageri clan physicians, to make sure that Arlen was alright. He dropped the news on everyone that Arlen was to have twins, but would probably not need emergency surgery to remove the babes. Daneli remembered how many women in Warani died in childbirth, and was happy that it was a very rare occurrence in Trageri. She could feel that Arlen was about out of energy.

“Push! Arlen, I can feel the first head. It’s coming...”

Daneli could feel the push from Arlen, and the wave of fatigue that came with it.

The midwife said, “Here it comes! Yes, the first one is out.”

Daneli saw the baby in Sateri’s hands as she brought it up out of the pool. She could feel Arlen relax and feel relief. Daneli heard the robust cry from the newborn, and Sateri said, “Arlen, you have given birth to the Eldest. She’s a fine, healthy girl.” Daneli saw Arlen’s smile, and heard in thought, “I told you so.” Sateri gave the baby to Jeri, who, with the dula, went to clean her off.

Daneli had her hand on Arlen’s shoulder, and was sending her thoughts and feelings of love and support, as were all of her spouses. Arlen pushed again.

Sateri said, “Here’s the second one. You’re almost done, Arlen.” There was a pause, then, “Here it is, the twin! Another fine, healthy girl. She’s a little smaller.”

There was a lot of activity, with the midwife and others dealing with the babies and the afterbirth, but Daneli didn’t need to do anything except sit with Arlen, and give her support. After a while, she, along with Ulio and Meri, helped Arlen out of the tub, get dried off, and back to her bed. Daneli gave her a kiss, and left—Ulio would be spending the night with her and the twin newborns. On her way out, Daneli saw Sateri and the dula carrying the babies to Arlen’s

room. She stopped to look at the first and second daughters born in the House. Daneli knew that the Eldest would be named Raliro.

She felt some relief now that she knew the House had an eldest, and a backup, too! Little Raliro's life would be quite different than her own. Daneli grew up far from Trageri, and had an eldest brother who was heir to his father's duchy. On her visits to Trageri, she always felt special, and her father did his best, but her context was Warani, and she had been a girl of Warani. She couldn't even express how happy she had been in these years since she lived in Trageri, even though in some ways they had been quite difficult.

A few days later, she was taking one of her periodic rides out into the countryside with Master Garliri. They were taking a break, sitting with a small picnic lunch she'd put together.

"My Queen?"

She looked up to see him looking very serious.

"Yes, Master Garliri?"

"You need to find a protector for little Raliro, and for Guite, too."

"They are only three days old, Garliri!"

"I understand, my Queen, but Raliro is Eldest, and in line to be queen; she needs protection, especially now."

"Why especially now? Neither Warani nor the Niyeshis are much of a threat, Garliri."

"I'm not talking about threats without, my Queen."

"You're worried about...?"

"There has been a lot of chatter, my Queen. Some of the major houses have been unhappy with how you've been doing things—and they will be especially unhappy that you chose to aid Warani."

"But I aided Warani only to help Trageri!"

"Some don't see it that way—they see you only as a Warani puppet."

"What!?"

"Yes, my Queen. Unfortunately, my sibling at Serel is the leader of this pack. Not that I think she is capable of doing anything, but there are others that might."

Daneli sighed.

“Do you have a suggestion for a protector, Master Garliri?”

“Yes, I do. A young man, whose name is Hizeri. He is a younger sibling of Ulio’s, and he approached me during the last Sala Red. He wanted to know more about becoming a Master at Arms. He said he’d thought of joining the Guard, but he liked the idea of being a Master for a particular House. I talked with Ulio about him—Ulio respects him greatly.”

“He will be your apprentice?”

“Yes, and I’ll take him on to teach him, and to see if he will be a suitable protector for Raliro and Guite.”

“Alright. I’ll mention it to Derisi—he’ll need to arrange housing, and the contract and such.”

“Thank you, my Queen.”

“No, Master Garliri, thank *you*. You have been such an incredible support to me and the House—I’m not sure what I would have done without you.”

“Well, my Queen, there are things I would have liked to have managed to do better, like protect Raliro.”

“Master Garliri, I can’t tell you how many people in our House feel responsible for that—including me! We can’t take that on—not you, not me, not any of us. Warani arranged the assassination, and there isn’t much we could have done to stop it.”

He nodded, and Daneli could feel a sense of remorse coming from him, but it was shut down quickly. He got up.

“Come, my Queen. Time for some sword practice. It’s been too long.”

Daneli groaned, but rose, and grabbed her sword from its scabbard on Galinsa’s saddle.

Daneli was sitting in the small parlor of her rooms at Hasni, the evening before the beginning of the Sala Red. As usual, she wanted to spend this evening alone, on her own, preparing for the yearly onslaught. Daneli had gotten used to the constant series of meetings, and people who wanted to talk with her. And parties. Lots of parties.

This year, for some reason, the Sala Trageri had been uneventful. Daneli had organized the announcement about the coming ship and colonists last year, and everyone was now used to the idea. Most of the families where the timing would be right had volunteered to open their doors to colonist spouse candidates when the time came. Many others had agreed to take in as many as

three colonists as permanent guests of their families. Alone, clan Trageri could handle as many as a thousand of the fifty thousand colonists—a much higher percentage than their representation as a clan.

She had been made aware, some by rumors going around that her spouses and others picked up, and some by the difficult conversations that she had with members of the executive committee, that kalas were unhappy with her performance as queen. She knew that some of it was definitely that because she'd grown up in Warani, she wasn't entirely trusted.

She wasn't sure that she would be able to do much about this, except ride it out, and do the best she knew how. She realized that she probably should have called the Sala Hoira after all—the kalas would have appreciated having input, and that might have muted their discontent. So she would, from now on, tread more carefully.

She heard a knock at her door. She said, "Come in."

Ulio and Quin walked in. Quin said, "Sorry to interrupt you, Daneli. I know you like to have this time to yourself. Quin overheard a conversation, and when he told me about it, I thought it would be wise to tell you."

"Thank you, Quin. Please, both of you, sit. Would you like some tea? The warming kettle has plenty of water."

They both went to the sideboard to prepare themselves some tea, and take some snacks, and they sat down.

"So, Ulio, what did you hear?"

"I was taking a walk in the gardens, and happened to be near at least three kalas speaking to each other. One was definitely Kala Serel—I'd know that whine anywhere."

Daneli laughed, and almost spilled tea from the cup she was holding.

He continued, "Kala Serel thinks that you helped organize the assassination of Queen Raliro. The others agreed. They were considering courses of action."

Daneli sighed. "Did you hear her say why?"

"She said she'd always been suspicious of you, but when you aided Warani, she was then sure."

"Did you hear what they were thinking of suggesting?"

Ulio said, “A formal inquest. Kala Serel said that she was going to call for the inquest at the closed session tomorrow afternoon.”

Quin said, “You have to fight that!”

Daneli shook her head. “No, Quin, I can’t fight it—that will feed into their suspicions of my guilt. I have nothing to hide. Let them go ahead and do the inquest.”

“But…”

“Quin, you know I’m right.”

“I know, Daneli, but they will be dragging your name through the mud! Accusing you of being involved in the assassination of *your own* eldest? That’s crazy!”

Ulio said, “There is a possibility that Kala Serel and the others won’t get enough votes to have it happen. That would be the best result, I think.”

Daneli nodded. “Yes, Ulio, you’re right—that would be the best outcome.”

They talked for a bit more, then Ulio and Quin took their leave, and left Daneli to ponder what tomorrow might be like. The agenda was already going to be contentious enough. To add the call for an inquest around the assassination of Queen Raliro… Daneli shuddered.

On their plate was the report from Brao’s committee, which included data on the numbers of colonists each clan would be willing to take on, and about the suitability of the islands they had mapped for settlement. Daneli’s hope was that she would be able to report that all of the colonists would easily be accommodated, between the clans and the islands.

She had learned that the idea of colonists creating new families or Houses was much more contentious than she had imagined. That was another item on the agenda that would need a lot of time and discussion.

If an inquest was called, and approved, it had the potential to derail a lot of work on the settlement of the new colonists. She did have the utmost confidence in Brao, and she expected that the committee work would go on, even in the chaos of an inquest.

Daneli suddenly wished she hadn’t chosen to be alone this evening, and almost got up to go in search of Kamila or Liona, but she decided to spend time instead in meditation, to calm herself. She knew she didn’t have anything to really be afraid of, but she felt a lot of fear anyway.

The opening ceremonies of the Sala Red were uneventful, and even pleasant, so by the time the afternoon closed session came around, and Daneli had taken her place at the head table with the members of the executive committee, she had forgotten the impending situation. That is, until she noticed the flurry of activity at the table to her right, where Kala Serel and others sat. She looked down at her clock, and realized that it was time to start.

She picked up the gavel, and banged it several times until the room was completely quiet. There were some kalas that were still making their way back to their seats. She started to speak.

“We have a full agenda today, so I would like to get started. First, there is the approval of the summaries of the decisions made last year. Will someone move to approve those summaries?”

“So move.” She heard a voice from near the front. “Second.” That voice was Kala Serel’s.

“Any discussion?” There was silence.

“All in favor?” A chorus of “Ayes” was heard.

“Any against?” Again silence.

“Any abstain?” A number of kalas raised their hands, and Daneli counted. She knew those were all new kalas this year.

“We have twenty-three abstentions. Thank you. Next, we will take proposals for any additions to the agenda for the meetings for this Sala Red. Are there any proposals?”

There always were several. Daneli saw five raised hands, one of them was Kala Serel’s. She decided to get it over with. And she figured if she called on Kala Serel first, she’d never guess that Daneli knew what she was going to suggest.

“Kala Serel—your addition to the agenda, please?”

Kala Serel stood up, and spoke loudly.

“I wish to add to the agenda for our meetings at this Sala Red, a proposal to consider a formal inquest into the assassination of Queen Raliro, and a possible Warani agent present in House Trageri who might have been involved in the assassination.”

The room erupted. Everyone knew who she meant by “a possible Warani agent.” Daneli had to bang the gavel several times to get people to quiet down. The procedure was for each proposed item to get a vote with no discussion. Almost all proposed agenda items, especially the most contentious ones, were approved so that discussion on that item could happen.

“We will vote on whether to approve this agenda item...”

“No! This is absurd! We know who assassinated Queen Raliro—King Gasri has already admitted to it!” Daneli looked up to see Brao standing at her seat.

Kala Serel shouted back, “He admitted to it only in the presence of House Trageri! How do we know that they are telling the truth?”

The room erupted again, and Daneli had to bang the gavel.

Daneli said, “Kala Sopha, I appreciate your support for House Trageri, but it is procedure for us to vote on this agenda item.” The room when silent. Daneli could tell there was some surprise about her response. She was going to do this by the book.

“All in favor of this agenda item?” A surprisingly large number of “Ayes” could be heard.

“All against?” A chorus of “Nay’s” that was indistinguishable in number from the previous was heard.

“It is clear we need a vote count. Kala Jurlos, can you please organize a count?”

Kala Jurlos stood up, and grabbed a couple of other kalas to assist her. They went around the hall, gathering vote slips. There were always some particular votes that needed to be more precise than a verbal vote, and each kala had several slips of paper with “Aye”, “Nay”, or “Abstain” on them. Daneli chose one of her “Abstain” slips, and put it into the bucket as one of the kalas passed by.

After a while, Kala Jurlos came to her with a piece of paper. Daneli sighed as she looked at it.

“One thousand and five voted ‘aye’ on adding the proposed agenda item. One thousand and one voted ‘nay’, and there was one abstention.” Daneli was somewhat surprised that she had been the only abstention. “This proposed agenda item is approved.”

Pandemonium reigned for a moment. Daneli let it happen—she wasn’t quite sure what she should do next. She decided that the best course was to call a recess. She needed time to figure out what to do, and how to act in this new reality. She banged the gavel several times, and enough quiet emerged.

“I am calling a recess. We will return in one hour. We will then take up Kala Brao Sopha’s report on the colonist settlement progress, as this is a critical item that we need to discuss. I will leave the rest of the agenda in the hands of Kala Serel, who can determine on what schedule the discussion of the inquest will take place. I will be recusing myself from that discussion, when it happens.”

Kala Serel rose, and Daneli internally winced.

“Queen Daneli, with all due respect, I think the most critical item on our agenda is the discussion of the formal inquest. Your reign hangs in the balance. I suggest that we discuss that first.”

Daneli didn't quite know what to do. She felt extreme pressure to keep moving on the colonist settlement issues, but Kala Serel was right—with a possible inquest hanging over her head, she wasn't going to be especially productive. She nodded.

“Alright, Kala Serel. When the session reconvenes in an hour, you can take up the discussion of a possible inquest. We are adjourned!”

As she gathered up the varied papers in front of her, somewhat numbly, she looked up to see Brao, who had tears in her eyes. It was almost enough to start Daneli crying, but she was able to hold it back. She knew that would only be temporary.

“Daneli, I will do everything in my power to make sure that an inquest doesn't happen. I've already been approached by some of the other Trageri extended houses, and I know we all will support you and your House, unequivocally.”

“Thank you, Brao, I appreciate having you on my side.” Daneli didn't know what else to say. Brao nodded, and walked away. Daneli stood, and walked out of the auditorium, noticing that unlike regularly, when people were always wanting to get a moment of her time, everyone was giving her a lot of room. As she returned to the Trageri quarters, she saw Liona and Kamila sitting in the lounge. They both rose, and quickly walked towards her.

Liona said, “Love, did they call for the inquest? You look terrible!”

At that moment, the weight of what had happened fell on her like a ton of bricks. She started to sob uncontrollably, and was barely aware of Kamila and Liona helping her into her bed, and holding her while she cried. She cried until she fell asleep.

She awoke to soft voices around her, and when she opened her eyes, she saw Kamila, Liona, Ulio, and Quin, all of her spouses present at the Sala Red this year, standing near the bed, talking softly.

Kamila noticed that she was awake, and came to sit next to her on the bed.

“Love, it's just about dinnertime.”

“Do you know what happened in the afternoon session?”

“Quin spoke to Brao. The afternoon session was a complete mess, and they did not yet approve a full inquest. They did, however, vote to suspend all open sessions and committee meetings until this issue is resolved. Brao said that if Serel’s contingent has anything to do with it, they will completely derail this Sala Red with the inquest issue.”

“Maybe I should just resign.” She wasn’t really serious, but she felt like it would be a relief in the moment.

In response, Kamila bent down and kissed her cheek, and whispered, “I know you don’t really mean that.”

Daneli got up, and, after getting hugs from her spouses, went to get a bath before dinner.

The rest of the week was surreal. House Trageri had canceled the parties each night as the conflict around calling a formal inquest ate up each day in succession. Daneli had several private meetings with a number of kalas, including Brao, where she attempted to get some of the work on the settlement of new colonists accomplished.

By the end of the week, it was clear that the pro-inquest faction had grown, and was about to get a vote to approve the process of a formal inquest. The biggest victories for the anti-inquest group was that Daneli was not named specifically as a suspect, and that the inquest would be run by four very well-known Masters of Justice from around Trageri, instead of any kalas who might have a vested interest in the outcome.

Since Daneli knew of her own innocence, these seemed to assure that she wouldn’t be railroaded by an unfair process. Of this she was quite grateful. But it didn’t really feel that much better—although she was not named, everyone knew she was the primary suspect, and her House more broadly. And she knew that for many, the ultimate goal was not getting at the truth, but de-throning her, and thus House Trageri, in the process.

The last day, Daneli was sitting alone in her parlor, reading the final volume of transcripts, including conversations between Captain Jessup and Queen Raliro, when Quin burst into the room, with Master Garliri behind him.

“Sorry to interrupt, Daneli. The kalas’ vote is final. One thousand fifty voted in favor of the inquest.”

Daneli said, “They still agreed to the Masters running of the inquest?”

“Yes. And you still were not named the suspect.”

“Well, I guess that’s the best we can expect at this point.”

Garliri said, “I’m so sorry, my Queen. If I could throttle my sibling, I would.”

Daneli said, “Garliri, this isn’t your fault.”

“Well, she and I definitely had some words. I don’t quite understand what she is doing—she knows you are innocent, and that the result of any fair inquest will show that. She also knows I will be a major witness of the inquest. There is no good result for House Serel, from my point of view.”

The closing ceremonies of the Sala Red were muted, and Daneli was happy to finally arrive back home at House Trageri. She had only two months before she needed to travel down to Sur Rolero and give Captain Jessup the details of the settlement plans so far. She knew she could not explain the current situation to him—she was debating about how best to frame what would be an inevitable slowdown in the progress of the settlement work.

Brao had given her a detailed report of the number of colonists each clan was willing to take on. Unsurprisingly, some clans were completely unresponsive to Brao’s requests, and others refused to accept any colonists in any capacity. However, it was clear that between the clans that would accept colonists, and the islands, which Daneli was told could support up to ten thousand colonists sustainably, they would have the room they needed. It was a bit closer than Daneli would have liked, but it would be alright.

A few weeks later, Daneli sat in a small lounge downstairs in House Trageri, with Quin, Liona and Kamila. With them were two of the four Masters of Justice who would be running the inquest. They were here to tell her how the inquest would proceed.

“Queen Daneli, the inquest will happen at Hasni. We expect it will take about a month or so, after the evidence-gathering period.”

“Please let us know, Master Ware, whether you need anything else from House Trageri—we’re happy to provide it.”

He nodded, “Thank you, Queen Daneli. I do need a bit of a favor, and I believe you, or perhaps your father, are in the best position to get it for us.”

“That is?”

“We need to talk with someone from Warani who has direct experience of the assassination plot.”

Kamila said, “Actually, Master Ware, that would be me.”

“You? I don’t understand.”

“Before I left Warani, I talked with my husband about the plot to assassinate Queen Raliro.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I do appreciate that, Kamila, and we will then need to call you as a witness. However, you are not impartial. We need someone in addition who is completely impartial to the effect of this accusation on House Trageri.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

Daneli said, “Kamila, do you have any reason to think that Remiro would talk with one of the Masters?”

She shook her head. “He would do no favors for Trageri.”

Daneli said, “You should talk with my father. We might be able to get King Gasri to speak to you—he owes us. As you know, Warani is currently a bit... a bit busy now, dealing with the invasion by the Niyeshis.”

“Thank you, Queen Daneli. You have been most cooperative. We appreciate this.”

Daneli nodded. How could she not be cooperative? She was eager to clear her name, and the name of her House.

Quinn saw the Masters out while Daneli, Kamila and Liona talked about the inquest.

Kamila said, “I can’t quite believe this is happening.”

Daneli sighed. “I had a long talk with Master Garliri, and he told me some things about the relationship between House Trageri and House Serel that go back to the beginning of the colony. Theresa Serel, who was mentioned, but only briefly, in Joella’s *Chronicle*, was a cousin and companion of hers, and helped her greatly throughout the whole colonization process. The original agreement was that the honor of having a royal House would rotate with some regularity, and that Serel was next in line. The fact that House Trageri has been the royal house for all of this time is a combination of accident and the machinations of earlier eldests of House Trageri. House Serel has been, at various times, trying to gain royal status. Master Garliri thinks that this is just another attempt at it.”

Kamila said, “I guess add that to the fact that you are half Warani, were raised in Warani, and have a Warani spouse—something like this was bound to happen.”

“Yes, it makes sense—but I know that if Raliro hadn’t been assassinated...”

Kamila came to sit next to Daneli. “Daneli, love, there is nothing you could have done about it—stop feeling responsible for what happened!”

“Ah, you know me too well. It still haunts me, Kamila.”

Liona added, “Daneli, the House will get through this. We are a strong and noble House, innocent of the crime of even negligence.”

Daneli nodded. “I know. Anyway, I need to start preparing my report for Captain Jessup. I finally finished reading all of the transcripts—it’s quite amazing what’s in them—I learned as much about Trageri history as I did about Captain Jessup and the colonists!”

She had decided she wanted to ride to Sur Rolero this time, even though it would take more than twice as long to get there and back. She hadn’t seen much of the desert, and she felt that she wanted to take some time out in the open. She, Meri and Derisi, along with Master Garliri, were taking a long leisurely ride down. Liona was taking Derisi’s place as administrative spouse while he was away.

The House, and to some extent, the whole country, was engulfed in the whole drama of the inquest, but since House Trageri and Daneli were the major subjects of the inquest, it was as if House Trageri was at the eye of the storm. There was very little to keep Daneli busy during this time, besides preparations for the colonists’ arrival.

It wasn’t too hot yet, since it was just springtime. There were periods of rain during their travel so far, but it hadn’t been too onerous. They had stopped at three Houses, had camped a couple of nights, and were now skirting the southern jungle, with the canopy of tall jungle plants on their right, and wide fields of sugar cane on their left. They were headed for House Jurlos, a major House which was head of the clan that grew most of the sugarcane. They were responsible for the sugar trade in most of Trageri.

During the Sala Red, it became clear who she could trust, and she’d spent some time talking with Kala Jurlos, who she’d had little chance to work with before. Kala Camil Jurlos was of Raliro’s generation, and although she was a member of the executive committee, she was one

who kept a fairly low profile. In addition, like many clans of the south and east, her clan was quite insular, and she had no interest in placing one of their offspring with House Trageri.

Camil had given Daneli her unqualified support during that Sala Red. Daneli thought back to that conversation, which happened in one of the halls.

Kala Jurlos said, “Queen Daneli, I just wanted to let you know that I had no idea Kala Serel was considering this, and I can’t even imagine why she thinks it will succeed. I know you had nothing to do with the assassination of Raliro.”

Daneli answered, “Thank you, Kala Jurlos. I very much appreciate your support. It means a lot to me.”

“I have been watching you ever since I first met you at the Sala Red, when you were still Sulea Tala. I have been impressed by you ever since. I regret, as do we all, the early loss of Queen Raliro, but I think you have made an extraordinary queen, especially given your youth.”

Daneli had felt self-conscious and somewhat embarrassed by what Kala Jurlos had said, but at the same time, she much appreciated it.

She had said, “Thank you so much for your confidence in me, Kala Jurlos. I hope that I can keep living up to your expectations.”

The Kala had smiled, and Daneli had detected an almost motherly concern coming from her. She had offered hospitality, and Daneli was happy to get to see her again, and spend some informal time. They were going to rest for a couple of days at House Jurlos.

“My Queen, I suspect we are getting close to House Jurlos. I’d say another hour or so.”

Daneli looked to see Master Garliri next to him on his horse. He looked a bit tired.

“Thank you, Master Garliri. A rest would be good, yes?”

He nodded. “Yes, my Queen. A rest would be good.”

“Are you worried about me, Master Garliri?”

“Is it that transparent?”

“No, just deduction. You look tired, and I know that worry, more than action, is what tires you out.”

He smiled. “You know me well, my Queen. Yes, I am worried. Probably needlessly. I have faith in the Masters of Justice. But I also know my sibling. She seems to have come to the

conclusion that anything she can do to damage you is a positive benefit for House Serel. So I worry about what she has next up her sleeve.”

“Master Garliri, we just need to ride this out. I have been learning which kalas we can trust, and which we can’t. I do wonder, however, whether it may actually be time for our House to give up the throne, at some point.”

“What?”

“Master Garliri, the original intent of Joella Trageri, the founder of our House and colony, was to have different Houses be royal with some sort of democratic process. It never happened that way, but Joella wouldn’t have wanted it as it is. I don’t think we should do this as a result of the inquest—I think it should come later, sometime after the colonists arrive. But I am coming to the opinion that I should be the last Trageri queen for a time.”

Master Garliri was quiet for a while. He then said, “You are thinking about the good of the whole, not just the House. That is quite wise, Daneli. And you may well be right.”

“Master Garliri, the good of the whole is good for the House. That is, sadly, something your sibling doesn’t understand. House Trageri has a lot of strengths, and it will do well without being royal for a time. In fact, I was doing some review of our finances recently.”

“And?”

“It turns out that we spend far more than we take in because of our royal status. We would be in much stronger financial shape if we weren’t royal.”

Master Garliri laughed. “I’m sure my sibling hasn’t thought of that one!”

Daneli laughed, and they rode in silence for a while. Finally, the small trail they were on widened to a road, and they could see a large group of buildings in the distance.

“House Jurlos,” Master Garliri said.

“Interesting—it looks to be more like a compound.”

“Yes, there is one large house, and several other dwellings in close proximity. I think the guest quarters are also separate.”

“Interesting.”

“Actually, not so. You might notice all the buildings are single story.”

“Yes, I see that.”

“Between the heat, and the fact that this is basically a swamp, building large, tall buildings, like the four stories of our House is out of the question. So here, people build out, not up.”

“Ah, I see.”

They eventually came to the compound, which was divided across the road, which kept going on into the distance. They stopped, and dismounted. Several people that Daneli had never met greeted them.

One said, “Hello, my Queen, I am Gai Jurlos, spouse of Camil Jurlos. She’s out doing an inspection of some sugar cane fields, but she’ll be back before dinner. She wanted me to greet you, and show you around. This is Misa and Kerel, also our spouses. Kerel will take care of your horses.”

Daneli said, “It is nice to meet you all. Thank you so much for your hospitality. This is Master Garliri, House Trageri master at arms, and my spouses Meri and Derisi.”

“Let me show you to the guest quarters where you can relax before dinner. Dinner is here, at the main house, at 7:30.” He pointed to the largest of the buildings in the compound. They took their bags from their saddles and the donkeys, and followed him to a dwelling that was across the road from the main house, and several houses down.

He opened the door, and Master Garliri walked in first, followed by Daneli, then Meri and Derisi. There was a large parlor, with a small kitchen on one side. There was a central hallway at the back of the parlor.

“There are five bedrooms, all off this one hall. My Queen, this is the bedroom that has its own bathroom.” He pointed to the first room on the hallway. Daneli walked into the spacious room that had a large bed, and she could see the bathroom door.

“Thank you, Gai.”

Daneli tossed her bags on the floor near the bed, and went out to look at the rest of the guest house. There was a nice back porch with chairs and couches, which was screened, and looked out at some sugar cane fields.

Daneli had seen screened porches in some of her travels in the internal part of the south of Trageri. The first time she had seen one, she asked about it—there were, apparently, biting insects in some regions. When she’d gotten back to House Trageri, she’d mistakenly asked

Master Karini about them. He gave her the assignment to do the research herself, and write a paper about it. It had been rather annoying, but she'd learned a lot about the early colony.

Apparently, although they had in fact brought embryos of many insects with them, they'd had no intention of using most of them. Their initial attempts at growing some particular food crops had been a failure until the introduction of a particular pollinator insect, the yellow fly, which bit humans. Thus, the screens. Luckily, the yellow flies only lived in the south—the northern part of Trageri was too cold for them to reproduce. Bees were even used in Warani for crop pollination.

Gai said, “My Queen, I'll leave you and your party to relax until dinner. Please find me in the main house if you need anything before then.”

Daneli said, “Thank you so much Gai.”

He turned and left, and Daneli said, “I'm going to do my usual. See you later.” It was time for her bath, and a good, solid nap.

They'd had a nice time at House Jurlos, and Daneli had gotten to spend some time with Kala Camil Jurlos. She had given her a tour of some of the sugar cane fields and processing plants, and Daneli had learned a lot about this very important commodity. Kala Jurlos told her that Jurlos made the largest proportion of their profit from sales to Warani. Daneli knew that people in Warani used a lot of sugar, and before the Tala Shari, where she learned so much about trade between Trageri and Warani, she'd had no idea that it came from Trageri. In fact, Warani was dependent on Trageri for a number of crops that could not grow in Warani.

Well, she needed to focus on other things at the moment. She was sitting in the room with the communications screen, waiting for Captain Jessup to respond to her report. She felt it was a good one: the clans would accommodate up to forty-five thousand colonists, and the islands could sustainably manage to hold ten thousand. That left some room to maneuver. She'd wished the clan number was higher—that way when the reality hit, and those numbers melted, as she knew they would, there would be more slack. But, it was as it was, and there wasn't much they were going to be able to do about it.

The small set of bars went from yellow to red, and Captain Jessup's face started to animate.

“Queen Daneli, thank you for your hard work this year—those numbers are good. I understand why you would want a bit more wiggle room. One question—you did not address the

issue of a new House or families that the colonists might form themselves. Just so you are aware, there are one hundred and twenty families organized, enough for one of your minor Houses.”

Daneli had not addressed it, because there had been no time at the Sala Red to discuss it. It had been originally on the agenda, but of course, that agenda had been utterly derailed. She had been making inquiries, and some clans, as well as clan Trageri were willing to have new families formed in their clans. But new Houses depended on policy decisions made at the Sala Red.

“Captain Jessup, unfortunately, that issue was tabled this year, and will be brought up again next year. I can say that it is likely that several clans would be willing to have new families that are made up of colonists join them. The issue of a new House, however, with families of colonists, is a different matter altogether. We haven’t added a new House in over three hundred years, and there are, of course, ramifications to this.” She clasped her hands, and sat back.

After a long while—enough time for Daneli to have lunch, Captain Jessup answered.

“I see. Well, that makes sense. I do hope that you are able to have this taken up at the next meeting. Thank you again, and I look forward to speaking with you in six of your months.”

Daneli nodded, said her final goodbye greetings, and then walked out of the room. She’d had a very nice conversation with the representative from Catania, who explained how excited many people in that colony had been to read the information about Capella IV that they had sent them. She talked with a different member of what they called the “executive council” of Daraelia than she had before, and their conversation was strange—stranger than it had been before. But, Daneli tried not to think too much about it. There wasn’t much to talk about with them until Captain Jessup’s ship arrived at Capella IV. It was time for the trip home.

By the time she arrived at home, she likely would have only a few days until she would have to travel to Hasni to be a witness in the inquest. The official inquest had started, and they were already hearing from witnesses. She would be one of the last witnesses heard. She knew that two of the judges had traveled with her father to the Warani winter court. Although her father had not been privy to the meeting between the judges and King Gasri, he had told her that it seemed that things went well.

Daneli knew that although King Gasri was no friend of hers, or Trageri, he knew that ironically, Daneli was probably his best ally in Trageri. She figured that he realized that keeping

her in power was going to benefit him, and Warani, more than denying that they assassinated Queen Raliro. At least Daneli hoped he'd done that calculation.

CHAPTER 11: CHANGE COMES

Daneli awoke in her bed at House Trageri, and looked to see Jeri still sleeping next to her. She quietly got up. Jeri was pregnant again, with her second child—her first was born last year, another girl for the house. So far, there were two boys and three girls, plus Kamila's children—a crop of seven, with Jeri's as the eighth.

There had been some discussion about the number of children the house could have. The official policy of Trageri, now that they had reached the cap of sustainability, was that the house could at most only replace the previous generation of a house. For the past twenty generations there had been nine to eleven children of house Trageri, depending on the number of spouses.

Two things were possibly going to change that. One—Kamila's children. Although the policy on adoption was clear—those children did not count in the number, it was complicated by the fact that adoption always happened in Trageri when there were no parents connected. Kamila's presence as a spouse complicated matters.

Further, one topic of policy change that was to be discussed at last year's Sala Red, was that if there were fifty thousand new colonists, there needed to be fifty thousand fewer children in this generation. Although it would not be strictly necessary, House Trageri felt that it would be an important symbol if they voluntarily reduced their number by one. Reducing the number of offspring would feel like a real sacrifice to many, and it would be important if the royal House were willing to help. Arlen, who had given birth to the Eldest twins, had already decided to stop bearing children, and had had surgery. Garisi, who had given birth to the eldest son, was still wishing to have another child, as was Kamila, who wanted a Trageri child. They both would get that chance, but it was likely that those would be the last of the House. Jeri seemed fine with not bearing more, if that turned out to be what made sense.

As Daneli washed up and got dressed, she thought about what was in store for the day. She had not yet been called to be a witness at the inquest, so she went ahead and went back to whatever business was at hand, which wasn't much. She actually didn't know which diplomatic spouse was going to show up this morning with topics to discuss.

“Mmmm, Daneli.” Daneli heard Jeri from the bedroom. Daneli walked back in, and sat on the bed, stroking Jeri’s hair.

“Morning, sleepy-head.”

Jeri smiled. “Time to get up, eh?”

“Yes, although I imagine you can stay in bed.”

“No, no, Master Karini has me working on some new prototypes she wants me to finish before I get too pregnant. I feel silly doing it though.”

“Silly? Why?”

“Because in three years, the colonists are going to come, and wipe all of this work away with their technology.”

“No, I want us to be able to carefully control what technology they introduce to us. Plus, remember, Daraelia is a completely different planet. They won’t know what’s best here.”

Jeri smiled. “Thanks—a non-scientist explaining to me what I should have already known.”

“I’m just giving you some perspective. I lose it too, sometimes.”

They heard a knock, and Kamila’s voice.

“Daneli, I’m here.”

Jeri said, “Come on in, Kamila.”

Kamila opened the bedroom door, walked in and got into the bed. She said, “Wish we didn’t have to work this morning.” Daneli caught the sexual undertone. The three of them had, in fact, spent a number nights in bed together over the years.

Daneli got up, and kissed Jeri, and pulled Kamila up off of the bed. “Alas, we do. What’s on my plate?”

Kamila grinned, and said playfully. “Such a task master, Queen Daneli. See you later, Jeri.” They walked back to the parlor, where breakfast waited.

“This morning, we’re getting a visit from Masters Juri and Wuron, in about a half-hour. Apparently, they have some news. They did not want to give me a preview, so I expect it is momentous. I’ve invited Master Garliri, Quinn and Liona to the meeting as well. We’ll be meeting in the west conference room.”

Daneli said, “I’m looking forward to it. We haven’t heard much from them about Warani in quite some time.”

Kamila nodded. “Before we meet with them, I thought I’d take advantage of the fact that I’m on tap today to give you the latest trade report.”

“Alright. Go for it.”

Kamila handed her a sheaf of papers. Each sheet represented a class of trade goods, commodities like sugar, wheat and cotton, manufactured goods, like cloth, oils and wine, and raw materials. Trageri exported things like sugar and cotton, and imported things like some oils and certain minerals, as well as some kinds of goods such as swords, bows and arrows, cloths, and beer and whiskey. They did also import a lot of wheat from Warani, and Warani was the sole source of very limited gold, silver and precious stones mined from the continent.

There was always a trade imbalance. Warani imported far more than it exported, and because of this, varied clans of Trageri quite ironically owned large swaths of land in Warani. This was a well-known, but largely ignored fact in Warani royal circles. Warani was utterly dependent on Trageri, and their response had always been resentment and violence, instead of peaceful coexistence—the only thing Trageri had ever wanted.

Daneli said, after looking through the reports, “Understandingly, imports of everything from Warani are way down, and exports are way up. How are the Warani paying for all of this?”

“The standard—there is some gold and silver—see that line item there...” Kamila pointed to a part of the overview sheet that Daneli was looking at, “... but, as usual, they are incurring a lot of debt.”

“They are going to wake up one day with me at the Winter Palace telling them we own the place.”

“Indeed, Daneli. And, of course, the gold and silver largely just gets stockpiled by the clans, since we don’t use it very much for internal trade. We use it mostly to pay our spy network in Warani!”

“They can’t keep this up—they must know that.”

“They ignore it, Daneli, like they ignore many things. I remember once being at an audience with my father and his commerce minister, who was even then trying to explain why this was such a problem. He ignored it.”

“Well, alright. Is there any evidence that any clans are suffering because of the imbalance?”

“That you’d have to ask Quinn. I imagine not, but he’d know for sure.”

“Put in your list to set up a meeting with me, you, him, and Master Kitula—for sometime after this whole inquest thing is finished. I want to get a better handle on how we are going to deal with this imbalance going forward. It’s just not sustainable. We’ll have to add this to a discussion for the next Sala Red—this meeting will be good preparation for that.”

“Sure thing, Daneli. It’s time for us to head down to the conference room.”

They walked down the hall, and down a set of stairs, and made their way to one of the conference rooms. Someone, probably a spouse, had thoughtfully set out some coffee and breakfast pastries.

Masters Garliri, Juri, and Wuron were already in the room, and as Daneli and Kamila were sitting, Quinn and Liona walked in and sat down.

Daneli said, “Welcome, Masters Juri and Wuron, I am quite eager to hear what you have to say.”

Master Wuron spoke first. “My Queen, we have two pieces of important news. First, we finally have been able to fully debrief the Niyeshis we captured.”

“Great. What did you learn?”

“The reason for their invasion. They invaded our continent because they are dying off.”

“Dying off?”

“They have been shrinking in population over the last hundred years. The people I talked with don’t know why—I imagine someone in Niyesh might. But anyway, fewer and fewer babies have been born, and there are more and more birth defects. Their plan was to invade, then start shipping young men and women back to Niyesh. When we destroyed their ships, we destroyed just about all of their shipping capacity.”

“Oh, my.”

“Apparently, the men who formed the invasion force are most of the young men of Niyesh. It was a huge gamble for them.”

“I see. Very strange.”

Master Juri said, “And, it seems that they will lose that gamble.”

“Oh?”

“We have information from our spies that suggests that Warani will win the war.”

“Really?”

Master Wuron answered, “Yes. The Niyeshis are holed up at the summer palace, Karina, and Sabri. They are running out of ammunition and food.”

Daneli said, “How much longer?”

“Not so long. The Niyeshis have been able to get some supplies by threatening surrounding farmers, but Warani forces are now protecting the farmers. There have been massive defections of Niyeshi forces as well. I’d say this will be over in a matter of weeks.”

“Suggestions?”

“Well, my Queen, we don’t have to do anything. But, for humanitarian reasons, I suggest that you send a ship to Niyesh, with the prisoners we have and representatives of Trageri, and we talk to the Niyeshi leaders, and lend them our support.”

“How might that play in Warani, though?”

“We would make it clear it was only humanitarian aid. No military support of any kind.”

Under normal circumstances, this would have been a reason to call a Sala Hoira. Daneli realized that the judges would have to call a Sala Hoira in any case, and if the results were as she expected, she certainly could ask the kalas to stay to determine whether they should take this action.

“I agree. Thank you, Masters Wuron and Juri, but I cannot take that action unilaterally. The Sala Hoira will be called after the inquest is over, and, if I am in any position to do so, I will bring this item up.”

The meeting broke up, and Daneli went back to her office, and spent the rest of the morning reading the details of the interview with the Niyeshis. She wished she would be able to go and see Niyesh, but she doubted that would be possible while she was queen. It sounded like it was quite a beautiful continent.

She heard a knock at her door. She went into the parlor, and opened it. Quinn was standing at the door.

“Sorry to bother you, Daneli.”

“No problem. What’s going on?”

“The messenger just came from Hasni.”

“Ah. Time for me to go?”

“Yes. The judges also called Kamila and Master Garliri. I’ve already told them. Do you want others to come with you? I’m happy to.”

“Thanks, Quinn, I appreciate it. Let me think about it. When do we need to leave?”

“Tomorrow, first thing. I told Derisi, and he’s arranging stops along the way—Surfit will be one for sure. Meri might want to come, even if just an excuse to visit—he hasn’t been back in a while. I’ll ask.”

Daneli hugged Quinn. “Thanks, Quinn, for everything.”

He smiled, and put his hand under her chin. “For you, anything.”

The trip to Hasni was relatively quick and uneventful. Daneli, Quinn, Kamila and Liona, along with Master Garliri, arrived and settled into their traditional digs at Hasni. It was a little strange to be at Hasni without the crowds of Salas and their spouses. Daneli hoped that she’d not have to travel home, and then travel back for the Sala Hoira. They hadn’t found out yet how close the judges were to making their determination.

Daneli hadn’t cooked in a long while, and was determined to make dinner for their company this evening. They had brought some supplies, but when Daneli had begun to put away some of them in the kitchen, she realized that family Hasni had completely stocked it—even with fresh vegetables, dairy and meat. She was quite grateful, and would make sure to thank them.

She was going to make a stuffed, baked chicken, some steamed greens, and baked potatoes for dinner. As she went about her dinner preparation, she wondered about the questions that the judges would ask of her. She imagined them wanting to know what happened on the fateful day of the assassination. Perhaps they would ask her about her affiliations with Kamila. She just didn’t know. She looked forward to it, in some strange way. But what she most looked forward to was the whole thing being over.

As she was chopping the greens, she felt someone wrapping their arms around her midsection. She heard Kamila say quietly, “Whatcha cooking?” in her ear.

“You’ll see. You are being impatient. It’s almost done.”

“It smells wonderful.”

“Of course. I’m a good cook.”

Kamila kissed her on the neck, stepped back, and walked around the table that Daneli was chopping greens on.

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Sure—set the table?”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“You are incorrigible!”

“That’s why you love me.”

Daneli couldn’t help chuckling. It was, in fact, one of the many reasons she loved Kamila.

Quinn, Liona and Master Garliri wandered into the kitchen, making appreciative noises at the smell of the food. Daneli shooshed them out of the kitchen so she could finish. In the end, it had turned out to be quite a feast. Roasted hen stuffed with wild rice and onions, potatoes baked with garlic and shallots, gravy, steamed greens, and some apple crisp and ice cream for dessert.

While they were eating they were talking about the inquest.

Daneli said, “Well, I sure will be glad when this is over.”

Liona agreed, “It has been a drag on the House, and the clan. Apparently some of the border families have been feeling the pressure from their neighbors.”

Master Garliri said, “I too will be relieved when it’s over. I am not happy about what I’ve been hearing about how people think of House Serel.”

Quinn said, “I had a conversation at the Grain Festival last month with a man from one of the families with very high status in clan Serel. Apparently, there is some degree of consternation with the behavior of Kala Serel, and the House. They are considering challenging it for clan leadership at the next Sala Serel.”

Daneli was shocked. “Really? That doesn’t happen very often. Serel seems to be to still be in a strong place.”

Master Garliri shook his head. “Actually, no, Daneli. Serel has been on the skids in terms of status within the clan for quite some time. Over the last three generations or so, the House has had to *recruit* some clan members for spouses.”

“Wow, recruit spouses! That’s unheard of for a Major house.”

“My sibling keeps that secret close to her vest. But you certainly saw the kind of hubris from one of the offspring.”

Daneli said, “Yes, I did, but I took that to be an anomaly, especially with the apology Kala Serel gave me. Anyway, I can’t say that I would mind terribly to lose Kala Serel from the executive committee. That might happen in any event. But, Master Garliri, it would make me sad if your House lost its status.”

Garliri nodded his head. “I tried to tell my sibling what she was toying with, but she didn’t understand—she has this laser focus on unseating Trageri, and having Serel take its place.”

The next day, they went into the large room that was serving as chambers for the Masters of Justice. As Daneli walked in, she saw four chairs at a table raised on a dais, in front of several rows of chairs, some of which were filled. Off to the side a little was a table and a chair—Daneli assumed that was for the witnesses. Daneli saw a few members of family Hasni, a spouse of Kala Serel, and several other people in the audience she did not recognize.

They sat together toward the front of the audience section, and waited for the session to start.

At one point, a man came into the room, and said, “All rise.”

They all rose.

“Presenting the Masters of Justice overseeing this inquest: Masters Salimo, Ware, Ghen, and Coval.”

The Masters, all wearing the black robes that Masters of Justice wore at inquests and trials, walked in, and sat in the chairs facing the audience.

Master Ghen banged the gavel, and said, “Please be seated. I now call Master Garliri Serel Trageri.”

Master Garliri got up, and went and stood next to the chair.

“Please raise your right hand.” He did.

“Do you swear, by Sabadora the Goddess of Wisdom, to tell all of the truth as you know it, and to withhold any falsehood or opinion?”

“I do.”

“Please sit. Master Garliri, where were you born and raised?”

“In House Serel.”

“When did you leave House Serel?”

“When I was eighteen.”

“Why did you choose not to marry?”

“It didn’t seem my path.”

“Really?”

Garliri hesitated. “The full truth is that I left House Serel with a broken heart, and no desire to marry.”

“I see. Is there more you want to say about this?”

Garliri sighed, and clearly looked uncomfortable. “I fell deeply in love with a man in a lower-status family of clan Serel when I was eighteen. We had found a family within our clan that wished to marry us both. My parent, the then Kala, derailed that offer, because she wanted me to marry into a major House. Instead, I left Serel, and pledged myself to House Trageri.”

Master Ware asked, “And how do you feel now about your House?”

“How else can I feel? I am pledged, and loyal to House Trageri, but House Serel is my family. I love them, even though my parent hurt me. I wish only the best for House Serel.”

Master Ghen said, “Thank you, Master Garliri. I know you didn’t expect that question, but your answer is helpful.”

Master Garliri nodded.

Master Ghen then said, “How did you come to serve Jorli Trageri at Castle Trevalian?”

“I was at House Trageri serving Queen Fero until the war, when I served with the Trageri guard to take Castle Trevalian. When the agreement was signed, I stayed at Castle Trevalian to help organize the guard there, which were largely Northern soldiers. When Daneli was born, Queen Fero asked me to become her protector and teacher, which I did.”

“So you have known Daneli since her birth?”

“I even changed some of her diapers.”

Daneli could feel the heat of her face as she blushed at that answer from Garliri.

“How would you characterize your relationship with Warani at that time?”

“Cautious. I was in charge of a group of Northern soldiers that resented our existence, hated Southern culture, but had no choice but to obey me. It was not especially fun.”

“Did you make any friends?”

“I’d not go as far as to call them friends. But I did get along well with some.”

“Are you in touch with any in Warani?”

Garliri shook his head. “No sir.”

Master Coval leaned forward. “Master Garliri, recount for us the day of the assassination, please?”

“Certainly. It had been a hectic day, as all first days of a Sala. I was helping Daneli with her speech—she was to give a major speech that day, and she was very nervous. She was taking the Queen’s place to give the ‘state of the clan’ speech.”

“Why was she taking her place?”

“The Queen wanted to give Daneli some experience. It was commonly done in clan Trageri.”

Master Ghen said, “You said she was ‘very nervous.’ Would you say Daneli was nervous out of proportion for the task ahead of her?”

“No, not at all. This was only her second Sala Trageri—she’d not even been made Sula yet! Giving the ‘state of the clan’ speech would make anyone except a queen very nervous.”

Master Coval said, “Keep going.”

“So I was helping Daneli for a while—she was practicing in front of me, then Mara, I think, came in to tell us the session was starting.”

“Mara?”

“One of Queen Raliro’s diplomatic spouses.”

“I see.”

“We then went outside, where the opening ceremonies were to happen. Daneli was standing in front, a few people down from the Queen. I was standing in the front row, even further away. It was time for things to start, and the Queen stood up. That was when I noticed the man in the aisle, walking toward the Queen.”

“What did you do?”

“I was paralyzed for a moment, but then as he got closer to the Queen, I started to run in her direction. Daneli was ahead of me. She tackled the assassin after he’d stabbed the Queen. I was too late to prevent him from hitting Daneli several times. A group of us were finally able to get him wrestled to the ground. I could see that Daneli was bleeding. At some later point, I saw Master Poera and some guards take Daneli away.”

“What did you do then?”

“I kept holding the assassin down, who kept struggling. I saw him bite down on something, stop struggling, and die. It was then I knew that he was from Warani.”

Master Salimo, who had not yet spoken asked, “How did you know that?”

“From my years in Warani, I knew about how they assassinate people. It’s not uncommon there. If an assassin gets caught, he bites on a capsule in his mouth that is filled with cyanide.”

“Were you surprised that Daneli tackled the assassin?”

“No, not at all. She is strong, and once she figured out what was happening, it would be natural for her to try and protect the Queen.”

Master Ware said, “Thank you, Master Garliri, our questioning of you is complete.”

Daneli was a little surprised by this, but she didn’t know what to think. The Masters called Kamila next, who just gave them the story that she’d already told Daneli, about talking with her then husband about the assassination plot. They then dismissed her.

Master Ware said, “We now call Queen Daneli Trageri.”

Daneli stood up, and walked to the seat, and stood next to it.

“Please raise your right hand.” She did.

“Do you swear, by Sabadora the Goddess of Wisdom, to tell all of the truth as you know it, and to withhold any falsehood or opinion?”

“I do.”

“Thank you, Queen Daneli.”

The questions were predictable, and few. She recounted her experience at the assassination, and explained any contact that she had with Warani before the assassination, which amounted to the single letter from Kamila. It was almost as if they were bored. Then she realized that they likely were bored! There wasn’t anything particularly interesting to find once they had talked with King Gasri, who admitted to the assassination.

Daneli was the last witness they would call. Once she went back to her seat, Master Ware said, “This inquest is now adjourned. We will call the Sala Hoira, to deliver our verdict, to start in fifteen days.” He banged the gavel.

Fifteen days was the minimum amount of time it took to get messengers sent throughout Trageri, and have all kalas make it here in time. Whenever a Sala Hoira was called, it was always

fifteen to thirty days before the kalas would convene. The fact that it was so soon suggested to Daneli that the decision was pretty much already written.

Daneli decided to stay in Hasni for the fifteen days. It was going to feel like a little vacation. But she also knew she would be plagued with worry.

As she sat in the audience in the auditorium at Hasni where the kalas met in session, she watched the Masters of Justice, who were sitting where she usually sat. She could hear kalas entering into the room behind her. Brao Sopha was sitting on her right, and Kala Frel Colera was sitting at her left. She and Frel had become friendly, and Colera was a staunch ally of House Trageri.

Finally, everyone was present, and Master Ware banged his gavel.

“Kalas of Trageri, we have made our decision regarding the inquest you called to investigate the assassination of Queen Raliro.”

Daneli thought that she'd never heard this room be so quiet.

“We have determined that the assassination of Queen Raliro was done entirely at the hands of King Gasri of Warani, through his agent Duke Trevalian, previously heir to Karina, with no aid, assistance, or complicity from any persons in Trageri. The well-trained assassin snuck over the border, murdered a member of House Kitta to steal his clothes, traveled to the Sala Trageri in those stolen clothes, and assassinated Queen Raliro. No member of House Trageri had any knowledge of the assassination, and all members of House Trageri acted honorably in the face of this assassination.

Further, we have found no undue influence of Warani on House Trageri. Despite the fact that sons and daughters of the House had spent years in Warani, and one of the Queen's spouses is from Warani, House Trageri has fewer regular communications with Warani than most border families and Houses. The aid that House Trageri gave to Warani was clearly made for the benefit of all of Trageri, not Warani. One could argue that Queen Daneli overreached her authority by not calling a Sala Hoira, but the nature of the aid given to Warani was actually in her power to give without approval.”

Daneli was a bit surprised that the Masters had gone so far—but she appreciated it.

He banged his gavel. “All of our detailed findings will be given to each of you in book form. The inquest is adjourned. I turn over this Sala Hoira to Queen Daneli.”

She had been prepared for this. Master Ware had told her their report would be brief.

She stood. “I call a recess. I do have one important item of business regarding Niyesh I would like to bring up, since you all are here now. Then I will let you all go home. We will reconvene in one hour.”

Kamila had suggested the recess instead of plunging right into the issue with Niyesh. She felt that the kalas would want time to digest the judgment. Daneli agreed.

She looked at Brao, who gave her a big hug. “Congratulations, Daneli. I’m glad it’s over.”

“I am too. Thanks for all of your support.”

She was suddenly surrounded by people who wanted to offer their support. She knew that at least some of these had likely voted for the inquest. It didn’t matter, really. She was happy that there would be no lingering shadow of doubt on her or her House.

After her complete exoneration at the Sala Hoira, getting the kalas to agree to have Trageri send ships to Niyesh to talk with their leadership was easy. Master Wuron organized an expedition to Niyesh, to include not only diplomatic representatives, but also some scientists who might be in a position to help the Niyeshis figure out why they were dying out.

Her spouse Ulio had approached her with the request that he serve as the diplomatic representative of Trageri to Niyesh. Ulio had been spending most of his time helping to raise the House’s children, and Daneli and Derisi, her administrative spouse, had to spend some time rearranging child care and education duties because of Ulio’s absence. Daneli had gotten to know Ulio well, and she felt that he would be a good diplomat—he was passionate about trying to figure out how to help them. He had been gone for a few weeks now. She missed him and wondered how he was.

The next time Daneli talked with Captain Jessup, which would happen in about two months, she would suggest to him that there might be an opportunity for the colonists to help Niyesh. But she didn’t know whether Niyesh would welcome that—they wouldn’t know until the expedition returned.

She heard a knock, and Quinn poked his head in, holding the breakfast tray.

“You’re up early, Daneli.”

“I woke up early, and worried, so I just got up and started working. What’s up for today?”

“Are you worried about Ulio? He’ll be fine, dear, I know it. And they are due back in a few days. Anyway, there is a long list today. We have seven trade agreements to deal with, a request from House Werni, and a border issue. Kamila will be joining us in a while to talk about that. Also, we need to discuss the marriage offers for your sibling Kalisi.”

“Marriage offers for Kalisi? She’s only 16!”

“That may be, Daneli, but she has four offers already, all from major Houses.”

“I guess we need to bring her to the Sala Red next time, eh? Anyway, Gareth knew which offer he wanted to accept, and I just agreed to be at his wedding in Colera. Does Kalisi know anything about these kaleas?”

“Er, no.”

“Isn’t that a little... strange?”

“I talked with Mara briefly, since this is out of my experience. She said that it is not especially rare for children of our House to get marriage offers before they’ve even met them, especially for the last children of a generation. She said that since it will be another fifteen years or so before there are more available, people who can are grabbing their chance now.”

“I see. Have you talked with Kalisi about what she might want to do? I know that Jerel plans to dedicate himself to Sur Rolero instead of marrying.”

“I did talk with her, and she does intend to marry. However...”

“Why does this sound ominous?”

“She has taken the fancy of an eldest within clan Trageri.”

“Ah, well.”

“It might take a twist of the arm...”

“I’m not an arm twister, Quinn, you know that—if she wants to marry into a family inside our clan, who am I to tell her she can’t? How does it weaken the House if she does?”

“It doesn’t weaken the House, but she should understand what affect it might have on her own status.”

“She may not care.”

“Agreed.”

“I’d like to have a chat with her—can you arrange that?”

“Of course, Daneli. So, the trade agreements...”

“Which ones are those?”

“Nothing unusual, or that you haven’t seen. Basically, I should just give you the drafts to look at, and you can review them, and let me know if anything pops out at you that we need to address.”

“Alright.” Quinn handed Daneli a stack of papers.

“So...”

Daneli looked up. “Yes?”

“House Werni has a request of House Trageri.”

“Well, we owe them big time for helping get me back here in a pinch a few years ago. I sent some gifts, but that didn’t feel like enough. What do they request?”

“One of their offspring has been particularly interested in the colonists—she’d like to be involved somehow in receiving them, or helping them get settled, whatever.”

“How old is she?”

“Fourteen.”

“Ah. So she wants an apprenticeship.”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm. Alright. Master Hiller is organizing a group of people to work on this issue. Have a message sent to him to find out if is a space for her. Have her meet us at Sur Rolero when I’m to speak with Captain Jessup in two months time. If Master Hiller can’t accommodate her, she’ll return with us and stay as a guest of the House, and we’ll figure something out.”

“That sounds fine. Let me go get...” A knock sounded. “... never mind.”

“Come in Kamila.”

Kamila walked into the parlor and sat down, grabbing one of the pastries.

Daneli said, “So, I hear there is a border issue.”

“Yes, a sticky one.”

“How sticky?”

“It depends on your point of view.”

“Well, then, tell us about it.”

“The short story is that Duvale wants to defect.”

Kamila had Daneli’s full attention at once. “What!? Defect?”

“Duvale and House Joquin have been very closely allied of late. One of Duke Duvale’s sons just married into House Joquin.”

“Oh, my. A son?”

“Yes, my love, a son. Not the eldest, mind you, but still.”

“Well, Duvale has been quite distant from the center of Warani politics for a very long time, and comfortable with Trageri culture—more than most in Warani.”

“Anyway, Duke Duvale would like to come to House Trageri to meet with you, and formally request that Duvale and it’s holdings become a House.”

“Oh, my that is sticky.”

“It gets a little stickier.”

“Oh, no. What?”

“Apparently, several Earls and Barons want to come with him.”

Daneli put her head in her hands. Defections of this sort, at a time when Warani is busy finishing off the Niyeshis, seemed to be timed rather badly.

“Well, I will absolutely honor their request for a conversation, but it must be made clear that any change of this sort requires the approval of the kalas. I don’t know how they would react to this sort of thing—especially given the upheaval that the colonists threaten. It might well seem too much to handle.”

“Agreed, but, the chance to eat away at Warani territory would be rather tempting to the kalas.”

“True, although the debt they are incurring is having the same effect. I don’t know how King Gasri will react. He may feel like ‘good riddance,’ but it may feel like an attack—something I don’t want. Well, as I said, accept his request for a conversation.”

“Alright.”

“And have him bring his son, if he is willing. I’d love to talk with him. He might be key—we need people who can talk with Warani about the colonists—people who aren’t me or you, that is.”

Kamila nodded. “Good idea, Daneli.”

Daneli had a realization—she absolutely had to bring Warani to the table and talk about the colonists. Anything else would potentially lead to disaster for Capella IV.

Daneli sat in front of the communications device, ready to have her first synchronous conversation with Captain Jessup. As the ship had decelerated over the course of the last two years, her conversations with him had been more and more in sync. But now, he was basically at rest, like them.

His ship had reached orbit around Capella IV just a few days ago, and was in final preparations for the slow process of disembarking 50,000 colonists and assorted cargo. Daneli was quite happy about how prepared they were. About fifteen thousand colonists would become guests of varied Houses and families, with most of them eventually to join Houses and Families as spouses. The rest would remain guests—essentially contributing members of those households. House Trageri would have two guests, Captain Jessup's second in command, and another person who had a diplomatic background. Captain Jessup, and a small crew, would remain at Sur Rolero, likely to take off in the next year or so to head to Catania.

Another ten thousand would form House and families of clan Daraelia, and were given lands in central Trageri. Daneli remembered with a twinge how hard those negotiations had been. About five thousand would settle in the islands south and east of Trageri, and twenty thousand would help to re-populate Niyesh.

That last agreement had been no mean feat for Daneli to arrange. The Niyeshis, unlike Warani, were fully cognizant of their origins, but were exceedingly insular and xenophobic. It had taken a full year of negotiations between Trageri and Niyesh to agree to this option. And it was still unclear how the two peoples would actually interact on their continent. In the end, the Niyeshis realized they didn't have another option. They'd lost their battle with Warani, losing hundreds of young men in the process. Trageri and Daraelian scientists had determined that a previously unknown native virus was at fault for the Niyeshi's population problem, and the Daraelians were confident that they would be able to create a vaccine very soon upon landing. It was genuinely critical that they do so—the Niyeshi men invading Warani had already spread the infection to Warani, which meant that Trageri wasn't far behind.

The screen lit up, and Captain Jessup's face appeared.

“Queen Daneli, hello. It is nice to finally get to speak to you synchronously.”

Daneli smiled. “Yes, Captain Jessup. I guess the moment has finally arrived.”

“It seems that we are in good shape. Thank you for that most recent report on Niyesh—we received it just as we entered the Capella system.”

“I’m not so confident of what might happen in the future, Captain Jessup.”

“Understood. We’re all stumbling around in the dark, aren’t we, Queen Daneli?”

Daneli nodded, and remembered how much she’d come to like Captain Jessup. They discussed the final preparations for the colonists. The ship had ten shuttles, each could take about two hundred passengers. It would take many, many trips to finally get all of the passengers off the ship. They had decided to dedicate five for Niyesh, three for Trageri, and two for the islands. There had been an effort between the Masters at Sur Rolero and those working on Trageri settlement to determine the optimal landing places so that the colonists would have the shortest travel to where they would be guests. Captain Jessup had made it clear that none of them knew how to ride a horse—there were no horses on Daraelia.

As Daneli stood watching the setting sun over the deck of the ship taking her home, she realized that life for Trageri and millions of people over all of Capella IV would forever be different. The addition of what could be considered a tiny number of new colonists shifted the balance of power on the planet in a way that no one could ignore. It was going to be a very interesting time.

About the Author

Michelle has been a science fiction fan since she could read. She has written and published poetry and technical writing. She has published four novels in *The Casitian Universe Series*, two novels in the series, *The Casseopeia Chronicles*. This is the first novel of a new series, *The House Trageri Saga*. Michelle lives and works in Northern California.

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