

'Tis not the many oaths that makes the truth,  
But the plain single vow that is vow'd true.

Shakespeare: All's Well That Ends Well

## CHAPTER 1

 “WHY ARE THERE SO MANY SECRETS IN THIS FAMILY?” Gwenna’s voice wasn’t raised; if anything, it was lower, colder than normal, her clenched fists reflecting her anger. “No-one tells me anything. My classmates laugh at me, because they know more about you than I do. It’s not fair.”

“Kitten,” Druise began. She rounded on him.

“Do not call me Kitten,” she hissed. “I hate it!”

“Gwenna,” Cillian said firmly, “if you cannot be civil, you must leave. If you are prepared to outline your complaints in a manner both calm and logical, you may join us after dinner for a while, and I,” he glanced at Lena, who nodded, “we, will listen. But you may not shout at any of us. Go to your room, please.”

She glared at him, but even Gwenna, as angry as she was, would not gainsay Cillian. Both because he was the *Comiádh*, and because he was her adored father. Colm looked up from the book he was reading. “May I go too?” he asked. “I want to finish my drawing.”

“Of course,” Lena said. “Bring it to show us, later.”

“Properly labelled,” Cillian added. He held out an arm to embrace his son, kissing him on the temple. Gwenna stood sulkily near the door. She opened it as her brother approached, then turned on her heel to look directly at her father.

“I am not a child. Stop treating me like one,” she said fiercely. The door closed, quietly — she was not that defiant — behind her.

“Gwenna has a point,” Cillian said quietly. “We have, with good reason, been sparing with what she knows of our lives before she was born, and since. I did not fully realize we were part of the curriculum so early in the officer cadets' education.”

“Perhaps it’s an extra class, for those who will become diplomats?” Lena suggested.

“Perhaps. In either case, she needs to hear the truth from us. But I worry.”

“About what?” I asked.

“She is volatile. More so than usual,” he amended, at Lena’s raised eyebrow. “I do not quite trust her to differentiate between what she deserves to know, and what she can speak about. When a secret shared must remain a secret.”

I stood to pour myself more tea from the pot on the sideboard. I stopped behind Cillian to put a hand on his shoulder. “You’ll have to elicit a promise,” I said. He looked up at me. I was leaving in two days, for much of the summer. He leaned back, a tiny movement, acknowledging the touch.

“I suppose I will,” he said. “When she is calmer, Sorley.”

A gentle knock at the door and Apula slipped in. “Am I early?” he said, seeing that I was pouring tea.

“No,” Cillian said. “We had an upset daughter to deal with. Have some tea, Apula, and tell me if any of the new students has a voice to be cultivated.”

I handed Apula a mug of tea and listened with interest as he spoke intelligently about the three new students' singing voices. "The boy has the most potential," he said, "if his voice remains true. Both girls carry a tune adequately, but nothing more."

"The boy plays, too," I said, "and with some skill. Apula, he's yours for the summer, although Robb can give him some instruction on the *ladhar* while I am gone." I was riding north into Sorham, to supervise the beginning of a music program in the newest *Ti'ach*, recently established in my homeland. By tradition, *scáeli'en* travelled alone. I turned to my partner. "And you on the *cithar*, Druise, if you want."

"Why not?" Druise said. "If I am teaching the others anyhow."

"I am ready," Cillian announced. He pushed himself upright, reaching for his walking stick. Apula stood, going to Cillian to ensure he was steady. They would go to Cillian's treatment room in the annex, where there was a high bed for massage, and shelves for Apula's oils and lotions, and from there to the baths Druise and Apula had built, the first summer here. I might join Cillian in the hot pool later, I thought.

"What is Colm drawing?" I asked Lena idly, finishing my tea.

"A squirrel skeleton he found," she said, rolling her eyes. "It was old, and bleached, so I let him keep it. Cillian found him an anatomy book from somewhere, so he's labelling the teeth and bones as best he can." Colm was as precise and thoughtful over his work as his father, and by nature self-contained, but a loving and generous child. Privately, I thought he was what Cillian might have been, had his childhood been different. Where Gwenna, tall and inherently graceful, looked almost exactly like her father, the strong stamp of Callan's line evident, Colm was a blend of his parents. He had Lena's skin colouring and her hazel eyes, but, like his sister, Cillian's dark hair. He had been born into the peace of the *Ti'ach*, to a calm and ordered life, and I wondered sometimes if this has contributed to his happy, unbothered personality, so unlike Gwenna's. Her first year had been different, and difficult.

"*Amané*," Druise said, "should we review what you expect from the students this summer?"

"I suppose we should," I replied. We made our way to my teaching rooms — ours, really, as Druise taught here too, but by convention they were mine. As I held the appointment as *scáeli* to the *Ti'ach na Cillian*. When they had been Dagny's rooms, she had used one as a bedroom, but Druise and I shared a suite of rooms in the annex, where students were never allowed. So there were two rooms to use for teaching, and the instrument room, so even when Lena was teaching aspects of *danta* interpretation, we all had space.

We went over the students and what I thought they should be learning for much of the next hour. Robb would work with the younger ones on the *ladhar*, and Apula on voice with them all. "Gwenna is competent on the *ladhar*, too," I said. "It won't hurt her to start helping the others with tuning and fingering."

"She is angry at the world," Druise said, "and in no mood to help anyone. I will wait to suggest that, yes?"

"Yes," I agreed. "Although you know what Cillian would say."

"That it is her role in life. I know," he said. "But she is fourteen, Sorley."

"Two years an officer cadet, and heir to Faolyn. She doesn't have the luxury of being moody. What were your sisters doing at fourteen, Druise?"

"Marrying," he said with a shrug.

"As was mine," I said, "or at least being betrothed. And I could do a day's work in the *torp*, and you were a soldier."

"A day's work overseeing, you mean," he said. It was an old tease between us. "What does a lord's son know of work?"

"Tell me when you have sheared sheep for a day," I replied. He chuckled.

"I will miss you," he said softly. "It is many years since we have been apart for so long." I glanced at the door; firmly shut, and we were in the rear of the two rooms. He was violating one of our rules, but I saw no harm in it. No one could hear. Or see. I leaned over to kiss him, just lightly.

"I'll miss you, too," I replied. I would have liked to take him with me, to see my homeland, even to take the time to travel to Gundarstorp, my ancestral holding now in the hands of my brother Roghan. But I could not take a guard, and I would have no other way to explain, in Linrathe or Sorham, Druise's presence at my side. Here at the *Ti'ach*, our rooms in the annex gave us privacy, our hours with Cillian and Lena gave us acceptance, and Apula's care of our rooms and laundry and his responsibilities for the baths meant no *torpari* servant ever had cause to suspect we were anything but friends. A necessary deception made easier by the traditions of the *Ti'ach*, which also prohibited any signs of affection between Cillian and Lena in front of the students. We had our public lives, and our private ones, and we kept them separate.

"Tomorrow," he said, grinning, "we will say goodnight early, yes?"

"Yes," I assured him.

"But not tonight, though," he said, matter-of-factly.

"No."

"He will miss you too," Druise said. "Lena will have to improve her *xache* game."

"He can play Gwenna," I suggested. "She's better than I am, already, when she concentrates." I stretched. "Baths, Druise?" He shook his head.

"Tomorrow."

"I'll see you at dinner, then," I said.

Apula was just helping Cillian into the pool when I arrived. I slipped into the water beside him, luxuriating in its heat. My shoulders and neck, bent too long over my instrument or that of my students, needed relaxing.

"Is Colm joining us?" I asked. We maintained the rules of bathhouse use from Wall's End: no mixing of sexes, although that did not extend to Cillian and Lena, alone. The baths were strictly for family, except for the occasional Casilani envoy.

"No," Cillian said. "Druisius?"

"No." We regarded each other. A smile played on his lips. He glanced up at Apula.

"Half an hour." Apula nodded and left. "*Mo duíne gràhadh*," Cillian murmured. "You are going home."

"Back to Sorham," I said. "Home is here."

"Will you go to Gundarstorp, though?"

"Yes, likely. The new *Ti'ach* is only a short ride south, as you know."

"And you believe your brother will provide for it? I am still not entirely happy that there are no lands to support the *Ti'ach*, but asking the *Härren* to give up part of their estates and their people is not reasonable, not yet." Here in Linrathe, the *Ti'acha* were generations old, and their endowments of land had been given — or ordered — by a *Teannasach* hundreds of years ago. Their expansion into Sorham, and perhaps one day into Varsland, had been requested by Ruar, but even with the support of his Marai wife Helvi, he could not order them to give up land.

"He has promised. Fish and wool and mutton, and I imagine it will be much the same from Pietarstorp and others. His son will be sent, too, although Hairle is not pleased. He is sixteen, a man."

"A sixteen-year old from Gundarstorp?" Cillian said. "Dangerous creatures, they can be."

"No more dangerous than a visiting *toscaire*," I said.

He chuckled, lifting his hand out of the water to put an arm around my shoulders. "I am long past being dangerous, at least in that way," he said. I felt the touch of the silver marriage bracelet on his arm. It had been mine, once, it and the one on Lena's wrist. I had given them to Cillian on the eve of their wedding.

"I disagree," I murmured. Grey streaked his hair, and lines of pain never fully alleviated scored his face, but to me he was as beautiful as he had been the night I had fallen in love, watching him dance to the music I was playing. Twenty-three years ago, that had been. Grace unfettered, I had written later, although he couldn't be described as graceful now. I didn't care. That he was alive and that I was here at the *Ti'ach* with him was more than enough.

We sat for some time, not talking, until we heard Apula clear his throat in the anteroom. With a wry smile, I moved away. Apula knew everything there was to know about all of us, but his personal history meant we were careful with expressions of affection between men in front of him. I stood in the water, and between Apula and me we helped Cillian out. Had I not been there, Apula would have come into the pool himself.

We wrapped towels around our waists and went to dry and dress. "Will you want another massage later?" Apula asked quietly, drying Cillian's back.

"I think not," Cillian said. "But the baths again in the early morning, please."

Dinners at the *Ti'ach* meant a topic of discussion chosen by one of the adults, or occasionally by the senior students. If Cillian chose, it was frequently a passage from Catilius he offered for the *daltai's* thoughts, and tonight it was no different. "Catilius wrote: *Look back over the past, at the empires that rose and fell, and predict the future.* What is he telling us?" he asked. As always, he began with the youngest students, asking supplemental questions if necessary, to elicit an answer.

"That nothing lasts," Gwenna said, when it was her turn. "But if this is true, *Comiádh*, then why do we work so hard to maintain our governments, and the relationships among our lands?"

"What happens if we do not?" he asked in return.

"War," Robb said. He was the oldest of the students, although not quite old enough to remember coherently. Images, perhaps, and fear. "Anarchy."

"Indeed," Cillian said. "Look around this table, *daltai*. I, as you know, am Linrathan born, but now a citizen of Ésparias and by extension of the Eastern Empire. The Lady of this house is Ésparian; the lord Sorley was born in Sorham, and the Captain in Casil. And among you, I count two of Ésparias, five from Linrathe, and two from Sorham. We live together in peace, with common goals. How do we do that?"

"Because there are rules," Colm said.

"Who decides on the rules?" Cillian asked. "Am I free to do what I wish?"

None of the students spoke. "I don't believe so," Robb said finally. "Even the *Comiádh* has rules, does he not? Expectations? "

"Yes," Cillian said. "I am less bound than Lord Sorley, whose responsibilities as a *scáeli* are set by his council, but still I am not free to do what I wish, either in how I lead this *Ti'ach*, or in my public life."

"*Comiádh*?" Robb said. "I would like to ask something, but I'm not sure if it is appropriate."

"Is it on topic?" Cillian enquired.

"The question came from your last statement." I smiled to myself. Robb had been twelve when he came to us, quiet and shy; he was often still quiet, but his confidence now was apparent. He would be an excellent travelling teacher, and, perhaps, a *comiádh* himself one day. He was a competent musician, too, but he lacked the skill, or interest, to be a *scáeli*.

"You said you are not free to do as you might wish, in your public life. But you have two public roles, sir." He hesitated. "Should I go on?"

Cillian looked down the table at Lena. He spread his hands. "There is no reason not to," he said. "One rarely influences the other, but the question is valid."

"Which role constrains you more?"

"Day to day," Cillian said, "the role of *Comiádh* governs my life. The other concerns me only occasionally, when the envoys visit, or the *Princip*. But beyond those times, and my signature on a few letters each year, I am the *Comiádh*, and so its constraints have a greater influence."

"Is that true?" Gwenna asked. A direct challenge to the *Comiádh* — whether he was her father or not — was rare from a student of her age. Only when the head of the *Ti'ach* had invited a *dalta* to call him by his name did anyone, traditionally, challenge him

"Why is it not, in your eyes?" Cillian replied.

"You are *Comiádh* of this *Ti'ach* through an appointment by the *Teannasach*. But your other role," she frowned a little, "comes from the Empress of the Eastern Empire, and Linrathe pays tribute to her. She is therefore the greater power, and the *Teannasach* the lesser, so *Comiádh* is the lesser role."

"That is one way to measure the value of the roles," Cillian said. "Is there another?"

"One title is very new," Robb said. "The other has been in existence for generations, and is greatly honoured."

"But *Comiádh* means only that you teach us, and while that is important, isn't advising the *Princip* and the Governor of Ésparias more so?" Colm asked.

"There is no correct answer," Cillian said. "What we do in our lives, the roles we take on, will be seen differently by different people, because the value a person gives a role or an action is a reflection of what they believe is important. But I will ask you this: would the leaders of Ésparias seek my advice, had I not been educated at this *Ti'ach*? Would being the last Emperor's son be sufficient?"

"Then you value being *Comiádh* more?" Robb ventured. "What about you, Lord Sorley? There are parallels between you, aren't there? If I am not presuming?"

"Present your argument," I said.

"Both you and the *Comiádh* advise your leaders. You were both heirs to a position you relinquished, although you retain the titles for diplomatic reasons, I believe. Both of you were important *toscairen*, and both of you chose to give that up to return to this school in Linrathe. Are you happy with your choice too?"

Lena's eyes met mine along the table. There was nothing — other than his family — that Cillian valued more than being Perras's chosen successor at this *Ti'ach*. My appointment as *scáeli* here meant both my lifelong dreams had come true, although that was too personal to speak of to the students. But Robb had asked me a direct question, and I thought there might just be more than one reason for it.

"I am happy in this life, yes," I said. "It is an honour to be the *scáeli* of this house, and I am a *scáeli* before anything else, Robb." Just as Cillian was the *Comiádh*, first. But behind our official positions, beyond the calm and ordered life of the *Ti'ach*, we had other work, all four of us. Work the *daltai* knew — and could know — nothing about.

"Thank you, Lord Sorley," Robb said. "May I make one further observation?"

"Go ahead."

"We think, as children, that the adults around us are free," he said. He glanced at all of us, but I thought his eyes lingered on Druise and me. "But you are not. We are not, I must learn to say soon. I appreciate the example you have set me, in my years here."

He will still be here when I return, I thought, so I have time. Time to tell him how to conduct himself as a *channàdarra* man in Linrathe and Sorham. It wouldn't be the first conversation of this sort I had had over my years at the *Ti'ach*. I wished someone had done it for me, when I was a student here. Perras had tried, but he could not speak from experience. Perhaps I would have a word before I left, I decided.

"If we have taught you that, we have taught you much," Cillian said. "Apula will supervise tonight, *daltai*. Robb, will you assist until first bedtime?"

"Of course," Robb said. Cillian stood, indicating the end of the formal dinner.

"Gwenna," he said. "I gave you an assignment. Is it ready for review?"

"Yes, *Comiádh*," she said.

"Then will you accompany us?" In public, Cillian treated his children exactly as he did the other *daltai*, with the same grave courtesy and expectation of obedience. In private, he was very different.

"So, *mo nihéan*," he said, as soon as the door to their rooms closed, "You have catalogued your grievances?" I heard the amusement in his voice, and so did Gwenna. She glared at him. Only in her expressions of frustration or anger could I see Lena in her.

"If you are not going to take me seriously," she said, "I will ask to leave."

"Cillian," Lena warned. He sobered.

"I apologize," he said to Gwenna. "Your complaint of secrecy is valid. We have not told you enough. Sit, *leannan*, and tell us what you want to know. You may have a little watered wine, if you wish."

"Not now," she said, taking a seat. "Could I wait, and have it later?"

"You may." We all sat.

"This is what I have heard," Gwenna began, taking a folded piece of paper from a pocket. "and I want to know what is true, and what isn't." She looked down at the paper. "I'll just give it to you. There is one other thing, but..." She hesitated. "I didn't want to write it down, and I don't want to ask you. Or mother."

"Then ask Sorley, or Druisius," Cillian said. He took the list from Gwenna, scanning it quickly. "This is quite a lot, Gwenna. More than we can talk about tonight. Is one thing more important to you than the others?"

"Yes," she said, a little defiantly. "You have always told us promises are binding and should not be made unless you will keep them. But you broke your oath to Linrathe to save your life, didn't you?"

"No," Cillian said evenly. "I did not, Gwenna. I had resigned as *toscaire* some years earlier, which freed me of my oath to Linrathe and its people."

"Then if not to Linrathe, then to your *Teannasach*," she persisted. "Sorley, when you stopped being a *toscaire*, you swore an oath to Ruar, didn't you?"

"I did," I said.

"Then you would have too," she said, turning back to her father, "to Donnalch." Cillian's eyes met Lena's, a long look.

"At my trial," he said, "who was *Teannasach*?"

"Lorcann," she said. "Donnalch was dead."

"Had I had the opportunity to swear allegiance to him?"

"I suppose not," she admitted. "But allegiance to a new *Teannasach* is assumed until there has been time for the oaths to be made, so it makes no difference."

"Your argument is correct," he said, "but the assumption you have made is not."

Just tell her, I thought. Don't play games. Then I mentally shook my head at my own reaction: this was Gwenna, brought up nearly since she could talk to think about what was hidden by words, about

what was not said, as much as what was. Both her father and I used language as tools, but very differently.

Cillian waited. Gwenna's frown deepened, her eyes narrowed and distant, thinking. A hand went to her hair, twisting its almost-black strands. She cocked her head. "You were not sworn to Donnalch?"

"I was not," he said. "Well done, *mo nihéan*."

"Why not?" Curious, more than confused.

"He would not accept it. He had no trust in me; had not since we were children together at this *Ti'ach*," Cillian said, no emotion in his voice at all. Just a fact, to be related. I glanced at Lena. Her eyes were on Cillian, not Gwenna.

"Why not?" she asked again, but this time disbelief coloured her voice.

"Donnalch was twelve when he decided that since my mother had borne me to an Empire's soldier, she was a traitor to Linrathe. Remember that Linrathe and Ésparias were enemies at that time, Gwenna, so that view would have been widely held, and he would have heard it from his own father, no doubt. His thinking was this: since my mother and I had both been brought up by the same people, if they had raised her to be a traitor, then they must have also raised me to be the same."

That conversation had led Perras, then the *Comiádh*, to tell Cillian he would need to be man of utmost integrity, and always keep his word. Dagney had explained it to me, many years later. What might have been different, if that accusation, and Perras's counsel, had never been spoken?

"But that's a fallacy," Gwenna said.

"Perras explained that to him, but he chose to follow his emotions rather than logic. Even when we were both adults, I never had his full trust."

"So you were free to choose Ésparias over Linrathe," she said.

"Not entirely free. I could make that choice only because my father was willing to acknowledge me."

"Can I tell my classmates this?" Her voice trailed off. "But it won't help."

"Kitten," Druise said, "tell us what they are saying."

"All sorts of things," she said, "and sometimes they contradict each other. But —" She straightened her shoulders a little. "I tried not to be upset. I'm sorry I was earlier today, *Athàir*. I analysed what they were saying, as you taught me, and as I have learned to do too at the White Fort."

"And your conclusion?" Cillian asked.

"What is said is the same as what Donnalch thought. That you cannot be trusted. *Mathàir*?" She turned to Lena, and I thought she looked about ten again for a moment. "Has he ever broken a promise to you?"

"Once," Lena said. Gwenna went very still, her eyes wide. "In Casil, trying to ensure my safety, and that of all of us, by attempting to bind the Empress to sending troops to support the war against the Marai. He had promised to be constant, and he wasn't. I forgave him, under the circumstances," she added, with a smile.

"And that is the only time?" Apprehension quivered in her voice.

"Yes," Lena replied. "Haven't I just said so?"

"*Mo nihéan gràhadh*, will you listen for a moment?" Cillian asked. "You have heard my loyalty questioned, and especially my reasons for accepting my father's acknowledgment of me. Those questions come from those who only know part of the truth. That both Casyn and Ruar, who know it all, continue to trust me should tell you more, but you must never accept such trust blindly."

"Then you haven't told me all the truth?" Gwenna asked immediately. I swore silently.

"It is not entirely my story to tell, Gwenna," her father answered. I watched her, seeing the confusion, mistrust battling against love. Oh, Gwenna, I thought. I know almost exactly how you feel.

"Shall we have wine now?" I asked.

"A good idea," Druise said. "Kitten, you will share a cup with us, and then you will let us talk, the four of us, yes?"

"All right," she said.

"Gwenna, we have a ritual with wine, of an evening," Cillian said. "Sorley began it, many years ago. Do not drink when you are given your wine, until the toast is made." He pushed himself up and went to the sideboard. I joined him. He poured five cups of wine, watering two — his and Gwenna's — extensively, the others less so. He handed one to me. I gave it to Lena, the first cup of the night always hers, my acknowledgment of the primacy of her bond with Cillian. Then Druise's. Gwenna was next. My own I took from Cillian's hand, feeling even in his daughter's presence the light brush of his fingers.

Cillian raised his cup. "*Seek the truth, by which no one was ever truly harmed.*" Catilius, of course. I wasn't sure I agreed.

When Gwenna had left us, Lena uttered a deep sigh and sank into a chair. "I am not looking forward this summer," she said. "She is going to be confused and angry, and *so* pleasant to live with. Wasn't it enough to explain that you were not sworn to Donnalch, Cillian? Why did you have to imply there was more to it?"

"Because there was, *käresta.*"

"I know that. Does she need to?"

"I believe so." Lena didn't reply. She wasn't angry, I knew, just considering the situation.

"Do you truly believe Donnalch never came to trust you?" I asked Cillian. "Not even in his last days at Fritjof's hall?"

Cillian sipped his wine. "At the very end, when he knew he would be killed, I think so," he replied. "What choice had he? But I have wondered, over the years, his reasons for taking me with him."

"To observe, and listen, and remember," Lena said. "That is what I recall him saying."

"And would he not also be observing and listening to see how Fritjof and his men acted towards me?" Cillian ran a hand through his hair. "What had Liam told him?"

"Kitten needs to hear the truth," Druise said bluntly. "What you did, Cillian, and why."

"She's too young," I said.

"She is young," Lena said, "But better she hears it from us than have her mind filled with rumours and half-truths at the cadet school."

"All of it?" I asked. "Even — ?"

"A certain question will follow, I think," Cillian said. "I see no other reason for her asking if I had broken a promise to you, *käresta.*"

"Maybe she does need to hear the truth," I said. An idea had appeared, swirled, coalesced. I wasn't sure I liked it, but it made sense. "Or most of it. But not as a lesson, Cillian, the bare facts. Not like you told me."

"What are you suggesting?" Lena asked.

"She needs stories," I said, "to give her perspective."

"Stories told by you, with all your *scáeli's* skills?" Cillian asked. "A tale spun to coerce and convince, my lord Sorley?"

"Yes."

"But you are leaving in two days," Lena said.

"I am," I said. "But why can't I take her with me?"

The immediate objection came, of course, from Druise. "You cannot protect her properly," he growled.

"But you could," Lena said. "Sorley, would it break tradition if Druise went with you to guard Gwenna?" *Scáeli'en* travelled unarmed, except for our belt knives, and usually alone, although there were exceptions to that.

"Not considering who she is," I said.

"Then..." Lena turned to Cillian. "There is wisdom in Sorley's suggestion," she said to him. "In Tirvan, it was other adult women who helped us make sense of our rules and traditions, when we were young and argumentative."

"You, argumentative?" Cillian said. "I cannot imagine it, *kāresta*." His eyes were soft, as they always were when he looked at her in their private rooms. Lena pulled the cushion from behind her back and threw it at him. He caught it easily, laughing.

"Such behaviour from the *Comiádh* and the Lady," I said. "And what were you like at fourteen, Cillian?"

"I would ruin Druisius's good opinion of me, were I to say," Cillian answered. He tossed the cushion back to Lena. Druise snorted.

"If I had one, perhaps," he said. "Am I going north?"

"I have no objection," Cillian said. "It is an excellent idea. But it is not my decision. What about the guard, Lena?"

"They can be my responsibility for the summer," Lena said. "But are you completely sure, Sorley?"

"If you are, yes," I said. "I may well be glad Druise is with me, though." Since earliest childhood, it had been Druise Gwenna had gone to when she was upset or confused.

"No doubt," Cillian said, understanding. "And now I am going to make an exception, and have a second cup of wine. Who is joining me?"

We talked no further about it. Druise and I played music, and we drank a bit more wine, Cillian limiting himself to two watered cups. He'd mixed the few drugs he sometimes allowed himself into one, and he was relaxed, free of pain. Not terribly late in the evening, Lena yawned. "Bedtime," she said. She got up from the floor where she had been leaning against Cillian's good leg, her usual place when she listened to music. She bent to kiss him. "Try to get some sleep."

"I will see you in the morning, *kāresta*." He smiled up at her. Druise picked his *cithar* up, stretching as he stood.

"Good night," he said. "See you at breakfast."

We let them leave. I stood, holding out a hand to Cillian to help him up. We walked across the silent hall to the annex and his library. The door between it and the adjoining treatment room was open, lamplight flickering in the space beyond. His *xache* set — mine, really: Irmgard has sent it to me, in gratitude for learning her sons were alive — sat on the table, the carved walrus ivory gleaming palely as I lit a lamp. Cillian went to the shelves that lined one wall, pouring me a small amount of *fuisce*.

I picked up the white cat from the chair where she had been sleeping, transferring her to my shoulder. She purred, rubbing her head against mine before jumping down to stalk out into the hall. Sitting, I looked at the gameboard. We were part-way through a game, although we hadn't played for some weeks. The lamp flickered. I deliberated over my move, taking a sip of the peaty spirit. I moved a piece, capturing one of his, eliciting a faint sound from Cillian. I looked up at him, seeing the amusement in his eyes, dark in the lamplight. I had left myself vulnerable.

Reaching out, he took my game piece in one deft move. He might never walk easily again, or dance, but his hands were as graceful and skilled as they had been before that terrible autumn, nearly fifteen years past. "Will you never learn?" he asked.

"Someday, perhaps," I said. "But you don't really want me to, do you? It will always suit you to be the teacher."

"Not always." He smiled, slowly, his true, radiant smile, rarely seen. "Not in all things, *Somhairle*."

"Good morning, Sorley," Apula said quietly, when I met him in the corridor just before dawn the next morning. "There is a jug of hot water by your door."

"Thank you," I said. I picked up the jug of water, crossing our sitting room to the bedroom that was nominally Druse's, and almost never used. As I washed, I thought about my dream just before waking. Apula had been in it, as the frightened *castrati* slave he had been, arriving from Casil fourteen summers past. What he had been subjected to as a bath slave, by men who saw a pretty boy who could not refuse them, made me angry even now. When Druse had told me that Apula had been a singer before his enslavement — his sentence for stealing a *cithar* — somehow that engendered even deeper anger. He had already paid a terrible price to keep his high, pure voice, and that had not been his choice, either.

Why am I thinking of this? I wondered, as I dressed again. But it wasn't hard to work out. Gwenna's questions would have no easy answers. In offering to tell her the stories, I would have to face my own memories: disillusionment and doubt, uncertainty and discontent, and deep sadness and deeper joy. Much of what I remembered was confused now, events recalled out of sequence. Gwenna's birth was a fixed point, and I knew Cillian and Lena were married just before that, and that the Governor arrived after it. Two other memories were as clear as the day they happened. But others were distorted by time, both the details and the chronology blurred.

I didn't think it mattered. If I wanted Gwenna to truly hear what I had to tell her, I would have to wait for her questions. Even then, I would need every *scáeli's* skill I had to explain her father's actions, to help her understand his reasons. All my skill, all my own hard-won acceptance, and all the love I had for them both.

