

Avim's Oath

Part 6 of the Okal Rel Saga by Lynda Williams

Chapter 1: Sex Ed

Stubbornly, Erien shouldered his duffel bag, ignoring the stares of the Silver Demish men among the honor guard sent by his father, Ava Ameron. All six of the Silvers were highborn men, their uniforms littered with embroidery representing their rights and privileges. Erien was a seventeen-year-old raised on Rire, but he also outranked them and it was very clear they resented his lack of respect for his own lofty heritage, because it belittled their own coveted place in the complex hierarchy of the empire.

Opposite the line of Silvers stood the Vrellish members of his receiving line: the Monatese dressed in green livery and the Nersallians in black. The Vrellish spokesman was a Nersallian woman whose crimson braid declared her a member of the *kinf'stan*: one of those entitled to challenge her liege for his title. She was also the only highborn of the six people on the Vrellish side and — to judge by her profile — grounded by the imminent birth of a child.

“Welcome, Heir Gelion,” the pregnant Nersallian greeted Erien. “My liege would have greeted you himself, but he is busy with the shipment he received from Rire.”

The Silver Demish members of the honor guard made an extra effort to look unresponsive at this remark, which even Erien — with his paucity of court experience — understood to mean they assumed Horth was slighting him by failing to appear.

“Tell your liege I look forward to seeing him later,” he told the black-clad woman, “and I hope his shipment of cats from Rire traveled well.”

One of the Demish men was startled enough to blurt, “Cats?”

House cats had been extinct within the empire since the Lorels were exiled after the Fifth Civil War over two hundred years before.

The Monatese exchanged knowing looks, doubtless informed about Horth's acquisition through their own channels.

Princess Luthan of the Silver Demish was the next to greet Erien. She had not stood waiting for him, like the rest, but was fetched from a nearby pavilion.

Luthan was what the Demish called a princess-liege: a female leader governed by her male relatives. The gender bias irked Erien, but the sight of Luthan's wide blue eyes, petite figure and mass of golden hair did other things to him. At sixteen, she was a year younger than him and lacked the breadth of education given him by his Monatese and Reetion foster parents, but somehow she made him feel woefully inadequate in all things.

“Welcome back to court, Pureblood Erien Lor'Vrel, Heir Lor'Vrel and Heir Gelion,” Luthan delivered her greeting, keeping her gaze fixed on his chest. Only when she had completed the last word did her blue eyes flick up to meet his gray stare, jolting him with their sweet purity.

“Thank you,” was all Erien could think to say. He did, at least, manage to get the pronoun right, down-speaking her by the one birth rank between Pureblood and Royalblood. But he had no sooner said it than he regretted the necessity of implying a superiority he did not feel. She looked so cool and poised in her multilayered, floor-length skirts that he found himself wishing to call forth the girl, met at a court reception, who had complained of pinching shoes.

“I hope you won't be leaving us again for some time,” Luthan said, her own acknowledgement of their respective status seamlessly smooth.

Erien nodded stiffly. He knew they were both on display here on the docking floor, and wanted to behave naturally, but something about Luthan's very presence seemed to paralyze him.

She was the first to hear the approach of a new arrival. "Late as usual," Luthan said, in the girlish way Erien had been longing to glimpse in her. "I will leave you to catch up with your Monatese half-brother, Prince Erien, and look forward to seeing you again. Ava Ameron will, of course, be hosting a reception for you in White Hearth? Or will you leave the business of an Avim's Oath reception to your new vassal, Amel? Never mind," she concluded, with a sudden rush of blood to her ivory-pale cheeks. "I'll see you again, I'm sure." She drew back her full skirts in preparation for a stately departure.

"Wait!" Erien detained her, and knelt to rummage in his duffel bag while the assembled Demish made a point of looking elsewhere and the Vrellish watched with open curiosity. "I've something for you."

"What is it, Erien?" Luthan asked as he handed up the package.

"A book," he said, rising again. "I had it manufactured in paper, because I thought the format would be culturally appropriate for you. I translated it into Gelack myself. Was I right? Or would you have preferred an animated Reetion info blit?"

Luthan looked with wonder at the gift in her hands, wrapped in brown paper. "What's it about?" she asked.

Erien made to answer and balked for the sake of their audience. "Something you have expressed a need to learn. It seemed right to me you shouldn't be kept ignorant."

"Thank you," she said, and withdrew with the book clutched to her chest, just as Erien's half-brother Tatt burst upon the scene.

"Royalblood Ditatt Monitum, 104th liege of Monitum," a nearby Monatese herald announced, belatedly, as Tatt plowed through the Vrellish side of the receiving line with a little girl perched on his shoulders.

"Welcome back!" Tatt hailed his childhood playmate with reckless informality, catching Erien in his arms. The child upon his shoulders hung on.

"This is Hemma Lorson of Monitum," Tatt enthused as they separated, swinging the little girl down with one hand. "My most Sevolite offspring to date and hence my named heir."

"It's an honor to meet you," Erien introduced himself gravely, structuring his pronouns to follow Tatt's usage, which told him Hemma was a Royalblood like her father. It was wisest, Erien had learned, to be factual about birth ranks unless one had compelling reasons to do otherwise. His egalitarian upbringing might balk, but his Reetion foster father, Ranar, was also an anthropologist and Erien knew there was nothing simple, in Gelack, about offering peerage to someone of a lower birth rank. If nothing else, condescension could be unwelcome if it implied a false intimacy.

"The honor is mine, Heir Gelion," said the child, whose head came no higher than Tatt's waist. She beamed with a glimmer of her father's irrepressible joy for life. "I've heard a lot about my sire's strange Reetion *ha'brother* Erien."

"Nothing too dreadful, I hope," Erien said seriously.

"Oh, no." She shook her head, lower lip stiffening as she rested her right hand on the hilt of her child-sized sword. "Sire Tatt likes you tremendously! But I have *fem*-kin who say you are going to ruin Monitum by introducing Reetion competition to our nervecloth monopoly, and undermine our brokerage of medical services with Reetion competition, as well."

"Nonsense!" Tatt admonished his daughter, ruffling her mop of dark brown hair. "Monitum is Erien's favorite house on Fountain Court!"

The child gave her father a concerned look. "But if Reetion medical sciences are competitive with those of Luverthan, and he convinces people Reetions can be honorable —"

"I assure you I will take him down myself on the Challenge Floor if he plans to ruin Monitum with his Reetions!" Tatt cried. There was laughter in his bold voice, but the words sent a shiver down Erien's spine at the thought of the two of them facing each other in a serious duel. It wasn't just that

Tatt was better than he was with a blade, it was the horror of imagining such a falling out.

"Bringing harm to Monitum is the last thing I want to do," Erien assured the serious-minded little girl.

She pursed her lips then yielded to a nod. "Welcome to Gelion," she concluded with the precocious maturity of Sevolite children in positions of importance.

"Thank you," he answered with equal formality.

Tatt gave his daughter a parting hug and handed her off to one of her mother's relatives — her *fem*-kin in Vrellish terms — reminding Erien of the limited rights embodied in the Vrellish term 'sire,' in contrast to the Reetion notion of fatherhood. Tatt was valued by his house in a capacity bordering on stud, which sometimes troubled Erien's more Reetion sensibilities.

"Let's go," said Tatt, steering Erien in the direction of a car he had waiting. "Ameron gave orders to fetch you soon as you arrived, and I want to get back to the Justice Ministry as soon as possible."

The Justice Ministry was Tatt's calling — his *rel* as Gelacks would put it — just as Erien's was beginning to revolve around the idea of educating Sevolites to create trust in science as a force for progress.

"I've teamed up with Luthan," Tatt explained as he piled into the back of the car beside Erien. "She let me put a branch office of the Justice Ministry — well, the only office to date apart from Green Heath itself — into her orphanage. My people provide security for the orphanage staff, and the orphanage has been around long enough to be trusted as a place to make contact with Sevolites who give a damn about living up to their responsibilities. It's working for both of us. But it's a new arrangement and I like to spend as much time down there as I can. So —" Tatt shifted to look straight at Erien, a hand spread across the back seat behind him. "— listen fast."

"Listening," promised Erien.

"There are two things I must hammer into that unworldly head of yours," Tatt told him. "First, and I want you to say this after me so I am sure you've got it — the Dragon-Lion Accord."

Erien frowned. "I am aware of Ameron's plan to bring the two pillars of his oath closer together."

"Really!" Tatt exclaimed in mock astonishment. "And yet, you left Dorn Nersal on Rire when he's supposed to be sealing the deal by marrying Princess Luthan."

"Dorn was injured," Erien defended his decision. "He needed time to heal. And I wasn't sure how he'd be received, at court, given the Reetion medical intervention required to save him. Besides, the genetic component of the accord doesn't require Dorn, specially." He paused, wrestling with an internal discomfort he couldn't label. "Horth has plenty of other sons."

"Dozens!" Tatt agreed heartily. "But none of them as housebroken to the ways of the Demish court as Dorn was! Besides," he added energetically, "insulted Demish tend to up the ante."

"What do you mean?" Erien asked, with an apprehensive frown.

"Prince H'Us will try to renegotiate for something even better, and it took Ameron long enough to get the current agreement hammered out, given Vrellish and Demish differences concerning modes of procreation."

Erien sighed. "What's the second thing?" he asked.

"Amel, and the women who view him as a signet of passage to power."

Erien's heart sank. He was fed up with Amel's doe-eyed helplessness in the face of predatory females. His jaw locked. He coaxed it loose again with difficulty, letting Tatt's words wash over him.

"Amel was under a cloud when you left court for Rire," Tatt explained. "His connection with Ann of Rire looked suspicious enough to overshadow even his value as a Pureblood. Then a group of *Okal Lumens* lobbied Ameron to rescue Amel from the Reetions on the grounds they believed him to be a Soul of Light, although that still isn't the official line from the Golden Emperor on Demora, and

here's the amazing part —" Tatt paused for dramatic effect, a tactic lost on Erien who was feeling more disgruntled word by word " —the *Luminaries* were backed up by Nersallians!"

"I didn't think there were any Nersallian *Luminaries*!" Erien objected.

"There aren't!" Tatt assured him. "But some Nersallians are pretty close to Nesak orthodoxy and believe Amel is what they call a *zer-pol*, which means a sort of holy sacrifice whose persecution points a finger at the bad guys to be wiped out by the righteous — at least according to Di Mon. I checked the Monatese logs."

Tatt's casual mention of his predecessor caused Erien a pang of undiminished grief despite the long years since Di Mon's death. Unlike Tatt, he could take no comfort in communing with his mentor through the notes Di Mon kept during his term in office, nor by appealing to his soul among the Watching Dead.

"The religious groups broke the ice by making it possible to view Amel's bad behavior in an elevated light," Tatt continued to explain Amel's women problems. "Apparently a saint can't be a traitor or a slut; he's sending complex messages to the faithful, instead. And as soon as the charge of traitor vaporized in the glare of possible divinity, three sets of females woke up to the realization there was a very breedable male up for grabs."

Tatt's very Vrellish way of putting the situation sat uneasily with Erien, because his own status as a Pureblood paralleled Amel's. "I suppose you had better tell me more about these women," he admitted.

"Vretla Vrel to start," Tatt obliged him. "Amel is still the only male who has ever managed to get her pregnant, back when he was working as a courtesan, and Vretla wants a child to raise at court as heir to Red Hearth. She expects to be his First Sworn, which would make sense since she's the best sword in the Avim's Oath, as it existed under Ev'rel."

"Go on," Erien told Tatt, trying to sound bored instead of irritated.

"The Goldens have designs on Amel, as well, but even Ameron is getting headaches making sense of them. Think factions. And marriage."

"That's two," said Erien tersely.

"Number three is the Dem'Vrel," Tatt concluded. "With Ev'rel gone, they are breaking up into the rival houses of Therd and Lekker. So it's factions again, but with the Dem'Vrel it's a toss up whether co-opting Amel would mean Vrellish style child-gifting or Demish marriage. I'd bet on child-gifting, myself, because they need highborns in the Knotted Strings as badly as Monitum did before me." Tatt grinned with unabashed pride at his role in restocking his ancestral house with highborns. "I may not have sired as many children as Horth Nersal, yet, but I'm working on it!"

And you don't know most of them, Erien thought unhappily. Erien never wanted to be forced to fight one of his own children, as Horth was when challenged, nor feel responsible for the reckless or malicious acts of any child of his raised without the benefit of his guidance.

"Last but not least," Tatt moved on, "I have a bone to pick with you about the way things went down before you left court for Rire." Tatt paused, an ominous and unnatural act of will in so volatile a personality. "You ... didn't ... tell ... me ... anything," Tatt ground out in a tone bordering, for him, on grim.

"There was hardly a chance!" protested Erien. "You were too ill, and everything happened too fast."

Tatt produced a frown remarkably reminiscent of Ameron, the parent they shared. "So tell me now."

"Some of it isn't mine to tell," said Erien.

"Meaning it is Amel's to tell?" Tatt caught on in a flash, looking as pleased as a detective with a clue in hand. "Brilliant move, by the way, swearing Amel."

"It was necessary on Rire — to empower me to act for him politically," Erien explained, feeling

wrong-footed.

"Whatever," Tatt said with a shrug, and grinned again. "It very cleverly removed him as a rival for the title of Avim."

"But Amel is Ameron's man much more than he is mine," Erien said. "Even though—"

"Father was prepared to write him off on Rire?" Ditatt finished for him. "That's the odd thing about Amel. The worse you treat him, the harder he sticks. As though he's out to prove his grip."

"I am not interested in treating him badly," Erien said, a little tensely. Ditatt had no idea what unpleasant memories his lighthearted comments evoked.

"I heard the news about Ann of Rire!" interjected Tatt. "A Pureblood Sevolite child-gifting to a Reetion — was that your idea?"

"No!" Erien denied vehemently.

"Father was less than thrilled," said Tatt. "He thought it might have been your idea, given how you feel about the Reetions."

Wonderful, thought Erien. *So now I'm to be blamed for Amel's sexual indiscretions.* "Believe me," Erien said dryly, "Ann is the last Reetion I would have selected for the 'honor' if I'd had a choice."

Tatt gave him a sudden grin. "And how about yourself, Erien? What's your position on child-gifting these days? The promise you made Di Mon is obsolete. You know who you are, now." Tatt gave him a playful punch. "Have some fun. Loosen up. Build yourself a power base. I bet you could get Vretla's oath, easy, if you can get her pregnant before Amel does. She doesn't really care who does the job so long as he can make her a mother. If you're up to it, of course!" He shoulder-checked Erien, making him lurch. "Stop looking so offended!" exclaimed Tatt. "Anyone would think you were still a virgin."

"Tatt," Erien said stiffly, "I am not child-gifting."

Tatt stared at him. "It's not natural for a man to have no children! People start wondering if you are capable of it! And then, maybe, they'll start wondering about other things." Tatt's face colored with embarrassment. "You've been on Rire, you know, and everyone knows that Reetions uh..."

How have we got into this! Erien thought. "Reetions, unlike Gelacks, accept same-sex relationships. It doesn't mean all Reetions are homosexual. And I'm not ruling out having children. I'm ruling out child-gifting. I want to have children in a relationship."

"You mean with a *mekan'st*, right?" Tatt said, sounding worried.

"I don't know," Erien said in frustration. "There are no models for the relationship I want to have, except maybe on Rire. And anyway, Tatt, I'm only seventeen years old!"

Tatt gave him an odd look that made Erien remember Tatt's first child had been born when he was barely fifteen. The Gelacks didn't care that physiological maturity was no measure of emotional readiness.

"Erien," Tatt said, unexpectedly gently, "you're on Gelion now."

"I know," Erien sighed. "And there are things I want to do here. But not become a father. Not yet."

"It might cost you the Avim's Oath," Tatt warned.

"I'm not after titles unless I need one to establish the academy," said Erien.

Tatt perked up. "Academy?" he said, eyes sparkling with excitement, apprehension, or both. "So you're going to get that started, then?"

"Yes," said Erien, "I —"

"Hold on," said Tatt, noticing something taking place on the street as they drove past. He snatched his sword up from the brace where he'd secured it. "Back up!" he ordered their driver. "And stop."

Tatt was out before the car came to a complete halt. Erien hurried to follow his impetuous half-

brother.

The ruckus Tatt had noticed was caused by a child and a woman being hassled by a small gang of Silver Demish men who had not yet gone as far as drawing swords. The men's braid identified them as Highlords from some side branch of Luthan's house. They looked like young troublemakers on the prowl.

Recognizing Tatt's braid and liege marks, one of the men slapped another on the shoulder to get his attention and in seconds the whole group of them had turned to confront the new arrivals.

"These two have no business on the highborn docks!" the Demish spokesman greeted Tatt, and pointed at the woman. "She is only nobleborn."

"I'm the highborn!" the child exclaimed, pulling out of the woman's grasp, his handsome face flushed with excitement. "Take back what you said about my father!" he cried in fury at the biggest of the Demish Highlords.

"I merely repeated a rumor I heard on the Plaza," the Demish man said lazily, with a smile for Tatt. "I am sure you know the one I mean, about D'Lekker Dem'Vrel's overly keen interest in collecting pornography featuring Prince Amel."

"I am D'Lekker now," the boy declared in strident tones, barging forward so violently that Tatt gave way rather than confront the seven-year-old. The boy was beside himself, bright tears of anger in his dark eyes. "And I will avenge your slur against my father's honor!"

The woman with the excitable boy took a firm grip on the child's shoulders from behind.

"We do not want any trouble," she insisted, addressing herself to Tatt. "These men accosted me over my birth rank because I appeared to be without highborn company on the highborn docks. Naturally, Leksan came forward in my defense." She indicated her charge with a nod.

Leksan! Erien thought. He was looking at the elder of the late D'Lekker's two small sons: the children he and Amel had risked their lives to protect from a truth even viler than the rumors the Demish men were playing up, because if Gelion learned what D'Lekker had really done, his descendants would be murdered out of a misguided sense of genetic determinism.

Erien's throat locked. He couldn't help identifying with the orphaned child. He, too, had lost a father at about the same age. A foster father, in his case, but one he could not have loved or honored more if he had been Di Mon's natural son.

"And you are?" Tatt asked the woman, whose grammar — in Gelack — pegged her as a Midlord.

"I am Sen Lekker," she replied. "Leksan's regent and aunt. We came here with a Golden Demish escort, but they stopped to commune with the Watching Dead at the Luminary Reverie of the Messenger. We grew impatient and decided to go on, alone, to Lilac Hearth where we knew we would be welcomed by Amel, himself." She paused for emphasis. "I am an old friend of His Immortality, Prince Amel."

"It's him!" Leksan cried suddenly, spotting Erien hanging back, behind Tatt. "The murderer!"

Sen Lekker snatched at her excited nephew and missed. It was Tatt who blocked the boy's charge, deflecting the child's hastily drawn sword. He followed up with a disarming move and swept up the kicking, raving seven-year-old.

"Killer! Killer! Killer!" Leksan shouted, pounding Tatt's arms.

The words struck Erien like knives. *Some people need killing*, Horth Nersal had dismissed Erien's remorse over D'Lekker's death, but Erien could take no comfort in the idea. From a Reetion point of view, the late D'Lekker had been a passionate, troubled man in need of treatment.

Tatt surrendered Leksan into the care of his nobleborn aunt.

"Thank you, Liege Monitum," Sen Lekker said, kneeling beside Leksan with her arms securely wrapped around him. Her eyes met Erien's.

"I have heard, Immortality," she said to Erien in measured tones, "that Prince Amel has given

you his oath.”

“No!” Leksan cried from her arms. “Amel wouldn't!”

“It was necessary on Rire,” Erien said quickly. “It remains to be seen how the oaths will fall out at the Swearing Ameron has called to settle the Avim's Oath.”

“Would you like an escort to Lilac Hearth?” Tatt asked, with his usual generosity of spirit.

“No, thank you, Liege Monitum,” Sen Lekker told him coolly, as Leksan continued to glare hotly at Erien. “We'll return to our Golden Demish escorts and pass through Golden Gate with them.”

“As you wish,” Tatt said breezily, and fixed a hostile glare on the pack of Demish Highlords who hesitated only long enough to oblige Tatt to reach for the hilt of his sword. Erien had a bad moment in which he cursed himself for not bringing his own weapon, but no swordplay proved necessary. At a gesture from their leader, the Demish group paid respect to Tatt's reputation on the challenge floor by heading in the opposite direction from Sen Lekker.

“Maybe you should tell me what actually happen in Lilac Hearth to make you kill the late D'Lekker,” Tatt said, watching them go.

“No,” Erien said with finality.

“Being secretive is a Lorel failing, you know,” Tatt admonished him, grumpily.

They got back in the car and continued in silence to Green Gate, where they surrendered the car. Tatt took his leave with a parting clap on Erien's shoulder, saying, “I presume you know the way to the Blackwood Room.” He put out his hand for Erien's duffel bag. “But give me that, because the idea of you showing up to see our illustrious father looking like a junior Nersallian officer on shore leave just bothers me. And put your sword on!”

Erien handed over the bag with an odd feeling of reluctance. “Thanks,” he said. He strapped on his sword, as well, after waiting for Tatt to detach it from the back of the duffel bag where he had tied it securely.

“I'll be at the Justice Ministry if you need me,” Tatt said, and headed off at a brisk walk. Erien let him get a good head start before following him through Green Gate, planning to use the time alone to gather his thoughts. But the walk across the promenade beyond and into the Palace Sector proved too short. He arrived at the Ava's anteroom feeling unprepared.

“The Ava is expecting you, Heir Gelion,” a herald said, and showed him into the Blackwood Room, past a waiting mob of envious petitioners.

Ameron was pacing before of the famous mahogany desk the room was named for. He stopped abruptly at the sight of his recently acknowledged son and heir.

“Erien!” Ameron crossed the space between them in a few swift strides, put a hand on Erien's shoulder, felt the absence of a spontaneous response and took his hand away. “Sit!” he said.

Erien considered apologizing for his standoffish character. He realized Gelacks in general, and Ameron in particular, were more physical in their interpersonal relationships than Reetions typically were. Or maybe it was just him. He preferred to maintain his personal space.

“Congratulations, on the whole, for your handling of the Reetions,” Ameron got straight to business. “It almost makes me grasp Di Mon's wisdom in fostering you on Rire with his scholarly friend, Ranar.”

They were lovers, Erien thought resentfully. *Not friends*. Of course the last thing Di Mon would have wanted was for Ameron, of all people, to know what Ranar had really meant to him. But it irked Erien that the truth of Di Mon's wholesome relationship with Ranar still had the power to wound his living relatives, just as the late D'Lekker's decidedly unwholesome obsession with Amel could have damned Leksan and his little brother.

“Of course, there are things I take exception to,” continued Ameron, “starting with you interference in the Dragon-Lion Accord. Do you have designs on Princess Luthan yourself, maybe?”

“What?” said Erien. He had been braced for a very different lecture — about letting Amel

child-gift to Ann.

"Dorn, lad!" said Ameron. "Dorn Nersal! He was slated to wed Luthan to give her uncle heirs who share Horth Nersal's blood." He scowled. "H'Us is as taken with Nersal as a giddy tournament fan, although he's loathe to say it in so many words except to go on, at receptions, about how the Nersallians and H'Usians share Demish roots." Ameron rolled his eyes, then fixed them upon Erien with the intensity of lasers. "Do you mean to exploit the girl's interest in you to forge a H'Usian alliance for yourself? It is not a bad idea," Ameron admitted. "But I hope you understand — by now — that males rule Demish houses even when a princess-liege is nominally in charge, and H'Us will be an obstacle."

It took all Erien's self-control to choke his outrage at Ameron's casual presumptions about Luthan's helplessness to make her own choices.

"Princess Luthan Dem H'Us has no 'interest' in me," Erien insisted with cold intensity.

Ameron realized he had made a misstep and stopped, reassessing Erien with an aloof, calculating air. "I see," he said, at last. "My mistake. I understood otherwise, from Tatt."

Erien gave no answer and Ameron circled behind the Blackwood desk to sit down, the energetic and outgoing manner in which he had greeted Erien moments earlier displaced by an unnatural calm. Ameron was thinking. Hard. And Erien didn't like it.

"There are a few things I need to explain to you," Erien said as blandly as he could. "First, although I need to be here to do what I believe Di Mon and Ranar have uniquely prepared me for—"

"You feel you have a mission?" interrupted Ameron. "Imposed upon you by your upbringing."

"If you like," said Erien, more crisply than he had intended.

Ameron nodded, leaned back and steepled his long fingers in a mannerism painfully reminiscent of Di Mon. *Although*, Erien was forced to admit, *Di Mon was more likely to have adopted the habit because he had read about it in the Ameron biography*. Ameron had always been Di Mon's idol.

"Go on," said the dangerously still and watchful Ava.

"I cannot behave in a typical manner for a Sevolite highborn," Erien explained. "I do not believe in *Okal Rel*, as a religion, and I hate the waste and injustice intrinsic to Sword Law. I do not care about lands and titles beyond the need to have a base to work from. But I will do what you require of me in order to achieve my goal."

"Which is?" asked Ameron, in the mildest of tones.

"I want to create an academy. A sort of university for Sevolites, to teach them about science and redress the prejudice against medicine, in particular."

"Very Lorel of you," said Ameron.

"Your own father, Avatlan Lor'Vrel, believed it should be done," insisted Erien.

Ameron nodded. "My father was a leader among those altruistic but opinionated Lorels who wanted to help the ignorant and suffering masses. They built and operated medical clinics in the UnderDocks." He paused. "Some of those my father trained betrayed the cause for personal gain, and other forces resented his encroachment on their prerogatives. During the Fifth Civil War, my father's philanthropic hospital was burned out and gutted along with the dishonorable Lorel establishments. People cannot tell the difference once their fears are aroused. Or perhaps his enemies among the elite of more than one house were to blame. 'People will behave criminally in defense of wealth.' I believe that is how your foster father, Ranar, puts it, which is a sentiment worthy of a Lorel. In fact, I am coming to appreciate his anthropology as a science not entirely foreign to what I view as the art of ruling the Gelack Empire." Ameron leaned forward, resting one long arm on his desk. "I can't afford a Sixth Civil War, Erien."

For a long moment, Erien held his father's stare, wondering if it was possible to glimpse a canny idealist behind the master politician. Something in the way Ameron spoke of past and present in

the same sentence made him wonder if Avatlan's agenda still lived in both of them. The next moment he felt as if Ameron was debating his father when he refuted Erien's ideas, and his dream of an academy to educate Sevolites was part of a struggle he had lived and lost before, in another life.

It is no wonder even intelligent people like Horth are able to believe in reincarnation, thought Erien, before dismissing the uncanny feeling with a dose of cool reason. Such feelings might stem from the artificial nature of Sevolite DNA which made them 'breed true' with respect to certain personality traits, as Di Mon had once explained it to him.

"I will be very careful," Erien assured the Ava.

Ameron sat back with a huffing sound. "It is yet to be determined whether you have earned the right to try, at all. We will talk about it further. First, before Amel arrives, I wish to discuss how we should handle him. His current situation is—"

"Wait!" Erien interrupted, not wanting to hear details he wouldn't be entitled to once he'd relieved himself of what he had to say next. "I have given it a lot of thought, and given my priorities I think it best I relinquish Amel's oath in your favor. I will swear to you, and let the vassals of the Avim's Oath swear as they wish under the new arrangement."

Ameron blinked. "You would give up being Avim?"

"Amel does not share my goals," said Erien. "And, in all honesty, I am loath to get between him and the women who believe he would make a good puppet liege."

"One of you must become Avim," Ameron said in a severe voice. "If you don't, someone else will covet it. A Demoran champion, perhaps, on behalf of the Golden Emperor, or some unsuspected Pureblood dredged up in the wilds of Red Reach. For that matter, there are plenty of Silver Demish who are over 90% Sevolite. Only their own conservative nature prevents them seeing the shortage of Purebloods as a huge advantage to them. As to Amel's women problems, I can help you decide which camp to favor." Ameron halted, seeing Erien begin to bristle. "What is the problem?" he asked in surprise.

"I do not want Amel sworn to me," Erien said, as hotly as he had ever spoken to his formidable sire. "I have saved him twice. I've paid the debt I owe him. And I have business of my own to get on with."

"Then you had better swear to him," said Ameron, in a bantering way that convinced Erien it was nothing but gamesmanship. No doubt Ameron thought the idea of swearing to Amel would rankle on Erien, and it did.

"That would hamper me even more," Erien said stiffly.

"Do you expect Horth Nersal to give you his oath?" Ameron demanded. "Because he won't. I've spoken with him. Not an easy task, but—"

A ripple of cloth from the *gorarelpul* entrance at the back of the room caught Ameron's attention. The supposedly cerebral Ava was up in an instant, a sword draw from a hiding place behind the Blackwood Desk. Erien was up as well, although he had not felt threatened by the movement of the curtain which he presumed to be nothing more than one of Ameron's *gorarelpul* listening in. He had already decided, at an instinctive level, to defend Ameron if the Ava was attacked.

The curtain stopped moving and hung straight again.

"Who is there?" Ameron's booming voice demanded.