

Part Nine of the Okal Rel Saga

HOLY WAR

by Lynda Williams



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—Lynda Williams

CHAPTER 1

The O'Pearls of Clara's World

"Great Goodness!" Lady O'Pearl called upon divine souls to preserve her as she stared at her mother-in-law standing on the front porch of O'Pearl Manor. Katara O'Pearl nee Jewel did not drop in unannounced unless something momentous had happened.

"Is it true?" Grand Duchess Katara demanded imperiously. "Is my granddaughter Samanda out of control again? And this time not merely content to disgrace us by dressing up as her brother, on Gelion! Is she—" Katara pursed her lips. "—loose in the universe!"

"Oh dear," said Samanda's mother, not at all sure how to start explaining.

It was no surprise to Lady O'Pearl that her mother-in-law had only just learned Samanda was in Killing Reach, where she was organizing the Bridegroom Ball at which Sevildom's most eligible bachelor would pick a wife. No one had wanted to risk Katara's wrath by informing her. And while it may have been impossible, even for Katara, to avoid knowing Prince Amel was choosing a bride, the name of his social convener was easier to repress.

"I was going to explain Sam's involvement in a letter," Lady O'Pearl fretted, wiping her hands on her apron with a pang of self-consciousness. As mistress of the household she was not supposed to engage in such menial tasks, but she liked to help her housekeeper, Mary, with the cooking.

Katara was merciless. "When?" she asked. "Exactly."

"Soon!" Lady O'Pearl assured her.

In the ensuing silence, Katara glared and Lady O'Pearl pondered the mystery of how she could be so intimately connected to someone so entirely different from herself. But there was no avoiding it — the children united them.

Grand Duchess Katara took an interest in all of her son's brood, and had always admired Sam's spirit, provided her granddaughter behaved in a manner befitting her prospects. It was Katara's decided opinion that the girls should aspire to rise through marriage, not sink lower by emulating their social inferiors. Over the years, she had worked to impress her agenda on all four of Lady O'Pearl's daughters: in person, by letter, and through the agency of tutors. So far, she was succeeding only with the six-year-old twins.

Jilly O'Pearl's latest tutor had decamped only last week, over the coltish girl's refusal to give up gardening in overalls. Lady O'Pearl had thought the recently departed tutor might have been the issue when her mother-in-law appeared.

Unfortunately, it gave Lady O'Pearl no relief to know Sam was the culprit instead. She was mustering a defense of Sam being in someone else's service, based on the historic importance of Amel picking a bride, when a door banged behind them.

Back porch, Lady O'Pearl decided. A second door banged. Kitchen door, she thought, and turned.

"Lady O'Pearl!" cried the groundskeeper, shocking her into a little gulp. Reb Dirtman never came into the house.

Reb had a weathered face, a big frame hardened by fifty years of outdoor work, and an unchanging wardrobe of long-sleeved shirts. His work boots were dirty. Lady O'Pearl saw the marks they were making on the floor and thought how difficult it would be to get the maid to mop the hall a second time in one day. Suz would complain about her stiff back and the host of other aches and pains prone to incapacitate her in the face of work, although the same maid was known to dance all night with townsmen at parties in O'Pearl Village.

"What is it, man!" Duchess Katara demanded of Reb Dirtman. "Why are you standing there ogling at us?"

Unaccustomed to the need to converse with the family matriarch, the groundskeeper just stared. He was rescued by a gaggle of excited young people, including a couple of visiting boys from a neighboring estate and — to Lady O'Pearl's particular horror, given their visitor — a handful of the commoner children who habitually played with her own. Lady O'Pearl's offspring were also in the pack: teenage Jilly in her gardening clothes, eleven-year-old Dale and Dak wearing their practice swords, and six-year-old Poly and Poff clutching their favorite dolls.

With the exception of Jilly, Lady O'Pearl had produced all her children in pairs. Her eldest twins, Dan and Sam, were both away from home. Sam was safe enough except from the displeasure of her grandmother, but on seeing the excited look on the children's

faces, she feared some dreadful news concerning Dan, who had run off with a strange woman over a year before.

"What is it!" Lady O'Pearl exclaimed. "Is it Dan? Has he joined the fleet?"

Jilly shook her head. "Paladins!" she said, brandishing a trowel in one hand. "Two paladins in Amel's service are coming! They sent word from the space port! Real Demoran princes!" she concluded, for emphasis.

Weakly, Lady O'Pearl lowered her hand from her overflowing bosom, confined in its comfortable but out-of-fashion morning dress. "Coming where, Dear?" she asked, bewildered. "Coming to Clara's World?"

"Here! To see us!" Jilly said, her face bright with excitement. "I might even put on a dress!"

"Their names are Paron and Soar," Dale spoke up, clutching the hilt of his practice sword.

"From Demora!" Dak repeated. He held out a deck of collectable paladin cards in one scuff-knuckled hand. Lady O'Pearl was just able to make out the name and picture of a paladin on the top card. "Soar gave up a fleet career to join the Golden Emperor's paladins before he switched to Amel's," Dak said. "He was Imsha Soran Vesta before that, and served under Prince Oleander Vesta in the defense of Golden Reach against Vrellish incursions! He took paladin's orders at the age of sixty after the loss of two grown sons who had volunteered to fight alongside the Nersallians in the last Nesak War. He's a *relsha* at heart, though. A warrior!"

"But Paron is pure luminary," Dale took up the narrative as his twin shuffled cards in furious haste to produce the next one. "He's only twenty-nine and the son of an abbess. His mother took orders when he was only two, so he grew up surrounded by weary sisters at an abbey." Dale made a face at the thought. "Paron was a natural with a sword. Soar became his mentor in Fahild's service when Paron beat him in an exhibition tournament and they've worked together as a team since. Almost as if Paron became Soar's adopted son."

"There's a rumor," Jilly put in with a romantic enthusiasm at odds with her ill-kept hair, "that Soar visits Paron's mother more than necessary, at the abbey she runs on Demora."

"However have you learned such gossip?" Duchess Katara demanded with a touch of real alarm. "And what could such men possibly mean by coming here!"

"I'm afraid I'm the source of the more speculative aspects of the paladins' biographies," a woman's voice spoke up from behind the press of bodies in the hall. "For the rest you can blame the boys' paladin cards."

Abbess Lee from the Mountain Village Abbey emerged from the obstructing mass of children in front of her. "Hello, Jillin," she greeted Lady O'Pearl.

Jillin was Lady O'Pearl's first name, and a little overly familiar, given that Lady O'Pearl considered the abbess a questionable influence on Sam for the sake of her premature conversion to Amel's cause. However, after Fahild's subsequent endorsement of Amel as a Soul of Light, what had seemed like impropriety at the time could now be excused as foresight.

Certainly Lady O'Pearl was in a state of sufficient confusion to welcome some spiritual guidance in dealing with a visit from a pair of genuine paladins — an event momentous enough to make even Katara's arrival seem trivial. But before she had a chance to ask Lee's advice on the matter, Katara took charge.

"Fetch tea," Katara ordered Suz, who had come to see what was happening. "And alert the household to expect esteemed visitors." She paused a moment. "You had best start by informing Mary."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Suz exclaimed, executing a much better bow in Katara's direction than Lady O'Pearl was accustomed to receiving from her.

"Yes, yes," Lady O'Pearl said, in support of Katara's command, although Suz had already darted off to notify the housekeeper, who was the *de facto* mistress of O'Pearl Manor in all things practical.

"Explanations," Grand Duchess Katara intoned gravely, "are in order."

"Of course!" Abbess Lee gestured for Katara to enter the family room.

"The children shall, I think, wait in the yard and be prevailed upon to behave themselves there," Katara said, fixing Lady O'Pearl with a stern eye.

"Yes!" Lady O'Pearl cried, and rushed to shoo the children out of the hall.

When she returned to the family room, Abbess Lee was busy satisfying the duchess concerning how she had been notified of the imminent arrival of their exciting Demoran visitors and elaborating on what she knew about their backgrounds.

"Paron and Soar have been assigned to Amel since he was proclaimed the spiritual heir to his great-grandfather, Fahild, the Golden Emperor," the abbess concluded.

"Good gracious!" Lady O'Pearl clutched at her breast. "Has all of this something to do with Samantha working for His Immortality Amel!"

"No doubt it has everything to do with Samantha so ill-advisedly throwing herself into service to a greater Sevolute," Katara declared. "A situation I only recently learned about. And I can tell you, Jillin,

I am not pleased! Not only does Sam's role encompass the shame of employment — regardless of her employer's station — but she's become embroiled in this unprecedented business of Heir Gelion's. A cultural exchange, indeed! A cultural exchange with Vrellish and Nersallians attending! As if they had anything a person could call culture! And all of this hullabaloo aimed at acquainting the empire with these Reetion commoners he's so fond of, who apparently manage to govern themselves without disaster in a far-flung quarter of the universe." She turned to Lady O'Pearl. "I did warn you, repeatedly, of the need to marry Samanda off as soon as possible, even if she had to set her sights lower than her blasted prospect."

Sam's mother flinched at this harsh reference to Sam's broken engagement to Prince Habeman D'Mark, the king of the Lakes District and liege of Jewel County. It seemed especially hard to Lady O'Pearl because throughout the years Sam had been so indispensable to Prince Hab as a playmate, Katara had been prone to sniff and remark that, notwithstanding Hab's rank in society, he was a touch insipid in comparison with Samanda and perhaps she ought to go to court where she might attract the attention of a Lion House scion.

Following the breakup, Katara had been firmly opposed to any granddaughter of hers going into service. Now Sam's mother was very much afraid that whatever business brought two of Amel's paladin bodyguards to overthrow the peace of her household could not bode well for Sam's standing with her grandmother. Which mattered, because Katara was not only a person of influence in society, she was family.

Lady O'Pearl loved her children and she loved her admittedly useless husband, who was currently in Pearl Village officiating as judge over the business of his commoners. Her husband would never stand up to his mother over anything he could safely dismiss as "women's matters," but she wished he would come home all the same. She felt defenseless against Katara's criticisms and left all the arguing to Abbess Lee, who believed Katara should be grateful for a chance to touch the hem of Amel's robes.

She was relieved when Suz returned with tea, occasioning a short break in Abbess Lee's defense of Samanda's employment. But the moment the tea was served, Katara went on the offensive again, rousing the abbess to defend her idol's immoral past.

"Even if Amel has reformed," Katara said acidly, "is working for him worth the sacrifice of Samanda's prospects for a good marriage?"

Finding herself unable to disagree either with Katara, who had the family's best interests at heart, or with Lee, whose ethics were

undoubtedly grander, Lady O’Pearl ate tea biscuits with strawberry preserves and watched the two formidable women argue about her poor, misguided daughter.

Katara’s mouth was wide and thin, set in an attractive, smooth face that somehow managed to look its age despite her highborn immunity to the symptoms of aging so easy to spot in a commoner. A strong woman with a stiff back and trim figure, Katara persisted in wearing the starched fashions of her girlhood. In contrast, Abbess Lee looked soft and natural in her loose robes. Her long hair was so blond it was nearly white. It was thick and coarse, framing her oval face like a hood. The two women were closer in age to each other than they were to the much younger Lady O’Pearl.

Lady O’Pearl had been a little vapid in her youth and her suitor’s parents, Alistair and Katara O’Pearl, had made a strong impression on her. She knew, in particular, that even though she was technically more Sevolite than her husband, making her a *rel* bride, the O’Pearls didn’t consider her quite good enough for the family. Her husband had assured her that his parents had, likewise, never quite reconciled themselves to the surprise of discovering he was the best they could produce between them, being both an only child and utterly undistinguished in any of the manly arts at which his father had shone. With Dan and Sam’s arrival Grandfather Alistair pinned his hopes on his grandson, while Katara dreamed of marrying Sam off to a catch. And she had very nearly pulled it off. It was Katara who had introduced the adventurous young Sam to Prince Habeman when they were both long-legged children growing up in very different spheres of society in the Lakes District.

Abbess Lee reclaimed Lady O’Pearl from her reverie with a question she did not want discussed, making her sit up and pay attention.

“Grand Duchess Katara,” Lee declared in a fit of exasperation, “since you so heartily disapprove of Sam being in service, how is it that you have only now decided to object to her attaching herself to Amel’s household, when it happened well over a year ago?”

“I am not much given to chasing after gossip about strangers that people like to dignify by calling news,” Katara informed the abbess, and gave her daughter-in-law a withering look. “I depend upon my loved ones to keep me informed of family matters. The last I knew, Samanda was attending court in the capacity of lady-in-waiting to Luthan Dem H’Us.”

“And why is that acceptable?” Abbess Lee demanded, heatedly.

Katara sniffed. “Being a lady-in-waiting in Silver Hearth is a way to meet an eligible prince of good repute.” She tipped her head in Lee’s direction, growing frosty. “Working as a mere employee in Blue Hearth, surrounded by devoted luminaries, is not.”

Abbess Lee could not contain her shock. "Do you really mean to suggest that working daily with Amel Dem'Vrel is inferior to being lady-in-waiting to the Princess Liege of H'Us? Need I remind you Amel is—"

"Please!" Katara held up an imperious palm to restrain the abbess. "Don't recite his titles. I am well aware of them. I even understand that since Amel developed the good sense to take the advice of the League of Women for the Betterment of Men, he has managed to conduct himself respectably enough." She paused. "For a man with Vrellish blood in him," she appended in a doubting tone. "But Samanda did not join Amel's household as a social companion. She could not, of course, exactly because Prince Amel is a man. And while I draw some small comfort from knowing my rather too spirited granddaughter did not perpetuate her first folly on Gelion by attempting to sign on as Amel's errant—" here she looked to Lady O'Pearl for confirmation "—she is quite done, I trust, with wearing her brother's sword?"

Lady O'Pearl responded with a vigorous nod.

"Our Watching Dead are grateful for small blessings," Katara intoned, sniffed again, and paused to dab her nose with her handkerchief before she resumed. "It is nonetheless unacceptable," she decreed, "that Samanda should have spent an entire year in service to anyone. Not to mention being surrounded by nothing but weary sisters and the occasional paladin far beyond her sphere of hope!"

Abbess Lee colored. "There are more important things in life than marriage to a *rel* groom!" she declared.

"Of course!" Katara snapped, and fidgeted with the long white gloves in her lap. "I married a man less Sevolite than myself. You think I do not care about love?"

The abbess subsided, then added more gently, "I meant things more important than anything personal."

Katara frowned. "I am not a luminary," she said. "I believe in *Okal Rel* and that's enough for me. And because I do, I plan to arrange for Samanda's late grandfather to be reborn as he deserves." She paused before adding, on a wistful note that touched Lady O'Pearl's heart, "You see, I think Alistair's soul will follow Samanda's line if she marries a suitable husband. That's what I care about. Not your Soul of Light and his hopes of improving the lot of commoners, or whatever it is Amel's about. What's so wrong with how commoners live anyhow? Or the rest of the universe for that matter. It gets along as it is well enough."

Abbess Lee exchanged a look with Lady O'Pearl that suggested she now understood why Jillin might have kept Samanda's change of situation at court to herself.

"Just this morning," Katara continued, "I learned about this horrid cultural exchange business of Prince Erien's. On Barmi II of all things! A place occupied by liege-killers and *okal'a'ni* brutes chased out there from all over the empire! There was some great disturbance recently, and my brother, who is more interested in his ships and *relsha* than anything civilized, was suddenly dashing about our wing of Diamond Palace yammering about Reetions and Nesaks. Well!" Katara exclaimed, squeezing her white gloves. "You can imagine how I felt when I heard Samanda, our Sam—" she stressed, with another glare at Lady O'Pearl—"was in the thick of it! Talking to Reetions! Peer-speaking them like Erien Lor'Vrel does for all I know! And you never told me any of this, Jillin!" she accused Lady O'Pearl. "Why not?"

Feeling the answer was self-evident, Lady O'Pearl sprang up and brushed crumbs of tea biscuit off her morning dress. "I must make sure Mary has sent someone to tell Lord O'Pearl his mother's here! And let him know we expect paladins for lunch."

"I am sure that Mary has not failed to—" Katara began in a quelling tone.

"And I must see to the children in the yard!" Lady O'Pearl clutched at straws. "To make sure they don't bother the paladins! Dale and Dak are mad about swordsmen, you know! I really must be there to make sure they behave properly!"

Katara continued to look displeased but she saw the wisdom in this. "Perhaps you are right," she allowed. "There will be time enough, afterwards, for us to talk about how to salvage Samanda."

Lady O'Pearl fled to the yard, tears in her eyes for the further humiliations of her poor Sam, and freshly alarmed by the sounds of horses and childish cheers. It was not hard to recognize two of the loudest as Dale's and Dak's.

Oh my dear Sam, Lady O'Pearl fretted as she hurried toward the porch. Real Golden paladins! Whatever have you done!

CHAPTER 2

Mother, I'm Married

Samanda was a princess.

For most of her life, all this had meant was that she was a Sevolute of the Royalblood birth rank who happened to be Demish instead of Vrellish. But as princesses went in the Demish world, Sam came of modest origins.

Despite this, she had always expected something wonderful to happen to her.

Once she had believed the wonderful thing was going to be marriage to her childhood playmate, Prince Habeman D'Mark. When their engagement fell through, Sam's world had turned upside down.

So you would think, she mused, staring out the velvet-draped window of the best carriage that paladins Paron and Soar had been able to command at the spaceport, that I would be thrilled to be returning home in triumph as the bride of Amel Dem'Vrel, Soul of Light and Avim of the empire.

Instead, she was scared.

Her right hand was locked in a death grip on the rich blue curtains of the carriage window. Sam noticed, and glared at her fingers until her hand relaxed and slumped obediently into her lap.

She looked out the window again, recognizing every stone, but feeling lost.

She was minutes from O'Pearl Manor, the home where she'd grown up, traveling under the escort of two absurdly important and ridiculously attentive paladins, with news grand enough to make her a legend on Clara's World. She had married the Avim, Amel Dem'Vrel. One of the empire's few surviving Purebloods. She ought to be the happiest woman in the empire.

But Amel wasn't just a trophy *rel* groom. She really loved him! And he was a universe away on a planet that might have already been shattered by fanatical Nesaks.

If the means existed to communicate with her new husband across the vastness of the universe she would have done it, even if it meant putting herself at the mercy of the Lorels themselves. But there was no such science. Nothing traveled faster than *rel*-ships, and such ships required a pilot to fly them.

On Clara's World itself, people used light-speed communications. Fleet officers and other officials had such devices. Soar had been able to use fleet connections to get word to Abbess Lee, so she could bring news of their arrival to Sam's mother. But people seldom went to such lengths to convey what could be delivered in a more socially appropriate, unhurried manner. People lived slow lives on Demish worlds, purposefully preferring horses to powered vehicles, overseeing the agricultural work of commoner villages, and attending to their social obligations. O'Pearl Village was the one place in the universe where Sam's father was someone important in his own right, and not just for being the son of the late Lord Alistair O'Pearl, husband of Katara nee Jewel.

Until she'd gone to court, Sam could barely conceive of any lifestyle other than the kind she'd grown up with on Clara's World.

Perhaps that's the problem, Sam thought with reference to her numb feeling. It's too big. And it happened too fast!

The O'Pearls of Jewel County had been modestly upwardly mobile over the last hundred years. Progress began with the success of her grandfather, Alistair O'Pearl, a mere Highlord who distinguished himself gallantly enough to win the hand of one of the younger daughters of the Jewels, a family related to the Marks of Diamond Palace. Sam had fond memories of her bold and dashing grandfather who had died of complications arising from a wound taken in a duel. He had won the duel, but the family would rather have lost the rights at issue. Sam's grandmother, Katara, had told her husband as much before he took to the arena, but there had been no stopping grandfather Alistair.

Sam's father had nothing of his father's skill or courage, but he, too, had managed to marry up. Sam's mother was a Royalblood, more than 50% Sevolute, even though she was called Lady O'Pearl to match her husband's title.

Growing up, Sam had liked to imagine she would be the one to raise the family's status the next notch.

And now she had. Most definitely.

But all she felt, on what should have been her triumphant return, were sick knots of worry in her stomach. She wanted to cry. To scream. To get back in a *rel*-ship and fly back to Barmi II so she

could die with Amel if necessary. And yet, at the same time, she was grateful to be safe and on her way home.

As they neared the house, one of the paladins pulled past her window mounted on a white horse, and she heard cheering from the front yard of O'Pearl Manor.

Will it be too much for them, too? she thought, suddenly afraid for the sanity of her family. Will it make them feel good? Or destroy the stories that define us?

Sam recalled the stories her family told each other about Alistair O'Pearl and grandmother Katara. *Will my marriage to Amel diminish our legends?* she wondered. Like force feeding people who would rather enjoy a long, slow banquet with a dozen dainty dishes and the proper interval between each new flavor. An increase of five or ten percentiles between oneself and one's children is an achievement. Marrying a Pureblood is just gluttony! The happiness of a family is such a complex matter. Like a table laid out with a tea service, it looks so ordinary until it's threatened. Then it becomes infinitely precious.

The enthusiastic yelling of her eleven-year-old brothers, Dale and Dak, did not suggest anything fragile about their welcome.

Sam pushed away recent memories of her escape from Barmi II. I am not going to think about the Nesaks! I'm not! I just won't do it!

She was as Demish as the next person, she decided. She could only cope with so much newness at a time. Huge changes — whether bad ones or good ones — left her breathless.



Lady O'Pearl sat down on her porch steps like a sack of potatoes dropped there by a farmhand. Her eyes were filled by the sight of a tall man with bright yellow hair who stood allowing Dale to pet his horse. The man was dressed in white flight leathers decorated in gold with the emblem of The Messenger over the left breast. He had piercing blue eyes and a cold, austere manner, but he seemed at home chatting with her eleven-year-old boy. Knowing Dale, Lady O'Pearl felt sure he would ask the paladin to draw his sword and fence with someone, any minute now.

Dale's identical twin, Dak, was dancing around the horse of the second mounted paladin. The spirited horse had started at the uproar in the yard, and Dak's insistence on getting close was making it doubly hard for the paladin to control the animal. This second marvel out of old Demoran legend looked sweeter and younger than the first man, even though both were ageless highborns. His hair was flaxen rather than brilliant gold, and his blue eyes were pale and generous. Jillin O'Pearl could not imagine for a moment that he would let any harm come to Dak, despite the boy's ill-advised behavior.

Moments later, one of the stable hands rushed forward, prompted by Lady O’Pearl’s second daughter, Jilly, and the gentle-looking paladin had safely dismounted to receive Dak’s enthusiastic welcome.

“You’re Paron!” Dak exclaimed, waving a card. “Aren’t you? You’re the better swordsman!”

The grimmer paladin, who had to be the one named Soar, cast a swift look over his shoulder in his partner’s direction at this remark, and smiled to himself in a private manner.

Paladin Paron said, “I can beat Soar in two out of three matches, yes.” He put a hand on the boy’s head and ruffled his mop of straw-blond hair. “But you’d rather have Soar flying flank for you in a shakeup. Amel had to rescue me the last time.”

“Amel did? Really?” Dak asked, baffled, and wrinkled his nose. “I didn’t think Pureblood Amel was a fighter.”

“No usually,” Paron said mildly, and smiled again. “But he has a great soul. Never underestimate such power.”

“You *know* Pureblood Amel?” asked Jilly, standing before Paron with her hands clasped behind her and looking as abashed at her less-than-presentable long skirt and simple blouse as her long-suffering mother had ever seen her.

“Yes,” Paron answered, “I’ve Soul Touched him.”

“We have been charged with protecting Avim Amel’s new wife,” Soar explained, stepping up to greet Jilly, who, in the absence of any capacity for action on her mother’s part, was serving as *de facto* representative of the family.

“So Amel got married?” Jilly said excitedly. “He really did it!”

“Who’d he marry?” asked one of the boys from a neighboring estate.

“And how come you brought her here?” Dale put in sensibly, still eyeing the jewel-hilted dueling swords of the paladins.

“Because she’s your sister,” Paron told them simply.

While Lady O’Pearl was attempting to make sense of this bizarre statement Paladin Soar turned away from Jilly, Dale and Dak to open the carriage door and help a woman wearing an odd collection of mismatched clothing. As best as Lady O’Pearl could make out, Amel’s wife was dressed in flight pants two sizes too big under a dirty white nightgown that looked like it might have been lovely before its misadventures, with the cloak of a luminary devotee wrapped about her shoulders.

“We did ask if she wanted to freshen up at the space port,” Soar explained as he presented Amel’s wife to Jilly, “but she preferred to come here directly.”

“I believe she needs her family,” Paron prompted, as Jilly and the bizarre apparition continued staring silently at each other.

Lady O’Pearl stared, too, hardly hearing what the paladins said.

“Amel is in grave danger,” Soar concluded. “That is why we were charged with taking her out of Killing Reach, away from it.”

“Nesaks,” Paron told Dak before the boy could voice the question.

“Sam,” Lady O’Pearl breathed, stunned. She couldn’t take it all in. But she rose off the step and staggered toward her bedraggled, frightened-looking eldest daughter thinking of nothing except the terrible need to put her arms around her.

“Sam!” Lady O’Pearl gasped, clutching her. Sam burst into tears as she hugged back. Her mother stroked her hair, holding on to her as if the world might slip away if they released each other.

Very close to them, young Jilly spoke tonelessly. “You’re joking, right?” she asked Paladin Paron. “Sam works for Amel, just like you, and this is some wild gag she’s put you up to.”

“By the souls of all my ancestors!” Katara proclaimed from the porch. “They really *are* paladins!”

“Sam!” Abbess Lee emerged from behind Katara and, seeing Sam’s tear streaked face as she and Lady O’Pearl separated, started towards them. “Sam! What is it? What’s happened?”

“I think we should go in,” Soar told them firmly. And the next moment the paladins had them headed up the porch into the family room.

Lady O’Pearl roused herself sufficiently to have the servants send their visitors home, and to tell Housekeeper Mary to make more herbal tea immediately. Then she rushed into the family room to see Abbess Lee on her knees before Samanda, who was sitting on the family couch blinking at the spiritual mentor of her childhood.

“What is it!” Lady O’Pearl exclaimed, panic-stricken by the air of gravity that pervaded the room. “Is Sam dying? Is it regenerative cancer?”

“She is Samanda Dem’Vrel, Heart of Light,” Abbess Lee said, giving Sam’s mother a wondering look from where she knelt, holding Sam’s hand.

“The wife of our beloved idol,” Paron underscored the fact, gazing straight at Lady O’Pearl without a hint of mischief about him.

Grand Duchess Katara sat down and raised her eyes in the manner of someone invoking the Watching Dead. “Alistair!” she called. “Do you hear? Sam’s married Amel Dem’Vrel! And he’s a Demish Pureblood — even if a third of it is Golden Demish and there is the matter of the Vrellish third, as well, but I can’t imagine you’ll be put off by a thing like that under the circumstances! Do you hear, my dear? You’re going to be reborn a Royalblood!”

The sight of her mother-in-law speaking to the Watching Dead outside a service or a private communion was shock enough for Lady O’Pearl. But it was nothing compared to the next one. Katara

clapped her hands, beamed as if she'd heard her late husband answer her, and burst into hysterical laughter.

"Grand-mama!" Sam exclaimed and ran to help contain the fit, helped by Paron.

It was long minutes before they had Katara calmed down enough to sit quietly, staring from Sam to Paron to Soar, smiling in a fixed, amazed manner.

"What is going on here!" Lord O'Pearl's voice declared from the door. He blinked at the sight of the sword-wearing paladins. "What's happened?" he asked, blanching. "I was halfway home when Reb Dirtman came tearing down the road to tell me—" He broke off, recognizing his eldest daughter despite her bizarre attire while hardly noticing the paladins. "Sam?" he asked.

Lady O'Pearl flew into her husband's arms. "Oh, Agon!" she cried. "Our Sam's married!"

"Married, is she!" He resisted his wife's embrace, bristling with indignation. "Married, you say? Without so much as asking my permission!"

"Married to Pureblood Prince Amel!" Lady O'Pearl almost shouted, half afraid the paladins might hurt him if he said the wrong thing with his usual strident bluster. "She's the wife of the Avim of the empire, a liege of Fountain Court, and spiritual heir to the Golden Emperor!"

Lord O'Pearl stared at his wife. He stared at the paladins. He stared at his eldest daughter.

"Is this true, Samantha?" he demanded.

"Yes, Father." She left her grandmother to run to him. "Oh Daddy!" she cried, losing control of her emotions. "The Nesaks attacked Barmi II! Amel sent me away under escort by Soar and Paron. But he stayed! And I'm so afraid they'll kill my Amel! And us barely even married!"

Paron turned to Lady O'Pearl with a look of apologetic gravity. "I regret it is also my duty to inform you, Ma'am," he told her, "that your son, Samdan, is among the defenders."

"My Dan?" Jillin O'Pearl nearly choked. "Fighting Nesaks?"

"Yes," said Paron. "Dan and his wife, Mayfly."

"Dan married *her*?" Lady O'Pearl could cope with no more. She looked about her vaguely, listening to the distant sound of Sam weeping and Lord O'Pearl trying to comfort his daughter. Her ears buzzed.

Paron caught her by the arm as she began to sway.

"I think you had better sit down, Ma'am," he said kindly.

"I'll help you with her," volunteered Jilly, who was proving surprisingly cool in a crisis.

“Amel!” Sam wailed in her father’s arms. “Daddy, I’m so afraid for him!”

Abbess Lee pushed forward. “Sam!” she cried. “You don’t mean to tell me Amel is fighting Nesaks in a *rel*-ship!”

“His Divinity is on the ground,” Paron corrected. “Organizing people.”

Abbess Lee looked hugely relieved. “Then he’s safe! It’s all right, Sam,” she added, turning to lay a hand on her arm. “If he’s on the ground he’s safe, whatever happens!”

The paladins exchanged looks, but neither dared speak.

It was Sam who turned in her father’s arms, staring at all of them, wild-eyed, and said the unthinkable, “No! He isn’t safe! Because these Nesaks are *okal’a’ni*! They’re planet-breakers!”

This was one more impossibility than Lady O’Pearl was able to believe. *My daughter has lost her mind!* she thought instead, feeling strangely comforted by the idea she was no longer obliged to believe any of this new reality.