

The castle was abuzz with rumors about why the Council had been convened. At this point everyone knew Draigo was back. Even though the messages that went out from the Queen downplayed the trouble brewing, it didn't stop everyone from exaggerating the little they knew. As the Queen entered the Great Hall at Castle Caernag with Ygayla the day of the Council Meeting, Nicolas laughed and said, "Mother, you would think that we were to be invaded this very day and a great battle was to take place in our hay field. The Wood Elves from Ravenscroft have arrived prepared for battle, and they aren't the only ones. I showed them where to set up their camp behind the stables and managed to calm them down a bit."

Amused, the Queen said, "I'm hardly surprised. Things have been too quiet for too long. Idleness does not sit well with those whose mission it is to protect. There is nothing like the thought of preparing for battle, even if it is imaginary, to relieve the boredom some feel at things being too complacent."

"I just hope the dragonriders from Baguul don't incinerate any innocent travelers on the road to Caernag." Prince Nicholas said with a smirk.

Ygayla and the Queen laughed. "Let's hope not." Looking around the Hall, she nodded her approval. "Everything looks to be in order, you two. Well done." Noticing the colorful banners and tapestries hanging from the wooden beams, she asked, "we haven't forgotten anyone's standard, have we?" Ygayla shook her head no.

The Great Hall was a large circular room with a dome ceiling. It had been transformed. Everyone who worked in the castle or in the fields had been busy for days as preparations were made for their guests. Tables had been laid for the feast, corners swept, and the two fireplaces at each end of the room were ready for lighting with fresh stacks of wood ready to stave off the autumn chill.

On each end of the room, stone stairs led to an upper balcony that ran under the windows that circled the room. From this height, the views were breathtaking in all directions. The balustrade had been decorated with ribbons, dried flowers, and lavender bunches hung from the supports. Princess Aubriana was busy looking for the first sign of those who would be coming by way of the road. With excitement in her voice, she called down to her mother, "I can see travelers on the south road where the trees thin. Troops of horses and wagons filled with others. I can't quite make out their standard though. They will be here within the hour."

Nicholas called up to his sister, "Bree, let's ride down and greet them at the crossroads."

Her huge smile said it all. “Perfect, Nico,” the Princess said enthusiastically as she headed down the stairs. Passing her mother, Aubriana quickly kissed the Queen on the cheek.

“Thank you, my love,” the Queen said to her daughter. “I can tell you have been busy as well.” Turning to Ygayla, she said, “It is time we changed.” As they headed towards her bedroom, the Queen noticed someone had hung some braided ivy around the necks of the twin stone dragons that flanked the door leading outside. She smiled to herself. It looked like Aubriana’s handiwork.

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Prince Nicholas and his sister Aubriana cantered easily through the castle gates and down the main road where the incoming roads from all directions come together. The crossroads had a tall menhir right at the center. It had been placed there by the ancient giants who first ruled these lands. The circular design of the crossroads had evolved from natural use over time. They pulled off the road just past the standing stone to be out of the way. Judging by the dust rising up through the trees, this group of travelers was just past the rise in the road. The Prince and his sister tried to settle their horses, who could hear and smell the advancing troops. The standard for the Horse Lords of Thaindorn rose above the rise as the contingent of riders came into view. The Prince and Princess raised their hands in greeting to E’Quessar, their leader, and his sister Arianthe, riding next to him. Several wagons with their provisions followed the twenty head of horses

The Prince waited for their leader to pull up when they came along side where he and Aubriana had stopped. “Hello, E’Quessar. It is good to see you, my friend. I hope your journey was comfortable?”

“Yes, Prince Nicholas. The roads were dry and the pace was easy as we preferred to remain close to the wagons.” The horse lord nodded to the Princess. “Greetings, Princess Aubriana. It has been some time since I have seen you. Are you not but almost sixteen now?”

“Yes. It is close. Your sister, as well, I think.” The Princess responded, smiling at Arianthe.

“Yes. Arianthe is only a month behind you.” Arianthe shyly smiled at Princess Aubriana. They knew each other, but it had been a few years since they last were together. No longer children, they had both grown into fine young women.

“E’Quessar, Ralf is expecting you. He has made ready the accommodations for your men, and ladies,” with a nod to Arianthe, “at the mews. Ride up to the stables and I will see you in the Hall later.”

Aubriana quickly spoke up. “Brother, I would like to have Arianthe stay with me. We haven’t seen each other in an age and we desperately need to catch up.”

Nicholas smiled and nodded, “Of course, Bree. Arianthe, have Ralf make arrangements to have your things taken to Aubriana’s room.”

The Princess added, looking at Arianthe “I’m going to ride up with the next travelers and then I will meet you there.” Arianthe nodded and her smile said it all.

“It is good to be back at Castle Caernag,” E’Quessar said. He gave Nicholas a nod as he rode past but his eyes were filled with questions that would have to wait.

Nicholas and Aubriana waited for the procession to pass. As the dust settled from the last wagon, the Princess said “I wish we could do this more often.” Then tilting her head lightly, she said, “Can you hear that?”

“Hear what?” her brother responded.

“It sounds like a bodhran and flutes. It must be the Woodland Fairies from Ravenscroft.” Nicholas scanned the forest off to the right and could see movement through the thinning trees. It was a good guess. The fairies always travelled with music, and he could now hear tamborines and lutes as well.

Leading the procession was King Aorith and Queen Caelia. Their two white stallions were easy to spot between the trees. Behind them, another twenty horses carried as many riders, and a dozen cobs pranced proudly behind the horses with the youngest of the tribe, many of whom were dearly hanging on to saddle straps to keep from falling off. Several carts made up the rear, and they were stuffed to the brim with food, clothes, and items to be bartered for what they couldn’t grow or make themselves. The music was coming from several fairies and elementals sitting on top of the bulging carts.

“Brother, look,” Aubriana said, pointing upward to the North. Draigofinn, Shadikar’s dragon, was busy ascending to meet the full regiment of dragons who could be seen in the distance flying in formation towards the castle.

“Ah, good. I’m going to ride back to welcome the Brinsop riders. Will you wait for the Woodland Fairies then ride up with them?”

“Of course. I haven’t seen them in ages. This is so much fun,” she said, grinning.

The Prince wheeled his horse around and began to gallop back toward the Castle. He passed the Queen’s Knights, led by Sir Lukahn, with a nod. Several platoons had already been dispatched in all directions to greet and escort those coming to the Faery Council meeting, but he wanted to meet the dragon riders himself.

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Nicholas came into the Great Hall and saw Ygayla directing the musicians and singers where to set up. “Where is mother?” he asked.

“She is in her room with Alessia, having dinner. She will come down towards the end of the feast.”

“Good. The first set of dragonriders is about to land. The Horse Lords are here and Aubriana is receiving the Woodland Fairies.

“It will be nice to see everyone. I may be exhausted when it is all over, but it will have been worth it,” she said.

“I wish the reason for the Council Meeting was a happier one.”

“As do I.”

Nicholas headed outside to meet the Dragonriders from Brinsop just as their dragons swooped in to land. Hovering in place, the dragons filled the sky, bellowing and hissing. In order of seniority and as a well-practiced formation, they landed in pairs on the flat terrace. The creatures kneeled on the stone surface so that the riders could dismount from their saddles. Each pair would then move over to make room for the next two. When they had all completed their landings and dismounted, Draigofinn lifted off to escort the dragons to the hunting grounds. There was a great rush of wings as the air reverberated with the sound of a dozen dragons taking flight. They would be able to feed and enjoy a well-deserved rest after their long trip.

Nicholas stepped forward as the dragon riders turned to greet him. “Welcome, Broudan; Taleisin” the Prince said as he shook their hands. “It is a pleasure to see you again. I look forward to hearing some of your escapades of late.” They nodded at that. The Prince was then introduced to some of their new members, and as a group they headed for the Hall in search of sustenance amid a great deal of chatter as news was exchanged about the possibility of war. The Brinsop riders chose a table nearest the dais, and happily dug in as food arrived.

The Prince returned to the terrace as the Baguul dragonriders from the Highlands arrived. The dragons and their riders were known as the fiercest of all of the platoons. Unlike the Brinsop dragon riders, they would not allow women. Dressed all in black, the only color came from the ruby clasp that held their cloaks together. Hardly ever in good humor, they took their duties as protectors seriously. Excited by the thought of a potential war, they were anxious to learn the details brought back by Draigo. Nicholas greeted them, and after they dismounted walked with them to the Hall. The Baguul made it a point to sit away from the Brinsop riders. The Prince showed no outer emotion, but it was clear that this old rivalry was as raw as ever.

As dusk began to settle, the Great Hall reverberated with music and animated conversations as the sound of old friends renewing acquaintances filled the Hall. The air hung with the delicious smell of fresh bread and roasted meats perfectly seasoned. Platters of wild boar, roasted lamb and succulent duck were placed on the tables. The kitchen staff was kept busy bringing fresh platters of meat pies, crisp fried sausages and roasted vegetables as soon as the original ones were emptied. Large tureens of soup and crisp bread rounded out the meal.

For the next hour, the Prince met each group as they arrived. It was a steady stream of inhabitants. The Wood Elves of Ravenscroft entered the Hall in a fluid and courtly manner, quietly settling near the dais while King Melwyn took his seat at the Council table.

Gidhorn, leader of the dwarves, entered with his usual boisterous band of men. It took them a full twenty minutes to settle close to the elves, as the good natured teasing was always in play between these two tribes. Gidhorn reluctantly left his men to sit at the Council table.

The Horse Lords had secured their mounts in the stables, and tramped into the Hall amid the ringing of their spurs on the stone floor. They couldn't help but make an entrance, between the spurs and the scent of horses that always followed like a billowing cloud. E'Quessar reported directly to the King and Queen, so he was not part of the Council. He and his fellow horse lords filled a table of their own.

King Aorith and Queen Caelia entered the Hall in a superior manner. This was the kind of gathering that provided the perfect excuse to wear their finest clothes, normally relegated to wait in patient silence for such an occasion. The tribe that followed had taken great care with their dress and elaborate hairstyles as well, walking purposefully and slowly for maximum effect. In stark contrast to this several of the younger fairies were flying around, zooming up into the rafters and circling the room in barely contained glee. Their excitement to be allowed to attend was evident and it took a stern look from Queen Caelia and a definitive hand gesture before they would return to the procession and temper their joy as they all settled at a table. As soon as their tribe was seated, the King and Queen made their way to the dais.

Baelthor and Eira, High Priest and High Priestess of a coven of witches from the hills of Chehillie, followed the woodland faeries into the Great Hall. Their dresses were dark; rich magenta, deep blue, or black with high collars framing their faces cut at an angle to blend into the decollette of the neckline. Most wore elaborate corsets to show off their figures. The male witches were in their finest wardrobe, high leather boots, trousers made of smooth black leather, high collared shirts with elaborate vests or gambeson's. Their hooded cloaks lined in red were woven from the finest wool with hundreds of sparkling stones sewn on that caught the light as they moved. Some had their owls on their shoulders.

As the witches passed him, Nicholas heard a familiar voice and he turned around to see Aylith Ravenstryke coming toward him with Naeeren's sister, Sabrina, one of the Ciruelo Mages. "Nicholas, it has been forever," she said happily, raising her arms for a hug.

Picking her up off her feet as he hugged her, he said "Welcome, Aylith. Are you still keeping our southern border safe?"

"Of course," she said, smiling as he put her down.

He then hugged Sabrina as well. "It is good to see you again." Sabrina was distracted as she had been watching the witches from Chehellie. Turning to Nicholas, and giving him an appraising look, she said, "Our young prince doesn't look quite so young any more. When did you get so tall?"

"Has it been that long since I saw you?" the Prince asked.

"I can't even remember our last meeting. A few years at best." Shifting her gaze again, Sabrina couldn't take her eyes off of the commotion at the far end of the room. There seemed to be a bit of a kerfuffle as to who got to sit where with the witches. "They certainly know how to make an entrance," she said, as she watched them sorting out their seating issues. They had the attention of everyone in the room. "They are always so compelling. I always find myself caught between a mixture of fascination and fear because I don't understand them at all."

"Fear? You? You are a Mage and your magic is a lot more powerful than theirs. I find it to be true that if you are not one of them, you don't understand them," Nicholas said. "They like it that way, I think, because the less others know about their secret world, the stronger the mystique. Your lot has their secrets too."

"I doubt they would agree that our magic is stronger than theirs. Yes, we do have our secrets. However, we do not live in the shadows." Sabrina said.

"Does that mean I can come to some of your meetings?"

"Well, no. Ok, I see your point. I think I'm annoyed at myself because I find them mesmerizing. Their dresses and capes and elaborate hair are beyond description."

"The whole room is watching them, which I think is exactly what they want. It is part of what I love about these rare occasions when we are all together," Aylith commented. "Sabrina, before you sit with the apprentice mages, let's go visiting. I haven't seen my woodland family in quite a while, although I saw my younger brother flying around just as we came in." They both headed over to the table of woodland faeries, leaving Nicholas to greet the wizards coming in.

Shadikar, The Senior Wizard from the Order of the Mystic Circle, entered the Hall guiding Brenainn, the oldest remaining wizard of this order. Behind them were several apprentice wizards looking all around and taking in the experience of being in the presence of the whole kingdom on this special night.

Leaning forward, the Prince bent over in order to be close to the wizard's ear. "How are you Brenainn?" the Prince asked.

"Ah, Tiernan, it is so good to see you," he responded, squeezing the Prince's hand.

The Prince gave the wizard a soft hug. Exchanging a look with Shadikar, he said "I'm as good as I have ever been." It wasn't the first time Brenainn had confused him for his father.

Smiling at the Prince, Shadikar turned and gestured to the apprentices toward a table near the dais, "Callum, seat yourselves at that table. Leave room for Brithien." Callum nodded. As a Third Year Apprentice, he was the senior of the other apprentice wizards. Shadikar then headed for the dais to get the elderly wizard settled and take his seat as well.

Princess Aubriana came in arm and arm with Arianthe on the castle side of the Great Hall. They had been laughing together as if the last time they had seen each other was yesterday. They stood for a moment and looked out over the sea of tribes come from every corner of Anara.

"It is quite amazing, isn't it?" she said to Arianthe.

"It is. I love when we can come together. Our land is so big and spread out."

They crossed the Hall and came up behind the Prince. "Brother, it looks like almost everyone is here."

As he turned to greet them, he was a bit stupefied by the transformation of both of the young women. His look of astonishment wasn't lost on the two girls. Smiling broadly, he said "You both look enchanting and bewitching." Taking Aubrianna's hands in his, he held her out at arm's length then twirled her around, twice. "When did you both get so grown up?" he asked.

"YGayla helped us put this together."

"Well done. Is this the same sister who rode down to the crossroads in her scuffed boots and rather rumpled dress with her hair flying all over the place?"

Giggling, she said, "Brother, you are embarrassing me."

He smiled, then shifted his focus to Arianthe. "Hello," the Prince said as he bowed. Leaning down, he gave her a hug. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you a proper welcome earlier."

"It is good to see you again," Arianthe said, blushing.

As they stood talking for a few minutes, the Prince noticed several of the male elves and dragonriders glancing at his sister and Arianthe. He had to admit to himself they both looked quite different than last year. Nicholas bid them farewell as his sister made her way up to the dais to sit on the Council, and Arianthe went to sit with the horse lords. It appeared that more than a few young men had made note of the changes as well as heads turned to follow the young ladies to their seats.

"Salutations, Princeling," Lud said, the leader of the Old Ones, as he and another dozed of his brethren came into the hall. The dragons were the most ancient of beings in Anara, but the Old Ones were exactly that, descendants of the first tribes to settle this land. They kept to themselves and called the hollow hills and the caves on the border home. Small and thickset, they smelled of the hills they called home and still used the old tongue when amongst themselves.

"Lud, I'm delighted to see you and your kin. It has been too long."

"It has been a fair amount of time by any measure. I'm afraid I won't be able to call you Princeling anymore. By Merlin's beard you have gotten as tall as Shadikar."

The Prince smiled at this. "We will be counting on you and your people to keep a watchful eye. In my father's mind, and mine as well, no one knows more about the comings and goings in this land than you and your kin."

Proudly accepting the compliment, but looking resolute, Lud said, "Aye, we have enjoyed many an age of peace, and we will fight with all we have to protect that. Tonight, we are honored to hear what the Queen and Draigo have to say and will pledge our fealty once again to this kingdom and offer freely whatever means necessary to protect it."

"We are grateful for it, Lud."

Mabli, another Old One, then spoke. "Prince Nicholas, we wouldn't have missed this. Last year at Midsummer was the last time we feasted at the King and Queen's table. Oh, the enticing scents carried on the wind found us down by the crossroads and urged us to quicken our pace. It was worth the four days of travel it took us to get here."

"Do you ever think about anything else but food, Mab?" Lud said, exasperated.

"I can do two things at once, brother."

“Well, Mab, let’s get you fed, then,” Lud said, chuckling under his breath as he said goodbye to Nicholas and headed up to the dais. He took his place across from Shadikar who nodded a welcome then sat next to Brenainn at the table as Mabli, Kwill and his fellow travelers filled out the table with the apprentice wizards. Never shy to enjoy a good meal, they grabbed some pasties and started eating before their backsides hit the bench.

One of the knights came up to the Prince and let him know that the Ciruelo Mages from Cerniliath were coming in. The Prince went back out to the landing area and greeted Pascus Celcius and Naeeren Starfury, the most senior members of their order of Mages, as they landed. Right behind them were Master Kong and Master Kim, two Realm Hopper Mages, and several apprentices queuing up. As the Prince watched everyone land, he exchanged pleasantries with them. As the last of the apprentices dismounted, they walked as a group into the hall avoiding any serious discussion. Sabrina Starfury waved at her brother across the room as he arrived and headed over to get the apprentices settled, joining them at table. Pascus and Naeeren took their place at the Council table, and sat on each side of Princess Aubriana, as Master Kong and Master Kim sat across from the Princess, leaving a space in between for the Prince.

Next to arrive were the Priestesses from the Order of the Seven Sisters at Whitethorne Sanctuary. High Priestess Isobel warmly greeted Nicholas, “Hello, Prince Nicholas. I am saddened for the reason that necessitates a Council gathering, but it settles my heart to see you. Where is your mother?”

“She will be down shortly and mentioned to me how much she wanted to sit and talk with you after the meeting.”

“I long for that as well.”

Nicholas then turned to greet the other Priestesses. They were dressed elegantly in long flowing robes of cream colored wool with matching capes lined in satin the color of lavender. The only other adornment was delicate stitching around the neckline and edging the sleeves. They personified simplicity, the most ornate item being the beautiful circlet on their foreheads. Made of silver, the flowing design showcased a moonstone at the center circled by seven stars representing their order and the Moon itself. The apprentices wore simple robes of green as initiates. The High Priestess Isobel went to sit on the dais, as Talira, Annika, Rowan and the apprentices went to find a table.

What seemed like a sea of monks came through the terrace doors next, bobbing up and down like seals in the ocean. They surrounded the Prince, indistinguishable one from another. Most of their faces were obscured by the voluminous hooded cowls. Out of the sea emerged one brown-robed portly man. “Greetings, Prince Nicholas,” Brother Bartholomew said as he pushed his hood back so the Prince could see who he was talking to.

“It is good to have you here, Brother. There seems to be so many of you.”

“We have grown this last year. We keep to ourselves, but that doesn’t mean we have no need to know what is going on.”

“A good strategy,” the Prince agreed.

The Monks of Beltanya were priests of the Old Religion. They lived on the side of Mount Tranquil in a stone fortress that could only be reached by one narrow road. It looked out over Mizzle Lake and was known for the bell tower that housed the Bells of Beltanya. The Bells were sung on each of the solstices, and to mark the turning festivals of each season. Some of the monks put their hoods back, while others chose to remain shrouded. Their cowed hoods were so voluminous you would have to be facing one of them to see who it was.

At last, the Prince turned back towards the entrance hallway to greet the last group. “Prince Nicholas, it is good to see you,” said Capricornus, leader of the Chiviceni. These fierce warriors came in full dress, with bows, swords, and knives at the ready. Striking in appearance, they were a tall breed with wild shaggy hair and striking ram like horns that framed their faces. They wore leather skirts and kilts, fitted vests with no shirts underneath. Both male and female had ornate gold and silver arm bands on their upper arms. Their leader, Capricornus, made his way to the Council table, while his sister, Kazzi, settled in with the others nearby.

With the arrival of the Chiviceni, all of the tribes of Anara were accounted for. The room was filled to capacity. The air pulsed with excitement amid the ever expanding rumors. All were enjoying visiting with distant relatives and old friends. The Hall hummed with conversation and shrieks of laughter as jokes were told and the food continued to disappear. Several groups were dancing in the aisles to the lively music as the owls took refuge in the upper beams of the domed roof.

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In time, the Queen and Alessia, the Court Seer and Astrologer, entered the Hall from the interior side. The Queen preferred to eat in her room with Alessia so that when she arrived in the Hall they both would be available to visit. Standing at the top of the room, Alessia said to the Queen, “You mentioned that Celestia wasn’t going to attend, but it looks as if everyone else is here.”

Looking out over the now crowded Hall, the Queen said, “It does. It will be good to let everyone know what Draigo has learned.” Having given everyone time to visit, settle in and finish their meal, Queen Jolianna and Alessia began working their way through the crowded room, stopping to have a few words with each tribe.

The Council Members representing all of the various denizens of this land were now seated, as well as Prince Nicholas. The thrones had been moved to an adjacent alcove to make way for the long table, and King Tiernan's chair sat at the high end of the table, empty, to emphasize his absence. The Council, too, had their fill and began pushing their plates away.

As instructed, the musicians and singers began to play quieter songs and ballads upon the arrival of the Queen. They willingly put down their instruments as the Queen gestured for them to go and eat. The musicians happily sat at a nearby table held for them filled with the same savories as everyone else had enjoyed.

Evening was pressing in, the fires had been lit, and many of the elementals and woodland folk, now full, had climbed up on the balustrade in order to see from a better vantage point. The floating light orbs were glowing as they illuminated the assemblage in the deepening night and several owls and falcons had taken up residence on the massive beams.

The Queen's Knights came in and began to space themselves every eight feet along the circular walls. The Queen reached out to her dragon. "*Draigo, we are ready for you.*"

"*Very well.*" the dragon answered. He lifted off from the fields and headed toward the castle. As Draigo landed outside, he gave his wings a shake. Positioned on each side of the huge doors leading into the hall were two knights, who opened them for the dragon. This brought a gust of air from the outside that entered the Hall just ahead of the Dragon, bringing with it the odor of the earth itself. A powerful current of pulsing energy swept the room as the dragon entered the Hall effectively stopping all conversation. Everyone turned to watch the ancient dragon make his way to the alcove adjacent to the dais.

The Queen finished her conversation with Talira of the Seven Sisters just as Draigo entered the Hall. A reverential hush descended on the room. Annika, one of the Priestesses of the Seven Sisters had leaned in to Rowan, and attempting to whisper, spoke louder than she meant to as the room fell into silence. "I always find it uncomfortable to be so close to a dragon. My father once described the smell as a cross between mushroom compost and a peat bog. Pungent at the very least." It was then she realized the Queen was standing behind her. Rowan caught the Queen's eye and realized Annika had been overheard. The Queen smiled at her, nodding, and placed her hand on Annika's shoulder. "Your father wasn't far off, Annika. I'm so used to it, I don't think about it much anymore. I know that not everyone has had intimate contact with a dragon the way I do. No offense has been taken." Annika blushed and smiled with relief.

Draigo was the oldest member of the Council. For a millennium he had been the leader, and had seen many come and go who sat on the Council. His recall of previous

ages was very useful. The Queen made her way up onto the dais as Draigo settled himself. She stood proudly on his left.

Looking out over the assemblage, she spoke clearly and with authority. “Welcome everyone. It is so good to see all of you. It has been too long since we have been together. With Draigo’s return from Lanskule, we are gathered to share the news that he has brought to us.” The crowd murmured and whispers were exchanged as the Queen now had everyone’s attention.

“King Tiernan is well, and is with Lord Balathar in Lanskule. He will be home before the end of the year. Beyond the kingdom of Lanskule, King Gael is dying, and if Algol inherits the throne, darkness will settle over the land of Brinduie. He has never been a man of good character, and I have no doubt he will rule their land with deceitfulness and treachery.”

The leader of the Baguul stood, and addressing the Queen said, “Your highness, why not let us take care of that matter and not leave the King’s pick to chance?” A loud roar erupted, and a great clamoring of pewter pints being banged on the tabletops showed approval for this idea as many shouted their support.

The Queen paused, thankful for the question. Between the banging of the cups and the shouting, she could feel the nervous tension that had been permeating the room begin to dissolve.

After a few moments she said, “Now, Razlek, that is a tempting idea.” Loud laughter erupted. The Queen paused again as everyone was shouting out suggestions all designed to eliminate Algol in one way or another. “You know as well as I do that our charter prevents us from interfering in the business of other lands unless they have interfered with us. We shall have to see what the fates have in mind.”

“Where is the fun in that?” Razlek shouted to great guffaws and cries of bloodlust.

As the din quieted down, the Queen continued. “My sister, Lilianna, has aligned herself with Malleus. We must be alert and aware. We have long known from Alessia’s prophecy that there will be trouble from Lilianna. It is now believed that the time is at hand. It is not yet clear as to how it will play out.”

“As also foretold, we are to play a role in the great awakening that is about to take place in the world of earth. The Age of Aquarius has arrived. In this new paradigm, there will be many who open to new concepts about how this Universe works. The first group of many young travelers from this realm we will host will be entering into Anara with the full moon in three days. These travelers are Earth Guardians and Realm Hoppers, though they are not yet aware of their destiny. Rowan will be crossing Alexandria, who is now a second level apprentice from the Seven Sisters.” A cheer went up. “Two new charges, brothers, will be collected by Sashira and delivered to Shadikar.” Another cheer. “Master

Kong will be crossing another new charge and Kazzi will be collecting her. I have already spoken to those of you who will be involved with these travelers.

“I also have some very good and long awaited news. Pascus and Naeeren will be crossing Trevallius as he returns to this realm.” A great cheer erupted in the Hall and the pewter pints were put to good use once again. Pascus grinned at the show of support for his son. I know that I speak for all of us that it will be good to see him again. He will be joining the other humans as he begins the journey to discover who he used to be. For everyone, though, we must be on alert and protect our portals at all times. There are many who wish to harm those who were not born here, yet each of these realm hoppers has been invited. This journey and their safety is essential in order for their destinies to be fulfilled.”

Addressing the horse lord, who promptly stood, the Queen said, “E’Quessar, it will be necessary for you and your knights to step up your patrols. It is possible that there may be those seeking to know our business and cause harm. We must be vigilant.”

Bowing, he said, “Yes, your highness. Consider it done.” The horseman looked pleased to be singled out for a task.

“After Pascus and Naeeren have collected Trevallius, they will be putting together a small group to travel to the Outerlands to see what can be learned.”

“What about Ludgorn?” asked one of the dwarves.

At this, Draigo growled under his breath and snorted. The room erupted again in shouts of bloodlust for there were none here in this assembly that didn’t wish him ill.

“One must always be on guard where he is concerned. Nicholas and I saw a black gryphon near the stables the other day.” With this revelation, another round of shouting began that all led to the demise of the dark wizard. “We have benefited from many an age of peace. We must all be aware that some shifts are taking place that might affect us in a negative way. Things are still playing out and have not yet taken shape. Please do not get ahead of yourselves with warmongering.”

The Queen waited for the din in the room to subside. Looking at the Dragonriders, she said, “Draigo will be traveling back to the Outerlands. He will need some militia to join him. There are over one hundred five-year-old dragons that have not yet formed an allegiance. We must make our case to see if they will join us. We believe Malleus is about to make a bid for power. He will be requiring dragons that have come of age. As per Draigo’s wishes, we must be one step ahead of him.”

“We will be honored to accompany you, Draigo,” Broudan said without hesitation as he stood up.

“As will we.” Razlek stood as he addressed the dragon, then bowed.

Raising up to his full height, Draigo snorted his disgust at the naming of Malleus. He still bore a scar near his left eye, courtesy of the old wizard. His snort echoed around the room. The Queen heard Draigo communicate with each of the dragon riders. “We shall discuss this after the meeting when we will have more privacy.”

The Queen nodded at her son. The Prince stood up to speak in his father’s place.

“War may yet be upon us. For now we do not know. If my father were here, he would tell those who long for war you must be too young to remember the last one, otherwise you would not be so quick to seek another. Sir Lukahn is increasing patrols and we wish all of you to be alert to anything out of the ordinary, no matter how small. Be vigilant. Enough of this talk of what may come. Let us continue the fellowship of sharing a good meal, a pint of ale, and some lively music.”

With that, a roar went up in the room. Puddings and desserts were being served as the music started again. The Council spoke quietly with the Queen and amongst themselves then moved off of the dais to mingle among the others.

They knew they were on the edge of something no one wished to name.