



THE
ELVEN NATIONS
TRILOGY

VOLUME ONE

FIRSTBORN

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Clouds scattered before the wind, bright white in the brilliant sunshine. In the gaps of blue that showed between the clouds, a dark, winged form darted and wheeled. Far larger than a bird, the creature climbed with powerful strokes of its broad wings. It reached a height above the lowest clouds and hovered there, wings beating fast and hard.

The beast was a griffon, a creature part lion, part eagle. Its magnificent eagle's head and neck gave way to the torso and hindquarters of a lion. A plumed lion's tail whipped in the wind. Behind the beast's fiercely beaked head and unblinking golden eyes, the leather straps of a halter led back to a saddle, strapped to the griffon's shoulders. In the saddle sat a helmeted figure clad in green and gold armor. An elven face with brown eyes and snow-colored hair peered out from under the bronze helmet.

Spread out below them, elf and griffon, was the whole country of Silvanesti. Where wind had driven the clouds away, the griffon rider could see the green carpet of forests and fields. To his right, the wandering silver ribbon of the Thon-Thalas, the Lord's River, flowed around the verdant Fallan Island. On this island was Silvanost, city of a thousand white towers.

“Are you ready, Arcuballis?” whispered the rider to his mount. He wound the leather reins tightly around his strong, slender hand. “Now!” he cried, drawing the reins sharply down.

The griffon put its head down and folded its wings. Down they plummeted, like a thunderbolt dropped from a clear sky. The young elf bent close to the griffon’s neck, burying his fingers in the dense, copper-hued feathers. The massive muscles under his fingers were taut, waiting. Arcuballis was well trained and loyal to its master; it would not open its wings again until told to do so. If its master so desired, the griffon would plunge straight into the fertile soil of Silvanesti.

They were below the clouds, and the land leaped into clear view. The rich green canopy of trees was more obvious now. The griffon rider could see the pines and the mighty oaks reaching up, connecting soil to sky. It was a view of the land few were ever granted.

He had dropped many thousands of feet, and only a few hundred remained. The wind tore at his eyes, bringing tears. He blinked them away. Arcuballis flexed its folded wings nervously, and a low growl sounded in its throat. They were very low. The rider could see individual branches in the trees, see birds fleeing from the griffon’s rapidly growing shadow.

“Now!” The rider hauled back sharply on the reins. The broad wings opened slowly. The beast’s hindquarters dropped as its head rose. The rider felt himself slide backward, bumping against the rear lip of the tall saddle. The griffon soared up in a high arc, wings flailing. He let the reins out, and the beast leveled off. He whistled a command, and the griffon held its wings out motionless. They started down again in a steep glide. The lower air was rough, full of eddies and currents, and the griffon bobbed and pitched. The rider threw back his head and laughed.

They skimmed over the trees. Abruptly the woods gave way to orderly rows of trees, orchards of cherry, plum, and fima nuts. Elves working in the orchards saw only a large object hurtle over their heads, and they panicked. Many tumbled down ladders, spilling baskets of fruit. The rider put a brass horn to his lips, sounding a shrill note. The griffon added its

own eerie call, a deep, trilling growl that was also part lion, part eagle.

The rider urged the beast up. The wings beat lazily, gaining a few dozen feet of height. They banked right, swooping over the slow-flowing waters of the Thon-Thalas. There were many watercraft plying the river—flat log rafts poled by sturdy, sun-browned elves, piled high with pots and cloth to be traded in the wild south; the slender dugouts of the fishers, the bottoms of which were silvered with the morning's catch. The griffon swept over them in a flurry of wings. The rafters and fishers looked up idly from their work. As travelers up and down the great waterway, they were not easily impressed, not even by the sight of a royal griffon in flight.

On they flew, across the river to Fallan Island. The rider wove his flying steed among the many white towers so skillfully that the griffon never once scraped a wingtip. Their shadow chased them down the streets.

The rider approached the center point of the city, and the center point of every elf's life and loyalty, the Tower of the Stars. At six hundred feet, it was the tallest spire in Silvanost and the seat of power of the Speaker of the Stars.

He steered the griffon in a quick circle around the white marble tower. The horn was at his lips again, and he blew a rude, flat warning. It was a lark, a bit of aerial fun, but halfway around the tower the rider spied a lone figure on the high balcony, looking out over the city. He reined back and sideslipped Arcuballis toward the tower. The white-haired, white-robed figure was no one less than Sithel, Speaker of the Stars.

Startled, the rider clumsily turned the griffon away. His eyes met those of the elven monarch for a moment, then Sithel turned and re-entered the tower. The griffon rider shook his head and made for home. He was in trouble.

North of the tower, across the ornate Gardens of Astarin, stood the Palace of Quinari. Here the descendants of Silvanos, the House Royal, lived. The palace stood clear of the trees and consisted of three, three-story wings radiating from a rose-colored marble tower. The tower soared three hundred feet from base to pinnacle. The three wings of the palace were

faced with beautiful colonnades of green-streaked marble. The columns spiraled gracefully upward from their bases, each in imitation of a unicorn's horn.

The rider's heart raced as the palace came into view. He'd been away four days, hunting, flying, and now he had an appointment to keep. He knew there would be trouble with the speaker for his insolent behavior at the Tower of the Stars, but for now thoughts of his upcoming rendezvous made him smile.

He brought the griffon in with firm tugs on the reins. He steered toward the eastern wing of the palace. Lion's claws behind and eagle's talons in front touched down on the cool slate roof. With a tired shudder, Arcuballis drew in its wings.

Servants in sleeveless tunics and short kilts ran out to take the beast's bridle. Another elf set a wooden step ladder against the animal's side. The rider ignored it, threw a leg over the griffon's neck, and nimbly dropped to the rooftop. More servants rushed forward, one with a bowl of clean water, the other with a neatly folded linen towel.

"Highness," said the bowl bearer, "would you care to refresh yourself?"

"A moment." The rider pried off his helmet and shook his sweat-damp hair. "How goes everything here?" he asked, dipping his hands and arms in the clean water, once, twice, three times. The water quickly turned dingy with dirt.

"It goes well, my prince," the bowl bearer replied. He snapped his head at his companion, and the second servant proffered the towel.

"Any word from my brother, Prince Sithas?"

"In fact, yes, Highness. Your brother was recalled yesterday by your father. He returned from the Temple of Matheri this morning."

Puzzlement knit the rider's pale brows. "Recalled? But why?"

"I do not know, my prince. Even now, the speaker is closeted with Prince Sithas in the Tower of the Stars."

The rider tossed the towel back to the servant who'd brought it. "Send word to my mother that I have returned. Tell her I shall see her presently. And should my father and

brother return from the tower before sunset, tell them the same.”

The servants bowed. “It shall be done, my prince.”

The elf prince went briskly to the stair that led from the rooftop into the palace. The servants hastened after him, sloshing dirty water from the bowl as they went.

“Prince Kith-Kanan! Will you not take some food?” called the bowl bearer.

“No. See to it Arcuballis is fed, watered, and brushed down.”

“Of course—”

“And stop following me!”

The servants halted as if arrow-shot. Prince Kith-Kanan rattled down the stone steps into the palace. As it was early summer, all the window shutters were open, flooding the interior corridors with light. He strode along, scarcely acknowledging the bows and greetings of the servants and courtiers he met. The length of the shadows on the floor told him he was late. She would be angry, being kept waiting.

Kith-Kanan breezed out the main entrance of the palace. Guards in burnished armor snapped to attention as he passed. His mood lightened with every step he took toward the Gardens of Astarin. So what if his father dressed him down later? It wouldn't be the first time, by any means. Any amount of lecturing was worth his hurried flight home to be on time for his rendezvous with Hermathya.

The gardens bulked around the base of the great tower. Not long after Silvanos, founder of the elven nation, had completed the Tower of the Stars, priests of the god Astarin asked for permission to create a garden around the structure. Silvanos gladly granted their request. The clerics laid out a garden in the plan of a four-pointed star, each point aligned with one of the cardinal directions. They wove spells granted to them by Astarin, the Bard King, spells that formed the trees and flowers in wonderful ways. Thornless red and white roses grew in delicate spirals around the trunks of evergreen oaks. Wisteria dripped purple blossoms into still, clear pools of water. Lilacs and camellias drenched the air with their perfume. Broad leaves of ivy spread over the garden paths, shading them and protecting strollers from all but the harshest rains. And most

remarkably, laurels and cedars grew in circular groves, their tops coming together to form perfect shelters, where elves could meditate. Silvanos himself had favored a grove of laurels on the west side of the garden. When the august founder of the elven nation had died, the leaves on the laurels there changed from green to gold, and they remained that way ever after.

Kith-Kanan did not enter the Gardens of Astarin by one of the paths. In his deerskin boots, he crept silently beside the shoulder-high wall of spell-shaped mulberry. He hoisted himself over the wall and dropped down on the other side, still without a sound. Crouching low, he moved toward the grove.

The prince could hear the impatient rustle of footsteps inside the golden grove. In his mind he saw Hermathya pacing to and fro, arms folded, her red-gold hair like a flame in the center of the gilded trees. He slipped around to the entrance to the grove. Hermathya had her back to him, her arms folded tight with vexation. Kith-Kanan called her name.

Hermathya whirled. "Kith! You startled me. Where have you been?"

"Hurrying to you," he replied.

Her angry expression lasted only a moment longer, then she ran to him, her bright blue gown flying. They embraced in the arched entry of Silvanos's retreat. The embrace became a kiss. After a moment, Kith-Kanan drew back a bit and whispered, "We'd best be wary. My father is in the tower. He might see us."

In answer, Hermathya pulled the prince's face down to hers and kissed him again. Finally, she said breathlessly, "Now, let us hide." They entered the shelter of the laurel grove.

Under the elaborate rules of courtly manners, a prince and a well-born elf maiden could not consort freely, as Kith-Kanan and Hermathya had for the past half-year. Escorts had to accompany both of them, if they ever saw each other at all. Protocol demanded that they not be alone together.

"I missed you terribly," Hermathya said, taking Kith-Kanan's hand and leading him to the gray granite bench. "Silvanost is like a tomb when you're not here."

"I'm sorry I was late. Arcuballis had headwinds to fight all the way home." This was not strictly true, but why anger her

further? Actually Kith-Kanan had broken camp late because he had stayed to listen to two Kagonesti elves tell tall tales of adventures in the West, in the land of the humans.

“Next time,” Hermathya said, tracing the line of Kith-Kanan’s jaw with one slender finger, “take me with you.”

“On a hunting trip?”

She nipped at his ear. Her hair smelled of sunshine and spice. “Why not?”

He hugged her close, burying his face in her hair and inhaling deeply. “You could probably handle yourself right enough, but what respectable maiden would travel in the forest with a male not her father, brother, or husband?”

“I don’t want to be respectable.”

Kith-Kanan studied her face. Hermathya had the dark blue eyes of the Oakleaf Clan and the high cheekbones of her mother’s family, the Sunberry Clan. In her slender, beautiful face he saw passion, wit, courage—

“Love,” he murmured.

“Yes,” Hermathya replied. “I love you too.”

The prince looked deep into her eyes and said softly, “Marry me, Hermathya.” Her eyes widened, and she pulled away from him, chuckling. “What is funny?” he demanded.

“Why talk of marriage? Giving me a starjewel will not make me love you more. I like things the way they are.”

Kith-Kanan waved to the surrounding golden laurels. “You like meeting in secret? Whispering and flinching at every sound, lest we be discovered?”

She leaned close again. “Of course. That makes it all the more stimulating.”

He had to admit his life had been anything but boring lately. Kith-Kanan caressed his lover’s cheek. Wind stirred through the gilded leaves as they drew closer. She entwined her fingers in his white hair. The prince thought no more of marriage as Hermathya filled his senses.

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They parted with smiles and quiet touches on each other’s faces. Hermathya disappeared down the garden path with a

toss of bronze-red hair and a swish of clinging silk. Kith-Kanan stood in the entrance of the golden grove and watched her until she was lost from sight. Then, with a sigh, he made for the palace.

The sun had set and, as he crossed the plaza, the prince saw that the servants were setting lamps in the windows of the palace. All Silvanost glimmered with light by night, but the Palace of Quinari, with its massive tower and numerous tall windows, was like a constellation in the heavens. Kith-Kanan felt very satisfied as he jauntily ascended the steps by the main doors.

The guards clacked their spears against their shoulder armor. The one on Kith-Kanan's right said, "Highness, the speaker bids you go to the Hall of Balif."

"Well, I'd best not keep the speaker waiting," he replied. The guards snapped to, and he passed on into the deep, arched opening. Even the prospect of a tongue-lashing by his father did little to lower Kith-Kanan's spirits. He still breathed the clean, spicy scent of Hermathya, and he still gazed into the bottomless blue depths of her eyes.

The Hall of Balif, named for the kender general who had once fought so well on behalf of the great Silvanos, took up an entire floor of the central tower. Kith-Kanan swung up the broad stone stairs, clapping servants on the back and hailing courtiers heartily. Smiles followed in the elf prince's wake.

Oddly, two guards stood outside the high bronze doors of the Hall of Balif. The doors were not usually guarded. As Kith-Kanan approached, one guard rapped on the bronze panel behind him with the butt of his spear. Silently Kith-Kanan stood by as the two soldiers pushed the heavy portals apart for him.

The hall was indifferently lit by a rack of candles on the oval feasting table. The first face Kith-Kanan saw did not belong to his father, Sithel.

"Sithas!"

The tall, white-haired young elf stood up from behind the table. Kith-Kanan circled the table and embraced his twin brother heartily. Though they lived in the same city, they saw each other only at intervals. Sithas spent most of his time in

the Temple of Matheri, where the priests had been educating him since he was a child. Kith-Kanan was frequently away, flying, riding, hunting. Ninety years they'd lived, and by the standards of their race they were barely adults. Time and habit had altered the twins, so much so that they were no longer exact copies of each other. Sithas, elder by scant minutes, was slim and pale, the consequence of his scholarly life. His face was lit by large hazel eyes, the eyes of his father and grandfather. On his white robe he wore a narrow red stripe, a tribute to Matheri, whose color it was.

Kith-Kanan, because of his outdoor life, had skin almost as brown as his eyes. The life of a ranger had toughened him, broadened his shoulders and hardened his muscles.

"I'm in trouble," he said ruefully.

"What have you done this time?" Sithas asked, loosening his grip on his twin.

"I was out flying on Arcuballis—"

Have you been scaring the farmers again?"

"No, it's not that. I was over the city, so I circled the Tower of the Stars—"

"Blowing your horn, no doubt."

Kith-Kanan sighed. "Will you let me finish? I went round the tower, very gently, but who should be there on the high balcony but Father! He saw me and gave me that look."

Sithas folded his arms. "I was there too, inside. He wasn't pleased."

His twin lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "What's this all about? He didn't call me here to chastise me, did he? You wouldn't be here for that."

"No. Father called me back from the temple before you came home. He's gone upstairs to fetch Mother. He's got something to tell you."

Kith-Kanan relaxed, realizing he wasn't going to get dressed down. "What is it, Sith?"

"I'm getting married," said Sithas.

Kith-Kanan, wide-eyed, leaned back on the table. "By E'li! Is that all you have to say? 'I'm getting married?' "

Sithas shrugged. "What else is there to say? Father decided that it's time, so married I get."

Kith-Kanan grinned. "Has he picked a girl?"

"I think that's why he sent for you and Mother. We'll all find out at the same time."

"You mean, you don't know who it is yet?"

"No. There are fourteen suitable clans within House Cleric, so there are many prospective brides. Father has chosen one based on the dowry offered—and according to which family he wants to link with House Royal."

His brother's eyes danced with merriment. "She will probably be ugly and a shrew, as well."

"That doesn't matter. All that matters is that she be healthy, well-born, and properly worship the gods," Sithas said calmly.

"I don't know. I think wit and beauty ought to count for something," Kith-Kanan replied. "And love. What about love, Sith? How do you feel about marrying a stranger?"

"It is the way things are done."

That was so like him. The quickest way to insure Sithas's cooperation was to invoke tradition. Kith-Kanan clucked his tongue and walked in a slow circle around his motionless twin. His words rang off the polished stone walls. "But is it fair?" he said, mildly mocking. "I mean, any scribe or smith in the city can choose his mate himself, because he loves her and she loves him. The wild elves of the woods, the green sea elves, do they marry for duty, or do they take as mate a loving companion who'll bear them children and be a strength to them in their ancient age?"

"I'm not any smith or scribe, much less a wild elf," Sithas said. He spoke quietly, but his words carried as clearly as Kith-Kanan's loud pronouncements. "I am firstborn to the Speaker of the Stars, and my duty is my duty."

Kith-Kanan stopped circling and slumped against the table. "It's the old story, isn't it? Wise Sithas and rash Kith-Kanan," he said. "Don't pay me any heed, I'm really glad for you. And I'm glad for me, too. At least I can choose my own wife when the time comes."

Sithas smiled. "Do you have someone in mind?"

Why not tell Sithas? he thought. His twin would never give him away.

"Actually," Kith-Kanan began, "there is—"

The rear door of the hall opened, and Sithel entered, with Nirakina at his side.

“Hail, Father,” the brothers said in unison.

The speaker waved for his sons to sit. He held a chair out for his wife, then sat himself. The crown of Silvanesti, a circlet of gold and silver stars, weighed heavily on his brow. He had come to the time in his life when age was beginning to show. Sithel’s hair had always been white, but now its silky blondness had become brittle and gray. Tiny lines were etched around his eyes and mouth, and his hazel eyes, the sign of the heritage of Silvanos, betrayed the slightest hint of cloudiness. All these were small, outward signs of the great burden of time Sithel carried in his lean, erect body. He was one thousand, five hundred years old.

Though past a thousand herself, Lady Nirakina was still lithe and graceful. She was small by elven standards, almost doll-like. Her hair was honey brown, as were her eyes. These were traits of her family, Clan Silver Moon. A sense of gentleness radiated from her, a gentleness that soothed her often irritable husband. It was said about the palace that Sithas had his father’s looks and his mother’s temperament. Kith-Kanan had inherited his mother’s eyes and his father’s energy.

“You look well,” Nirakina said to Kith-Kanan. “Was your trip rewarding?”

“Yes, Lady. I do love to fly,” he said, after kissing her cheek.

Sithel gave his son a sharp glance. Kith-Kanan cleared his throat and bid his father a polite greeting.

“I’m glad you returned when you did,” Sithel said. “Has Sithas told you of his upcoming marriage?” Kith-Kanan admitted he had. “You will have an important part to play as well, Kith. As the brother of the groom, it will be your job to escort the bride to the Tower of the Stars—”

“Yes, I will, but tell us who it is,” insisted the impatient prince.

“She is a maiden of exceptional spirit and beauty, I’m told,” Sithel said. “Well-educated, well-born—”

“Father!” Kith-Kanan pleaded. Sithas himself sat quietly, hands folded on his lap. Years of training in the Temple of Matheri had given him formidable patience.

“My son,” Sithel said to Sithas, “Your wife’s name is Hermathya, daughter of Lord Shenbarrus of the Oakleaf Clan.”

Sithas raised an eyebrow approvingly. Even he had noticed Hermathya. He said nothing, but nodded his acceptance.

“Are you all right, Kith?” Nirakina asked. “You look quite pale.”

To her surprise, Kith-Kanan looked as if his father had struck him across the face. The prince swallowed hard and nodded, unable to speak. Of all the eligible daughters, Hermathya was to marry Sithas. It was incomprehensible. It could not happen!

None of his family knew of his love for her. If they knew, if his father knew, he’d choose someone else.

“Ah,” Kith-Kanan managed to say, “who—who else knows of this?”

“Only the bride’s family,” said Sithel. “I sent Shenbarrus acceptance of the dowry this morning.”

A sinking feeling gripped Kith-Kanan. He felt like he was melting into the floor. Hermathya’s family already knew. There was no going back now. The speaker had given his word. He could not, in honor, rescind his decision without gravely offending Clan Oakleaf.

His parents and brother began to discuss details of the wedding. A tremor passed through Kith-Kanan. He resolved to stand up and declare his love for Hermathya, declare that she was his and no one else’s. Sithas was his brother, his twin, but he didn’t know her. He didn’t love her. He could find another wife. Kith-Kanan could not find another love.

He rose unsteadily to his feet. “I—” he began. All eyes turned to him.

Think, for once in your life! he admonished himself. What will they say to you?

“What?” said his father. “Are you ill, boy? You don’t look well.”

“I don’t feel too well,” Kith-Kanan said hoarsely. He wanted to shout, to run, to smash and break things, but the massive calm of his mother, father, and brother held him down like a thick blanket. He cleared his throat and added, “I think all that flying has caught up with me.”

Nirakina stood and put a hand to his face. "You do feel warm. Perhaps you should rest."

"Yes. Yes," he said. "That's just what I need. Rest." He held the table edge for support.

"I make the formal announcement when the white moon rises tonight. The priests and nobles will gather in the tower," Sithel said. "You must be there, Kith."

"I—I'll be there, Father," Kith-Kanan said. "I just need to rest."

Sithas walked with his brother to the door. Before they went out, Sithel remarked, "Oh, and leave your horn at the palace, Kith. One act of impudence a day is enough." The speaker smiled, and Kith-Kanan managed a weak grin in reply.

"Shall I send a healer to you?" asked Nirakina.

"No. I'll be fine, Mother," Kith-Kanan said.

In the corridor outside, Sithas braced his brother's shoulders and said, "Looks as if I'm to be lucky; both brains and beauty in my wife."

"You are lucky," Kith-Kanan said. Sithas looked at him in concern. Kith-Kanan was moved to say, "Whatever happens, Sith, don't think too badly of me."

Sithas frowned. "What do you mean?"

Kith-Kanan inhaled deeply and turned to climb up the stairs to his room. "Just remember that nothing will ever separate us. We're two halves of the same coin."

"Two branches of the same tree," Sithas said, completing the ritual the twins had invented as children. His concern deepened as he watched Kith-Kanan climb slowly up the stairs.

Kith-Kanan didn't let his brother see his face contort with pain. He had only a scant two hours before Solinari, the white moon, rose above the trees. Whatever he was going to do, he had to think of it before then.

* * * * *

The great and noble of Silvanesti filed into the open hall of the Tower of the Stars. Rumors flew through the air like sparrows, between courtier and cleric, noble clan father and

humble acolyte. Such assemblies in the tower were rare and usually involved a matter of state.

A pair of young heralds, draped in bright green tabards and wearing circlets of oak and laurel, marched into the hall in perfect step. They turned and stood on each side of the great door. Slender trumpets went to their lips, and a stirring fanfare blared forth. When the horns ceased, a third herald entered.

“Free Elves and True! Give heed to His Highness, Sithel, Speaker of the Stars!”

Everyone bowed silently as Sithel appeared and walked to his emerald throne. There was a spontaneous cry of “All hail the speaker!” from the ranks of the nobles; the hall rang with elven voices. The speaker mounted the steps, turned, and faced the assembly. He sat down, and the hails died.

The herald spoke again. “Sithas, son of Sithel, prince heir!”

Sithas passed through the doorway, bowed to his father, and approached the throne. As his son mounted the seven steps to the platform, Sithel held out his hand, indicating his son should stand to the left of the throne. Sithas took his place, facing the audience.

The trumpets blared again. “Lady Nirakina, wife, and Prince Kith-Kanan, son of Sithel!”

Kith-Kanan entered with his mother on his arm. He had changed to his courtly robes of sky-blue linen, clothing he rarely wore. He moved stiffly down the center aisle, his mother’s hand resting lightly on his left arm.

“Smile,” she whispered.

“I don’t know four-fifths of them,” Kith-Kanan muttered.

“Smile anyway. They know you.”

When he reached the steps, the pommel of Kith-Kanan’s sword poked out from under his ceremonial sash. Nirakina glanced down at the weapon, which was largely concealed by the voluminous folds of his robe.

“Why did you bring that?” she whispered.

“It’s part of my costume,” he replied. “I have a right to wear it.”

“Don’t be impertinent,” his mother said primly. “You know this is a peaceful occasion.”

A large wooden chair, cushioned with red velvet, was set in place for the speaker's wife on the left of Prince Sithas. Kith-Kanan, like his twin, was expected to stand in the presence of his father, the monarch.

Once the royal family was in place, the assembled notables lined up to pay their respects to the speaker. The time-honored ritual called for priests first, the clan fathers of House Cleric next, and the masters of the city guilds last. Kith-Kanan, far to the left of Sithel, searched for Hermathya in the press of people. The crowd numbered some three hundred, and though they were quiet, the shuffling of feet and the rustle of silk and linen filled the tower. The heralds advanced to the foot of the speaker's throne and announced each group as they formed up before Sithel.

The priests and priestesses, in their white robes and golden headbands, each wore a sash in the color of their patron deity—silver for E'li, red for Matheri, brown for Kiri Jolith, sky blue for Quenesti Pah, and so on. By ancient law, they went barefoot as well, so they would be closer to the sacred soil of Silvanesti.

The clan fathers shepherded their families past the speaker. Kith-Kanan caught his breath as Lord Shenbarrus of Clan Oakleaf reached the head of the line. He was a widower, so his eldest daughter stood beside him.

Hermathya.

Sithel spoke for the first time since entering the Tower of the Stars. "Lady," he said to Hermathya, "will you remain?"

Hermathya, clad in an embroidered gown the color of summer sunlight, her striking face framed by two maidenly braids—which Kith-Kanan knew she hated—bowed to the speaker and stood aside from her family at the foot of the throne platform. The hiss of three hundred whispering tongues filled the hall.

Sithel stood and offered a hand to Hermathya. She went up the stair without hesitation and stood beside him. Sithel nodded to the heralds. A single note split the air.

"Silence in the hall! His Highness will speak!" cried the herald.

A hush descended. Sithel surveyed the crowd, ending his

sweep by looking at his wife and sons. "Holy clerics, elders, subjects, be at ease in your hearts," he said, his rich voice echoing in the vast open tower. "I have called you here to receive joyous news. My son, Sithas, who shall be speaker after me, has reached the age and inclination to take a wife. After due consultation with the gods, and with the chiefs of all the clans of House Cleric, I have found a maiden suitable to be my son's bride."

Kith-Kanan's left hand strayed to his sword hilt. A calm had descended over him. He had thought long and hard about this. He knew what he had to do.

"I have chosen this maiden knowing full well the disappointment that will arise in the other clans," Sithel was saying. "I deeply regret it. If this were a barbarian land, where husbands may have more than one wife, I daresay I could make more of you happy." Polite laughter rippled through the ranks of the nobles. "But the speaker may have only one wife, so one is all I have chosen. It is my great hope that she and my son will be as happy together as I have been with my Nirakina."

He looked at Sithas, who advanced to his father's side. Holding Hermathya's left hand, the speaker reached for Sithas's right. The crowd held its breath, waiting for him to make the official announcement.

"Stop!"

The couple's fingers were only a hairsbreadth apart when Kith-Kanan's voice rang out. Sithel turned in surprise to his younger son. Every eye in the hall looked with shock at the prince.

"Hermathya cannot marry Sithas!" Kith-Kanan declared.

"Be silent," Sithel said harshly. "Have you gone mad?"

No, Father," Kith-Kanan said calmly. "Hermathya loves me."

Sithas withdrew his hand from his father's slack fingers. In his hand he held a starjewel, the traditional betrothal gift among elves. Sithas knew something had been brewing. Kith-Kanan had been too obviously troubled by the announcement of his bride-to-be. But he had not guessed at the reason.

“What does this mean?” demanded Lord Shenbarrus, moving to his daughter’s side.

Kith-Kanan advanced to the edge of the raised floor. “Tell him, Hermathya. Tell them all!”

Sithas looked to his father. Sithel’s gaze was on Hermathya. Her cheeks were faintly pink, but her expression was calm, her eyes cast down.

When Hermathya said nothing, Sithel commanded, “Speak, girl. Speak the truth.”

Hermathya lifted her gaze and looked directly at Sithas. “I want to marry the speaker’s heir,” she said. Her voice was not loud, but in the tense silence, every sound, every word was like a thunderclap.

“No!” Kith-Kanan exclaimed. What was she saying? “Don’t be afraid, Thya. Don’t let our fathers sway you. Tell them the truth. Tell them who you love.”

Still Hermathya’s eyes were on Sithas. “I choose the speaker’s heir.”

“Thya!” Kith-Kanan would have rushed to her, but Niraakina interposed herself, pleading with her son to be still. He gently but firmly pushed her aside. Only Sithas stood between him and Hermathya now.

“Stand aside, Brother,” he said.

“Be silent!” his father roared. “You dishonor us all!”

Kith-Kanan drew his sword. Gasps and shrieks filled the Tower of the Stars. Baring a weapon in the hall was a serious offense, a sacrilegious act. But Kith-Kanan wavered. He looked at the sword in his hand, at his brother’s and father’s faces, and at the woman he loved. Hermathya stood unmoving, her eyes still fixed on his twin. What hold did they have on her?

Sithas was unarmed. In fact no one in the hall was armed, except for the flimsy ceremonial maces some of the clan fathers carried. No one could stop him if he chose to fight. Kith-Kanan’s sword arm trembled.

With a cry of utter anguish, the prince threw the short, slim blade away. It skittered across the polished floor toward the assembled clerics, who moved hastily out of its way. It was ritually unclean for them to touch an edged weapon.

Kith-Kanan ran from the tower, blazing with frustration and anger. The crowd parted for him. Every eye in the hall watched him go.

Sithas descended to the main floor and went to where Kith-Kanan's sword lay. He picked it up. It felt heavy and awkward in his unpracticed hand. He stared at the keen cutting edge, then at the doorway through which Kith-Kanan had departed. His heart bled for his twin. This time Kith had not merely been impudent or impetuous. This time, his deeds were an affront to the throne and to the gods.

Sithas saw only one proper thing to do. He went back to his father and bride-to-be. Laying the naked blade at Sithel's feet, he took Hermathya's hand. It was warm. He could feel her pulse throbbing against his own cool palm. And as Sithas took the blue starjewel from the folds of his robe, it seemed almost alive. It lay in his hand, throwing off scintillas of rainbow light.

"If you will have me, I will have you," he said, holding the jewel out to Hermathya.

"I will," she replied loudly. She took the starjewel and held it to her breast.

The Tower of the Stars shook with the cheers of the assembled elves.