

1***KATIA - FIRST CHOOSING***

The girl crashed blindly through the wildwoods, her breath coming in agonised gasps, her heart thudding with fear of pursuit. Once she tripped over a tree root and rolled winded on the ground, but she clamped her teeth against a moan and was up again running within seconds. When she could push herself no further, she leaned against a tree, listening carefully. She could hear nothing but the faint noises made by the animals she had disturbed in her wild headlong flight and the rustling of foliage in the evening breeze.

She'd done it! She'd got away!

'Brother, don't let him notice I'm gone till after dark,' she prayed. 'Don't let him notice!' And it was ironic that she called upon the Brother of the World, for she was fleeing from her god, as well as from Kensin.

Dusk was gathering round her, but fear drove her to walk on again. She tried to leave no sign of her passing, but knew Kensin too well to think that he wouldn't be able to read her footprints.

By the time the first two moons had risen, she'd left the tangled growth of the wildwoods behind and was up among the sparse, spindly trees that clung to every crevice in the high rocky country. It would be difficult even for Kensin to track her across such terrain. Here, surely, she would be able to find a refuge until the Choosings had ended. After that, it wouldn't matter. She'd be disgraced, but safe.

She wished it were a three-moon night, for then she'd be able to continue, but the second moon lingered in the sky for a bare hour before sinking rapidly in the west, leaving her in the near darkness of a single pale crescent. She shivered. Always, the Choosings were held at the time of the Spring Darks. The day before she'd climbed a tree and seen the great temple wagon carrying the Sisters moving across the valley below her home towards the town of Danak, seen it and known a fear that crawled along every bone in her body. It was then that she'd decided to flee. She didn't dare not offer herself to their Brother the God.

It was a long time before she slept in the windy crevice that was too small to be called a cave, and even then her sleep was restless and unsatisfying. She woke and slept, woke briefly again, fear churning within her at every noise.

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Just before dawn Katia woke to an unnatural stillness. Even before she opened her eyes, she guessed he was there. There were no animal sounds and besides, she could sense his presence. A groan choked to nothing in her throat as her eyelids fluttered open. There, outlined against the brightening sky, was a figure she knew all too well.

'So. You're awake.' His voice was as chill as an icicle breaking in winter sunlight.

It was a moment before she could form a word. 'How did you find me?'

'I've lived in the High Alder for sixty years. Were I blind, I could still track you, Katia. This is my land.'

'Mine, too.' But even to her own ears, her voice sounded childish and sulky.

'Not until after the Choosing. You can own nothing, be nothing, until after the Choosing.'

'Grandfather, please don't make me go! I know something terrible will happen to me if I go down into Danak. I just know it!'

‘Then something terrible must happen to you, Katia, for you *will* go to Danak, even if I have to carry you there myself, trussed like a fowl for the market.’

Before she could move, he had clipped the chain he normally used to restrain injured animals round one of her wrists. She stared at it in horror, then raised her eyes pleadingly to a face whose lines seemed no less hard than the rocks around them.

‘Grandfather, please! Not that!’

He tugged her to her feet. ‘Come. We have a long walk before us if we’re to reach Danak today.’

‘Please - don’t chain me!’

‘If you behave like a wild animal, you shall be treated like one. Maybe it will remind you of your duty.’

With that he refused to speak to her further, so she could only stumble along in misery at the other end of the chain. When Kensin the Verderer set his mind to something, there was no moving him away from that path.

Outside the town, he stopped and stared at her coldly. ‘Can I trust you to wash and change from your forest leathers, or must I give you to the Elders chained and filthy?’

‘I’ll w-wash.’

‘No running away!’

‘No, Grandfather.’

He rummaged in his pack and pulled out a long blue gown and embroidered headdress. ‘Today, you must wear this. My sister’s second daughter sent it specially.’

She stood staring at it.

When she didn’t move, he added softly, ‘Your mother wore this very gown, once. Wear it for her sake.’

‘I hate gowns. And I hate the town!’

He lost patience again. 'Hate this, hate that! If you wish to live with hatred inside you, then get you to Kelandrak and join Those of the Serpent! We do not follow that path of pain and darkness in the High Alder.'

She gulped back a sob and he laid a hand on her thin shoulder. 'Would you really shame me before our kinfolk, child? Prove that they were right, that I was unfit to rear you when your parents were killed?'

She burst into tears then and turned to burrow into his chest, snuffling wetly into the sharp smell of the leather she had helped him cure. The robe fell unheeded to the ground.

His voice echoed above her head. 'Well, Katia?'

'I w-won't shame you. I won't! But oh, Grandfather, I feel so afraid.'

'You've been to Festivals of Choosing before, child. What is there to fear about them? The Sisters are good women. It's always a joyful occasion.'

'I wasn't an offrant before.'

'We must all offer ourselves to the God before we can take up our adult lives.'

'But boys don't get *chosen*! They can only be named as town Elders. Girls who are *chosen* are taken away. I couldn't bear to leave the High Alder!'

'Most girls think it a great honour to be called to serve our Brother the God.'

'I'd die if I had to live in a city.'

He shook his head and his voice was stern again. 'I doubt our Brother would *choose* someone as unwilling to do her duty as you, Katia. I've failed him somehow in the way I raised you.'

She could only hang her head, her throat too full of tears for speech.

'Well,' he pushed her away from him, 'go and wash yourself now, child, and then put on your festival robe. We mustn't be late for your night's vigil.'

Sighing she picked up the soft blue material and went over to the stream. She shivered as she washed herself, but not from the coldness of the mountain water, for she was used to that. Something was wrong; she knew it. Something was threatening her peaceful life.

When she was ready, she presented herself to her grandfather for inspection and he checked her over carefully. His Katia took little interest in her appearance, and had been known to wear a tunic back to front before this. Thin and leggy, like all young animals, he thought, but she'll be a beauty one day. His dead daughter had had the same cloud of dark hair, but her eyes had been grey, not green. The resemblance always twisted his heart. He didn't tell Katia that, of course; he merely nodded, put the chain and her leathers away, and picked up his pack.

Just before they reached the first houses in Danak, he stopped and looked at Katia sternly. 'You'll not shame me tomorrow, child? You'll do your duty?'

She threw herself into his arms and hugged him convulsively. 'No. I w-won't shame you, Grandfather. I promise.'

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Long before the sun rose the next morning, the townsfolk began to filter into Danak's only square, gathering in groups on the paved pathways around the green. Not a word was spoken, not a child cried out, yet the excitement was as tangible as the stone walls of the houses. Music and laughter would fill the later stages of the celebrations, but the Festivals of Choosing always began in solemn silence.

Slowly the darkness lightened and faces turned expectantly towards the east. A brightness crept across the sky until finally, rosy fingers of light touched the rooftops and gilded the garlands on the walls.

There was a drum roll, then the doors of the Meeting House were thrown open and

two Sisters of the God emerged, dressed in long full robes of glittering blue and silver, with tall, elaborate headdresses covering their hair. Even their faces were hidden behind jewelled masks. At this ceremony the Sisters had no individual identities, serving only as channels of communication with the God their Brother. When the fourteen-year-olds were offered to him every year, he would speak through his Sisters to call the chosen girls to his Sisterhood, or to name any young person as Elder-Elect.

Kensin stood motionless, not part of any group. He leaned against an angle of the wall and waited with a hunter's patience, his eyes on the sacred enclosure where the young folk from the district would be offered to the God. He had slipped out of town once he had delivered Katia to the Elders the previous day, and had spent the night beneath the stars, for he could not abide the crowded houses of his kinfolk. But he had slept little. The child's anxiety seemed to have communicated itself to him, and his dreams had been troubled. Well, he sighed now, the God's will be done, whatever it is.

'Brother, look down upon us!' The taller Sister's voice rang out clearly, signalling the start of the ceremonies.

Her call was echoed by the crowd. 'Look down upon us all!'

When the last murmurs had died away, the second Sister clapped her hands sharply together and the two women moved to stand on either side of the doorway of the Meeting House. The drum began to beat out an insistent throbbing rhythm, then one of the town's Elders appeared in the doorway, resplendent in his red robes of office and moving in time to the pulsing sounds. A sigh rippled through the crowd. The Choosing had begun.

The Elder was followed by a single file of solemn-faced young people. All were fourteen years old and all were clad in richly-embroidered garments, gowns or tunics of ceremonial blue, most of which had been handed down in their families for generations.

They showed the nervousness natural to those facing a turning point in their lives, but most also betrayed their pleasure at being there, at being almost an adult, at last.

Last night the youngsters had sat vigil in the Meeting House, and today, long before dawn, they'd prepared themselves for the ceremony. They hadn't broken their fast, except to drink a full measure of festival wine. The secret of this dark, sweet concoction, drunk but once in a lifetime, was known only to the Sisters, for it was blended with special drugs which heightened consciousness.

Katia had deliberately placed herself last in the line of offrants. Her head was spinning from the effects of the wine and everything had taken on a nightmare quality - sounds echoing, actions slowing down, colours beating at her eyelids, dawnlight tearing at her skin. Her urge to flee grew stronger, but her limbs were strangely lethargic and she stumbled once or twice as she moved across to the centre of the green.

The townsfolk lining the square swayed like reeds in a breeze and without prompting the adults began humming the introduction to the festival song, while young children strewed white festival flowers and scented fern leaves in front of the offrants. The crushed petals filled the air with a perfume like no other for these flowers only bloomed in the Spring Darks.

Katia seemed unaware of the stares of disapproval from the crowd as she broke tradition by pausing at the entrance to the enclosure. She threw a terrified glance back towards the Sisters, who were still standing like glittering statues in front of the Meeting House, then her eyes raked the crowd in a desperate search for a tall, silver-haired old man.

When her eyes caught his, Kensin frowned, shaking his head in disapproval, so she took a deep, sobbing breath and tried to pull herself together. She must not shame her grandfather before the townsfolk. She must not.

As she entered the enclosure, it seemed to seal around her like a trap, and she shuddered as she took her place in the circle of offrants and bowed her head. A semi-circle of girls faced a semi-circle of boys. Katia was oblivious to the encouraging smile from the Elder who had led the procession and the friendly nod of the girl next to her. In fact, she was oblivious now to everything except the terror churning within her.

When all was ready within the enclosure, the Sisters began to dance their way across the green, their complex steps at one with the rhythm which wove in and out of the melody like a live thing. The glittering figures paused in front of the enclosure and the music changed its beat. Four hundred adults began as one to sing the Great Chorus of Choosing.

The music seemed to pluck at Katia's nerves as if she were a stringed instrument. Its rhythm was strange, hypnotic, repeating the archaic cadences until they controlled her very heart beat. This chorus was never performed at any other time, and never rehearsed. It was only sung by those who had already been offered to the God. No one, save those who had heard it through the mind-enhancing haze of festival wine, could remember its complexities. And today it felt to be vibrating into Katia's very bones.

The chorus stopped abruptly. Katia swallowed hard and stared at the ground as she waited in numb misery for something dreadful to happen.

The Sisters stood for several interminable minutes at the gates of the low enclosure, then one called out in a voice which blared in Katia's ears like a trumpet call, '*Brother, look down upon us!*'

This call was again echoed by every spectator. 'Look down! Look down upon us all!'

If she could have moved, Katia would have fled, in spite of her grandfather, but she couldn't even twitch a muscle.

Both Sisters clapped their hands in unison and an intense silence fell upon the crowd,

a silence which seemed much louder than the singing, and which still echoed the rhythms of the song. The Town Elder left the enclosure to stand outside its entrance. Then, and then only, did the taller Sister begin.

Walking slowly round the circle, she paused in front of each offrant, gazing deeply into eyes glazed with tension, weariness and festival wine. Each time she closed her own eyes for a moment to allow the God her Brother to speak within her. When he didn't whisper in her ear, she reopened her eyes and nodded in dismissal. At this, each new adult took a step backwards, not knowing whether to be relieved or sorry not to have been claimed by the God.

Once, halfway round the circle, the Sister spoke. 'I *name* you, Steflin. One day you shall be Elder of this community.'

The young man beamed with pride and remained where he was. In the crowd outside, his family's faces reflected his pride and joy, but the silence still held.

The slow walk continued. To Katia, time itself seemed to pause and curl in on itself, as if waiting for this part of the ceremony to finish before it could start rushing on again. Nearer and nearer the Sister came, and still there was no hand outstretched to signify that the God had *chosen* one of the offrants to join his Sisterhood. It had been many years since a young woman from Danak had been called, and some of the townsfolk were saying that they had strayed from the God's path and must live more strictly in future.

The glittering robe stopped in front of Katia. She looked up obediently into the eyes behind the mask and gasped aloud. It seemed as if she was falling into a dark tunnel, as if a thousand lights were exploding inside her mind. To her horror, she saw a hand stretch out to rest on her head.

'You are *chosen* by our Brother, dear child,' intoned a melodious voice. 'Welcome to

the Sisterhood, Katia!’

Katia could only stand and stare into two implacable eyes while waves of terror washed through her. She heard her own voice say haltingly, ‘I shall serve our Brother with joy all the days of my life,’ even as her mind rejected the words and her spirit screamed for release.

She could do nothing but turn and follow one who was henceforth her Sister in God.

A murmur of surprise ran through the crowd as the Sister led Katia out of the enclosure, followed by Steflin. Who would ever have expected the wild grandchild of Kensin the Verderer to be *chosen* by the God? However, a shout of joy erupted spontaneously from them as they realised what this meant. Once again, Danak had been found worthy. They burst into the Song of Rejoicing.

Katia stood motionless in front of the Meeting House while the joyful music beat around her aching head. The Sister must have done something to her, because she had only enough freedom of movement to swivel her eyes around desperately, searching for her grandfather. When she found him, she saw grief warring with pride in his face and she cried out mutely for him to come and rescue her, but he shook his head and stepped backwards.

One of the Sisters looked round quickly, ready to place another Compulsion upon this wayward and ungrateful young woman if she did anything to disrupt the rest of the ceremony.

But Katia had come to her senses. The thought of her grandfather’s humiliation if she brought shame upon the way he had raised her stiffened her spine, as did the years of training in the ways of the God. It was beyond imagining that anyone could ever want to refuse this, the greatest of honours. Katia’s lips curved into a parody of a smile.

The Sister guided her towards the wagon. There were some frowns when it was seen

that Katia was not dancing the ritual steps, merely stumbling along between the Sisters. Children continued to throw their flowers at her feet and adults called out, 'Remember Danak in your prayers.'

Someone helped her up into the wagon and a soft voice indicated where she should stand and told her to wave until they were out of sight of the townsfolk. She still couldn't move freely and her vision was blurred with tears.

'They are doubly blessed who do not have the conceit to aspire to our Brother's service,' said one of the Sisters loudly, and the townsfolk nearest nodded to one another as they repeated the words 'doubly blessed'.

Then the wagon jerked forward and the huge grey deleff who pulled it settled immediately into their steady walk, a walk which would devour hundreds of kloms and which would separate Katia for ever from her grandfather and home. She blinked the tears away and strained around for one last glimpse of him. Didn't he even want to say farewell to her?

Sinking down onto the wooden bench she bowed her head in anguish.

Hidden behind a tree, Kensin watched them go. The God had accepted his unorthodox way of raising the child, and for that he was glad and proud. But he had lost his little Katia, and that was a sorrow deep in his heart. For a moment, even his loyal spirit rebelled. Was he to lose everyone he loved? Wife, child, grandchild - all gone before their time. How could the God ask so much of him?

Then he squared his shoulders and prepared to endure. And what supported him most in his personal pain was the knowledge of how important the Sisterhood was to the world in the struggle against Discord, the evil generated by Those of the Serpent. For Kensin had seen them and their unclean ways with his own eyes when taking the five-yearly tribute from the High Alder to Kelandrak. They must be stopped, at whatever

cost. The Lord Claimant of Kelandrak was wrong, so wrong to allow them to build a shrine. Was he, too, turning away from their Brother the God?

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While Kensin walked back alone through the wildwoods, Katia sat inside the swaying wagon, her eyes downcast. It was so large that she could keep her distance from the others who'd been *chosen*. The beautiful painted canvas sides were rolled up to let the fresh air in, and the green light of the forest filtered down around them. She'd seen the previous year how the provisions and camping equipment were stowed neatly in the rear compartments.

One Sister sat on the high bench at the front, though the deleff needed no guidance. They simply walked in and out of their harness themselves. At any other time, Katia would have been fascinated by the great draught beasts used for all long-distance travel, but just now she couldn't see beyond her own anguish.

After a while one of the Sisters turned and asked, 'Are you all right, Katia?' and she choked out a 'Yes, Illustrious Sister.'

'Best leave her be,' said the other Sister. 'Sometimes it's a shock to them.' She turned to stare at Katia. 'What were your kinfolk doing to let you offer yourself so unprepared, child?'

Katia drew a deep breath. One must respond when a Sister asked a question. 'No one thought I could possibly be called to serve the God, Illustrious Sister,' she managed to whisper.

'It is for the God our Brother, to *choose*, not for others to decide for him.' Then the stern face softened. 'Take heart, child. It's a richly satisfying life in the Sisterhood.'

The thought of living inside a great stone temple in a city crowded with people filled Katia with sheer panic, but she managed to hold it back. What was the point? She was

trapped now.

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After two days on the road they arrived at another small town for another Festival of Choosing. Before the ceremony began, Katia stayed close to the wagon and refused to be drawn into conversation with the townsfolk; afterwards, as they rolled away down the narrow mountain road, she drew her misery around herself like a cloak and even the Sisters left her in peace.

By the end of ten days, they had left the High Alder completely and were winding across grey-green grassy uplands where herds of meat nerids grazed and the herders were already settled in their tented summer camps. The landscape was alien and bare to the eyes of a girl raised on the borders of the wildwoods, and Katia sat uneasily, feeling totally vulnerable as the great wagons rumbled along rutted tracks beneath a vast blue sky.

One day she plucked up the courage to ask, 'Where exactly are we going, Illustrious Sisters?'

'Far away, child.'

'But where?'

'To one of the great temples. You must undergo years of training before you can take your place in the Sisterhood.'

'We're going to a city,' Katia whispered, her worst fears confirmed.

'Where else do they build temples?'

Katia swallowed hard. Kensin had told her about the city of Kelandrak, with its dirty crowded streets, its constant noise and its Shrines of the Serpent. How would she bear to live among such things?

Whenever they made camp, Katia took her share of the chores without being bidden,

but still the knot of misery inside her did not loosen or the desolate look leave her eyes. The other girls eventually decided that she was just too stupid to bother with. They were still in a state of wild euphoria at being called to serve their Brother the God. Nothing seemed to dampen their joy, but their high spirits grated on Katia's nerves.

They travelled for several weeks, taking part in so many Festivals of Choosing that Katia lost count. Every now and then they would meet another great temple wagon at a prearranged spot. Each time some of the girls would be exchanged, for the novices were always scattered widely, and could never return to their families, or even to their own claims. In this way Katia was passed from one wagon to another and travelled ever south through several of the Twelve Claims.

The first city that she saw was Kelandrak, but its details passed almost unnoticed during her early acute stage of misery. The only thing that really registered was her first glimpse of a Shrine of the Serpent and its guardian Servants with their black robes and serpent staffs. The twin wooden poles at the shrine's entrance bore the black and gold triangular banners of the Serpent. The snakes that wound up the poles were so realistic that even though one of the girls whispered that they were only carved wood, Katia could hardly believe it.

She had heard tell of such places, but had never seen one. They were not permitted in the High Alder. She shrank back in horror from the evil she could feel emanating from the shrine and gasped in outrage as the men standing outside it dared to sneer openly at the occupants of the temple wagon.

The next claim was Garshlian, with its river-borne commerce, so strange a place that even Katia forgot herself for long enough to marvel at the great barges that plied along the wide slow rivers. The river families spent their whole lives on the water, one of the Sisters told them.

After that came the plains of Netheron, with their huge herds of milk and meat nerids, and their equally plump farmers and herders who lived in painted wooden houses set in circles in cosy little villages.

Once in a while they would meet a family of traders, the only others to travel the land in wagons drawn by deleff, though traders' wagons were not so marvellously carved and their canopies were much simpler. They would stop briefly to exchange news with each trader family. A few times they stopped unexpectedly. One of the Sisters in this new wagon was a healer and people came to beg her help for someone seriously ill.

When they came to the Claim of Setheron they kept away from settlements, travelling along remote tracks and keeping out of sight in the daytime. This seemed to Katia to set the final seal of horror on these months of misery. In Setheron, Those of the Serpent were strongest of all and the Sisterhood was scorned, its very existence threatened, and Festivals of Choosings strictly forbidden.

What sort of depravity drove folk to attack the Sisters who healed them when they were sick and who interpreted for them the wishes of the God their Brother? Katia wondered. In the High Alder, no one would have believed this possible and they would have cried out against such heresy tainting their land, even given their lives to prevent it, if they had to.

The Sisters exchanged worried glances sometimes when Katia seemed unwilling to join in the tale-telling and singing, or when she performed poorly in the preliminary training exercises.

'No wonder they're sending her to Temple Tenebrak,' said one Sister after a particularly fraught session which had ended with Katia in tears yet again. 'I've never seen a novice so unhappy.'

'Yes, but Cheral will know how to deal with her. There's no Novice Mistress to equal

our Sister in Tenebrak.' They exchanged grins. Cheral's sharp tongue was a byword in the Sisterhood, yet those she had trained remained fond of her ever afterwards.

So Katia was exchanged again and found herself among another group of strange girls, one of three wagonloads now travelling together on the last stage of their journey. She couldn't help noticing how lush the fields and woods of the Claim of Tenebron were. Tenebron, first of all the claims, the history books said. Tenebron, the place of beginnings.

Even here Those of the Serpent had gained a foothold, the new Sisters admitted over the camp fire, but their shrines were few and had had little effect upon the life of the Sisterhood.

When the wagons entered the ancient city of Tenebrak, Katia was relieved to see no sign of black robes or serpent staffs in the streets, only cheering crowds in brightly-coloured festival garments, who greeted them and showered flower petals in the path of the proudly-smiling girls.

Katia couldn't return their smiles. Tallest of the novices, very thin now, with dark-circled eyes, she let the flowers strike her body and fall to the floor of the wagon unheeded. Her green eyes were feverishly bright, like jewels in her pale face, and her dark hair cascaded to her waist unbraided.

Not until they were entering the huge grey mass of Temple Tenebrak itself, did Katia stir. She raised her eyes to the high walls that were about to swallow her up and shuddered visibly as the tall bronze gates clanged shut behind them. The other girls had to push her from the wagon, for she seemed unable to move.

When the Novice Mistress bustled out to take charge of the new girls, one of the Sisters whispered in her ear for a moment, and as Cheral's shrewd eyes flickered over Katia, she nodded in acknowledgment before leading the girls into the temple where

they would live for the next few years.

First, Cheral took them into the Hall of the God for their welcoming ceremony. The Sisters and older novices were all waiting, arrayed in ceremonial robes and headdresses. This was a time of rejoicing. Their singing was of such piercing sweetness that it brought tears to Katia's eyes, and their dancing was more graceful than she would have believed possible.

Then the Circle formed, and for the first time the newcomers took part in a Gathering, that mystical communion of Sisters with their Brother the God. As its peace and joy washed over them, even Katia's grinding misery abated for a few precious minutes.

Afterwards Herra, the Elder Sister, went to the foot of the legendary Statue of the God and spoke kind words of welcome. Behind her, the strange forms carved into the stone showed the wondering novices the Seven Manifestations of the God their Brother, whom he had sent down among them. To the rear of the statue was a darkness that twisted your eyes in another direction, however hard you tried to look at it.

Katia stared at the Elder Sister, who had been heard of even as far away as the High Alder. An awesome person, Herra, and famous throughout the land, for she was over two hundred years old and wise, they said, beyond belief. But today Katia could not help noticing how tired Herra looked, how dreadfully bone-weary, and her welcome speech was brief.

Ceremonial over, Cheral showed the novices the long, narrow dormitories where their cohort would live, then the hall where everyone ate and the day-chambers in which they would meet to learn and practise the Disciplines. By now Katia was not the only girl drooping with weariness, so the Novice Mistress hurried them into the bathing chambers, fed them a light meal and sent them to bed.

‘That one is going to be a problem,’ Cheral thought to herself as she walked briskly down to the Sisters’ chambers afterwards, ‘or ninety years have taught me nothing about novices.’

But she soon forgot Katia in her worry over the Elder Sister, who was failing daily. Herra, who had lived longer than any other Sister in their long history must soon risk another Renewal of her ageing body, and they all feared to lose her. Indeed, we cannot survive without her, thought Cheral for the hundredth time. And even with Herra’s skills and wisdom, who knows if our Sisterhood will survive? Those of the Serpent grow ever stronger, even in Tenebrak. She shivered and forced her thoughts into more cheerful avenues. It was not for her to doubt their Brother’s power and wisdom.

Cheral watched over the Elder Sister’s health like a fussy grandmother during the next month or two, for she was one of the few who dared to chide Herra and scold her into resting. The Novice Mistress was herself becoming something of a figure in the Sisterhood, though she scorned to pay attention to that. What were a mere hundred and sixty years of life, compared to over two hundred and thirty? What were her mundane Gifts, compared to those of Herra?

Cheral knew better than anyone that she had never demonstrated any exceptional Gifts; she just excelled in supervising the everyday tasks without which no community could exist, and also in first-stage training of novices. Such Gifts as she had were in the small things in life, not prophecy and healing. Well, and why not? Such things were as necessary as the more exotic Gifts and powers.

During the next few weeks Cheral worried because she could not give Katia’s cohort as much attention as usual. But there were so many things to do and so few Sisters to do them nowadays, and Herra must come first. Without Herra, their world would be lost to the evil spread by Those of the Serpent.