

## Continuum

Rivalen stood beside his mother at the edge of a forest meadow filled with violet flowers, deep in the wooded realm that once was the abode of the Arnothoi elves. The wind, bearing the woody, floral fragrance of late spring, stirred the leaves to whispers. Twilight painted the meadow with golden light.

A false face masked Rivalen's intentions. Only his hands spoke truth. In his left fist he cupped the smooth black disc that served as his secret holy symbol of Shar. In his right hand, hidden under his cloak, he held the cool, wire-wrapped hilt of a poisoned dagger.

The patch of *avenoran* flowers, deep violet petals surrounding the black core of the stigma, stretched out before them. The fading light turned them into an iridescent violet sea. A breeze caused the flowers to sway as one. They undulated like waves, cast a cloud of sparkling pollen into the twilight air. The silver motes tinkled like faint bells as they rained down.

"It is wondrous, Rivalen," his mother said. She placed her hand on his arm. "Your father will be so pleased when I bring him here."

"Yes," Rivalen said, though he knew his father would never see the meadow.

His father, Telemont Tanthul, the most powerful arcanist in Shade Enclave, had taken an interest in botany in recent years. Rivalen had lured his mother to the meadow in secret, with the promise of a unique gift to commemorate his father's imminent ascendance to the office of Most High, ruler of Shade Enclave.

His mother walked ahead of him, into the patch, amidst the pollen, letting her fingertips graze the tops of the flowers. They shivered under her touch and sent more pollen into the air. The meadow looked otherworldly, a fey land of silver rain, tinkling bells and murder.

Rivalen stared at her back, at the space between her shoulder blades. His grip on the dagger tightened. He tensed as he thought of lunging at her, of driving the blade into her pale flesh, but he hesitated and the moment passed.

She turned and smiled at him. She did not suspect his motives.

He had taken precautions to ensure his crime would not be discovered. He had transported them to the meadow from Shade Enclave, utilizing the Shadow Weave revealed to him by Shar. After the murder he would move his mother's corpse back to the Enclave. The poison that stained his dagger, painstakingly crafted by his own hand in the quiet of his own manse, would leave no trace on her body and would make revivification impossible. After he healed his mother's flesh of the dagger's bite, it would appear that she had died in her sleep. Only Rivalen and Shar would know the truth. It would be Rivalen's Own Secret and he would bear its weight.

His goddess had ordered the matricide in a vision. He did not know Shar's purpose and dared not inquire. The Goddess of Loss kept her own secrets, promised Rivalen nothing.

He licked his lips and tried to slow his heart. The hairs on his arms stood on end. He told himself it was the magic in the air.

His mother turned a circle, still graceful and strong even in her middle years, even after birthing twelve children. She drew a deep breath of magic infused air and laughed. Silver motes coated her embroidered velvet cloak, her dark hair, her pale flesh.

"The pollen tickles my nose."

He smiled, another false gesture on a day of falseness.

She gestured him to join her. "Come, Rivalen. You'd stand in the shadows of the trees when this beckons? Come out of the darkness. Come."

He did not move. He preferred the darkness.

"I could lay here and sleep under the stars like an elf," she said, her wistful expression that of the young mother he remembered from his youth. "Your father will marvel." She looked away and smiled distantly, as if imagining in her mind the pleasure the meadow would bring father. "The elves say that if you inhale enough pollen while standing in a field of *avenorani*, your wishes will come true. Your father scoffs at such tales but standing here now, I believe it to be so."

His father was right to scoff. The Art of the elves had only enhanced the beauty and hardiness of the flowers, not granted them the power to grant wishes. The blooms flourished even in winter, changed color with the seasons, chimed in the rain, but nothing more.

“A legend,” he said.

Her expression fell and she eyed him with concern. “You are far too serious for so young a man. Have I raised so somber a son?”

“My studies require seriousness, mother.”

“So they do,” she acknowledged with a nod. “Your father drives you. But do not be so driven that the joy of life passes you by.”

He let his face offer the lie of another smile. Shar taught him that joy was fleeting, that love was a lie. “Do not worry for me, mother.”

She turned from him and he began the murder.

He whispered the words to a powerful abjuration that nullified all magic out to a distance of five paces from his person. The wards and alarms that protected his mother would not operate within the area of his spell.

When he completed incantation, his mother seemed not to notice, though the tinkling of the pollen fell silent, as if the flowers had grown sullen.

“I have never seen so many,” she said, looking out over the field of flowers. “Do you think the elves know of this meadow?”

“The arnothoi moved west,” he said, tensing. “The meadow is long forgotten. We are alone here.”

Possibly she heard something unusual in his tone. Possibly she noticed the silence of the flowers at last. She turned back and looked at him strangely.

Are you all right, Rivalen? You look pale.”

For a moment Rivalen could not speak. He stared at her while his heartbeat drummed in his ears and his mouth went dry.

Concern creased the skin around his mother’s eyes, furrowed her brow.

“Rivalen?”

She took a step toward him.

His hand tightened on the dagger hilt under his cloak. He swallowed.

“Rivalen?”

She neared him, one hand outstretched. His breath came fast. He readied himself.

She stopped two paces from him and her expression changed, hardened.

She knew.

“Rivalen,” she said, and the word was not a question.

He jerked the dagger free and lunged at her, blade held before him.

Her reflexes surprised him. She sidestepped his attack and kicked him in the knee, wrenching it. He shouted with pain and waved the dagger at her as he fell. He felt the blade bite flesh, heard his mother curse. He fell amidst the flowers, amidst a shower of silver pollen. He rolled over and looked up, the dagger held defensively before him.

His mother stood over him, a short blade already in her right hand. She held her left hand to the shallow gash that his blade had put in her hip. Her eyes looked as cold as those of his goddess when Shar had come to him in dreams. Her lower lip trembled. He did not understand why.

“I killed fifty men before you uttered your first squall and you think to take me unawares with that?” She nodded at the dagger. “Are you enspelled? Mad? What are you doing?”

Rivalen looked at the dagger in his fist, the black poison on its blade, the smear of his mother’s red blood.

“Murdering you,” he answered, and started to stand.

She snarled and stepped toward him, blade ready, but staggered. Her eyes widened and she wobbled.

“Poison,” she said, and slurred the word. “But...”

“None of your protective wards are functioning.”

She swayed, backed up a step.

“Nor your alarm spells,” Rivalen said, now on his feet. “Nor the contingency spells place on you by my father.”

She tried to back off another step but the poison had stolen her coordination. She fell amidst the flowers and sent up a cloud of silver.

He stepped near her, stood over her, held his holy symbol up for her to see.

She stared up at him through eyes turning glassy. “Why, Rivalen?”

“Because love is a lie. Only hate endures.”

Shock widened her eyes. “I am your mother.”

“Only of my flesh,” he said. “Not of my soul.”

Tears showed at the corners of her eyes.

“Your bitterness is sweet to the Lady, mother.”

He kneeled beside her to watch her die. The tinkling flowers sang a funeral dirge.

She swallowed rapidly, reflexively. Her breathing grew shallow. Her fingers worked, clawed at the ground, reached for him.

“Hold my hand, Rivalen,” she said in a whispered gasp.

He did not reach for her, merely stared into her wan face. “We all die alone, mother.”

She closed her eyes and the tears leaked down her cheeks.

“Your father will learn of this.”

“No. This will be known only to us. And to Shar.”

To that, she said nothing. She stared at him for a moment, then closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

When her intentions registered, he smiled.

“What did you wish for, mother?”

She opened her eyes and the hurt in her eyes was gone, replaced by anger. “To be the instrument of your downfall.”

He stood. “Goodnight, mother. I answer to another mistress, now.”

She gagged, tried to speak, failed. Her eyes turned distant. She stared up at the twilight sky and he saw the awareness melt out of her eyes.

Looking upon her corpse, he felt...nothing. Emptiness, a hole. He ran his fingertips over the edge of his holy symbol and supposed that was point.