

Wither the Ellkiyn

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Potokin squeaked and wriggled against Taminisha's constraining arms. She chattered and whistled in his pointed ear to soothe his fear of Oralia's scrying chant, and the expected splash of water that would follow when Spirit revealed itself. Keen to calm him, she moved away from the speculum, the hem of her long black habilan rustling on the stone floor.

With a gentle hand, she stroked the miniature Tarki's scaly skin, but his agitation increased. With a streak of silver, he swung his head and bit down hard on Taminisha's hand, embedding razor sharp teeth into her flesh.

Taminisha tried to snatch her hand away. "Ouch. Let go, right now, you savage little beast," she said aloud in romni.

Despite the admonishment, her precious pet hung on and growled between clenched teeth.

"Let go, you undersized demon. If you do not, your Mamam will drop water on you."

The Tarki squealed in terror and withdrew his serrated fangs.

Taminisha cuddled him close and sighed in resignation as her purple blood oozed from the puncture marks in her skin to form rapidly congealing beads. *This is what I get for insisting on keeping a ferocious Tarki for a pet.*

Severely chastened Potokin settled in the crook of Taminisha's elbow, licking her blood off his lips and expressing his displeasure in a low grumble even as she moved to the window, well away from the water.

"Shhh, my pet, you are in no danger."

"Be silent, Tamin, you are destabilising the rhythm of the waters," Oralia scolded.

"Forgive me, Oralia." Taminisha hitched her habilan up and perched on the wide stone window ledge.

Below her, the realm of Aikanshin spread like a colourful painting, glowing through the light mist drifting down from the mountain. The moist silken air caressed her skin. Taminisha inhaled deeply of the waylia-scented air, its zesty floral perfume a nostalgic, but faded memory of her dead mother.

A motley group of citizens were returning from the farming paddocks. They hurried along the winding stone bridge that hung across the gushing Aikan River, keen to get home after a period of hard work.

Taminisha could see quite a number of true blood sachans from Kylara amongst the throng of mixed bloods in sachan form. She suspected the mixed blood species

probably couldn't even trace their own bloodlines. She could not understand the intermingling of the species, but accepted it as commonplace.

A roar from above attracted her attention. Two Ellkiiyn soared past the castle with the lazy undulation of leathery wings. She recognised her soul mate Odakan from the iridescent flash of green and gold scales. The other, a Vaprus male, deeper purple than her, and much bigger ignored her. He had an impressive rack of pectenites curling around his pale lavender froxcomb that bristled all the way to his tail. She waved. Odakan flicked his tail in acknowledgement.

A childish squeal drifted up from the lake below. Taminisha leaned out over the window ledge to get a better view. In the upper lake, her nephew, in Ellkiiyn form, charged through the water after Taminisha's hallegan and bodyguard, Tarlitek. She smiled. Even as Ellkiiyn, the boy had no chance of catching the Orunan shape-shifter as he powered through the water with a few sweeps of his massive tail.

Taminisha leaned further out. Potokin squeaked. She ignored his protest and broadcast in Ellkiiyn. *"You'll have to swim faster to catch, Tarlitek."*

Jabrikan hesitated in his dash through the water and looked up. *"He's too fast, and I'm only a baby."*

Taminisha chuckled to herself. *"And he's Orunan. Even I couldn't catch him."*

The child beckoned. *"Come join us, Tamin."*

Taminisha shook her head. *"I'm not allowed. I'm helping Oralia commune with Spirit."*

"I don't like her doing her sorcery. It's scary."

"I know."

Taminisha ached to transmogrify, fly down and dive into the cool waters, but she squelched her desire knowing her stepfather frowned on her penchant for swimming and her affinity with water. *My predilection is nothing more than they deserve for leaving me, and Shydee, in the care of an Orunan shape shifter.*

Behind her, Oralia chanted in a soft rhythmic call of unintelligible words demanding Spirit reveal the future. Calling the spirits was fraught with inherent danger and seeking the future before its time, a dice with death and madness. However, the drop of Fylitia blood running in Oralia's veins drove her to seek what the Ellkiiyn could not, and did not, want to see.

A shiver flitted across Taminisha's skin. Not long after her mother died, her stepfather joined with Oralia, even knowing she had tainted blood. Still smitten with his partner, Tokanin never said a word against her spell binding or scrying.

Most of the occupants of the castle wished he would bring a stop to it, but Taminisha would never criticise Oralia because it would upset her stepfather, and he had always treated her with kindness.

Despite the loss of her parents, and brother, she had a pleasant life, full of freedom and love. When Tokanin either passed to Spirit or abdicated, she would be Regent for

Jabrikan and have to adapt to the responsibilities that came with such an elevation. Both she and Odakan looked forward to the challenge, but for now, she made the most of her carefree life.

Taminisha tucked a loose strand of pearls back up into her dainty rack of pectenites and smoothed her masq of purple and silver scales before she turned away from the scene below. She kept her eyes averted as Oralia sang in a high-pitched voice. Taminisha cringed against the screeching decibels as the keening invaded her head. Oralia sometimes forgot a full blood Ellkiiyn had much finer hearing than she did, and her raucous sounds hurt delicate eardrums.

Despite her dislike of scrying, when Taminisha heard the waters move, she felt compelled to watch. Potokin hunched down against her breasts, covered his horny face with clawed hands and curled his tail around his plump scaly body. Taminisha did not blame him for trying to hide. *I wish I could do the same.*

Oralia stood by the scrying pool, her hands held out, with palms toward the water. Her eyes sparkled with red flecks and her long angular face seemed more pinched than usual. The beads in her pectenites trembled. Vibrations undulated through the room as the clear water in the bowl became dark and murky. Under the motion of Oralia's hands, it swayed back and forth in the white marble speculum.

"Come Spirit, come. Reveal thyself to those that ask. Come hither, fair warning or foul, come to me, I demand thee," Oralia shouted.

The water swirled and slopped back and forth, hissing loudly as grey froth fizzed on the surface. Still Oralia called.

Taminisha pressed back against the cold stone of the wall. Potokin trembled in her arms as eerie shadows danced around the circular tower room. She glanced out through the open window, disconcerted to see Aikanshin's glowing pastel landscape had dulled, and the mist perpetually drifting over the lake and the river had thickened into a grey fog.

Taminisha held back a scream, gulping down large breaths of air as she tried to stay silent. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She cuddled Potokin closer. *Had Oralia gone too far this time?* An ugly sensation of doom nudged at her. Taminisha resisted its presence, but it deepened, and filled the room with malevolence.

A smoky swirl of vapour rose from the speculum and wrapped grey tentacles around Oralia's lean body. Oralia threw back her head, her white blond short-cropped hair stood on end as her body trembled. The uncontrolled movement made the long-beaded earrings in her pointed ears jangle with a furious melody.

She screeched as her eyes glazed over. "Untruths, broken rules—evil grows strong within. There is no escape until the Daughter of Kylara comes. The path is set, Ellkiiyn are doomed. I am the source," she cried.

A peal of maniacal laughter bubbled from her gaping mouth, silencing her words. Oralia clutched at her hair, her face, and her breasts, but the misty tentacles tightened

around her body, filling her mouth and ears, and entangling her hands until she could no longer move them. She began to spin, around and around on the spot, faster and faster, screaming louder and louder.

Taminisha shoved her pet behind the drapes, covered her ears and screamed for help.

Oralia span in a wide arc, closer and closer to Taminisha. Her dark hazel eyes were wide open, but unseeing, as they blazed with a fiery red light.

Taminisha reached out. "Oralia, be still. Take my hands, it is I, Taminisha."

Oralia did not respond, horror etched stark on her face. The fear reflected in her eyes, and her crimson painted lips drawn back in a snarl showing pointed teeth, terrified Taminisha. *What evil being had possessed her stepfather's mate?*

A series of thumps shook the door on its hinges, but it did not open.

"Stepfather, Nyket, anyone, help us. The Spirit has possessed Oralia!"

The battering increased and the door shuddered under the onslaught. Taminisha lunged at the door and tried to lift the latch, but it jammed.

"Taminisha, what is happening? Open the door," her stepfather shouted.

"I cannot. It's jammed."

"Stand back," Nyket, bellowed through the heavy timber.

Taminisha moved away, and with two thuds and a crack, the door burst open.

Nyket barged into the room. Tokanin hobbled in his wake, his cane cracking against the flagstones.

Nyket shoved Taminisha aside. "Mother, speak to me."

Guttural utterances burst from Oralia as she writhed on the floor unable to free herself.

Tokanin threw his cane aside, hobbled forward and slapped at the grey tentacles. "Be gone, monstrosity. Be gone from my mate."

The grey tentacles melted and dissolved.

Oralia lay still.

Tokanin eased himself to his knees, with a grunt of effort, and cradled her limp body.

"Evil comes from within, my love. We must restore the Vaprus to Aikanshin's Guardianship before this unstoppable terror rises." Oralia's voice cracked and faded. She closed her eyes and slumped against her mate's chest.

"Move out of my way, Father, I will carry Mother to her rooms," Nyket said.

Tokanin accepted Nyket's suggestion and shuffled aside.

Nyket scooped his mother from the floor and strode from the room with her cradled against his broad muscular chest.

With a curt nod, Tokanin accepted Taminisha's hand to help him rise. She retrieved his cane. He took and without a word staggered after his son.

Alone in the room Taminisha fought to control the nausea clenching in her gut. The

ugly ambience haunting the room stalked her. She held back a whimper as she retrieved Potokin from his hiding place. Clutching him to her breasts, she hurried from the room on shaking legs. Tremors still fluttered through her long after she'd retreated to her chambers and brewed some herbal tea to calm her nerves.

She pondered Oralia's words. *Restoring the Vaprus Ellkiiyn to the Guardianship of Aikanshin was a good thing. What of the evil—did it threaten the whole of Aikanshin, or just Oralia and Tokanin? I do not understand the meaning in this evil message from Spirit.*

Taminisha shivered and swallowed the sourness in her mouth. She did not fear the physical world for she had Odakan and Tarlitek to protect her, and Jabrikan. However, how did one fight an unidentified ethereal entity? She wanted to ask Oralia the meaning, but held back; concerned her stepfather's soul mate would not want to relive her ordeal quite so soon.

Taminisha settled Jabrikan for sleep and walked back to the main hall. Odakan had not returned from whatever errand he'd been on earlier in the solar phasing and both Tokanin and Oralia remained closeted in their suite. She wandered up to Nyket's rooms. They were empty, and she guessed he had also stayed to comfort his mother.

Still unsettled by the strange events she retreated to her bed to wait for her soul mate's return. The lunor discs hung high in the sky when she heard him enter the room. She rolled over and watched him disrobe. It gave her immense pleasure looking at his naked sachan body. His smooth olive skin, sculptured chest, slim hips, long muscular legs and the manhood that hung loose, having no sheath to withdraw into. He released his mahogany coloured hair from its bun and ruffled it out around his single slim pair of pectenites. He threw back the covers and slipped in beside her.

She slid into his embrace, inhaling his scent. He pulled her close, increasing her awareness of his hardness. Her nerve endings tingled. Heat flooded her nether regions and her fingers twitched and ached with the need to touch him. He kissed her. She waited for the urge to mate ripple through her. With a tender caress, she stroked his shoulders and down his chest. He kissed her again—long and hard. The urge did not come. She continued her caress down his abdomen and clasped his hardness. He growled.

"I want you, Odakan. To love me. If the urge does not come, surely we can share intimacy in the sachan way."

He pulled away and sat on the side of the bed. "If the Ellkiiyn mating urge does not come then it does not. I will not do it the sachan way. The risk is too high. I do not want you to end up like my mother."

"But, Odakan, I'm happy to take the risk."

"I am not. I will not have you suffer and die to have a child the sachan way."

She touched his back. "The chances are small. They say it is very intimate and pleasant."

“No, Taminisha. If you do not accept my edict I will go sleep in the guest room.”

She clenched her jaw and stiffened her body as she put a space between them. In silent frustration, she glared at his rigid back. A painful lump clogged her throat as she fought back tears. She sighed and not for the first time acquiesced to his dictates. She sagged back onto the bed. *A simple cuddle is better than sleeping alone, I suppose.*

“All right, Odakan. Come hold me. I will take comfort in what you offer.” Her voice cracked.

Her mate sighed and crawled back under the covers. She turned her back on him and he slid up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “I love you, Taminisha. And this is why I forbid it.”

“Then why does the urge not come?”

Odakan shrugged.

She lay silent, reining in her desire and hurt. When she brought her emotions under control, she spoke. “Spirit attacked Oralia during her scrying attempts.”

Odakan jerked up and leaned over to see her face. “How bad? You were not hurt?”

“Oralia collapsed, but she appeared more frightened than hurt. It did not touch me.”

“I will tell my uncle you are not to assist Oralia anymore.”

“Tokanin will be hurt. He needs to see we support his mate and their joining.”

“Not at your expense. You don’t want to—do you?”

“No, Odakan.”

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When she woke at first light, her soul mate had already left their bed. Her head ached and her eyes burnt with the sting of unshed tears. His refusal to mate with her in the sachan way had again left her frustrated and unsettled. Others did it, and none she knew of had bred other than her late mother in law.

She lurched out of bed and padded up to the landing platform. The air was clear and crisp. The village stood dormant at this early hour with only a few wisps of smoke signalling life in the cottages.

She stared up toward the mist-shrouded mountain. “Spirit, badger him to change his stance. I need the intimacy.”

With her pleas released to the Great Spirit, she rolled and transmogrified, stretching leathery wings wide for the solar orb’s rays to soften and warm the fibrous flesh. She squinted across the empty platform, clenched her hands into fists then filled her lungs with cool air. With a tremendous huff, she spat a stream of flame across the landing platform. As the flames died, she saw the scorched vines shrivelled along the parapet. She grinned and swaggered across to inspect the damage. Satisfied with her mute statement of protest she rose into the soft pink and apricot of the solar awakening with a single flap of wings.

Below, the waters of the upper lake shimmered. She spun around and dived. The wind danced over her skin teasing its way beneath the edge of her scales. She snorted, eased her dive, tucked her wings against her back, then splashed into the water. It swept cold and refreshing over her skin.

Taminisha closed her transparent lids over her almond shaped eyes and studied the bottom of the lake. A flash of green caught her attention. She surged forward, pumping powerful legs through the water. Three small orrtaya danced in front of her. She snapped her powerful jaws, caught one, chomped her teeth down and gulped. *Mmmm, a delicious awakening repast.*

She chased the other two and picked them of one at a time. Her hunger sated, she surfaced, rolled over and floated. The rays from the solar orb warmed her scaled belly. With slow movement of her hands, she paddled slightly against the gentle current to keep her distance from the falls. She had no desire to tumble over and end up in the dark waters of Menishin Lake and a face-to-face meeting with Tarlitek's deity, the vicious insatiable, Orunikan.

The combination of solitude and fresh air eased her restlessness and ready to face her life again she paddled to the shallows and waded ashore. With a tremendous shudder of her huge frame, she dispersed the water from her hide and flicked her purple froxcomb until it stood up along her back. She rubbed her snout plates against the pebbles then scratched her lower jaw. She glanced up at the castle. *Time I went to check on Oralia. Don't want Tokanin to think I don't care.*

With a jump and a downward thrust of her powerful wings, she launched from a standstill and soared back to the landing platform. She quite expected Odakan to be waiting to chastise her, but the platform remained empty. Before she transmogrified she licked her ekta claw, dipped it into her locket and formed a habilan. She slipped the soft stretchy garment over her head and padded down the stairs.

Nyket answered the door to Oralia's rooms. He scowled at her. The expression emphasised his long, angular features and twisted his wide mouth into a narrow line. The tattoos on his forehead distorted. "So you deigned to come."

His words cut deep as he made no effort to greet her formally, as he should.

"I thought Oralia would appreciate some time to recover. She had an awful scare."

"By Orunan scales, I wish she would desist from such barbaric practices."

"She can't, Nyket, it's in her blood."

"You would say that. Well, it isn't in mine."

"Whatever you say, Nyket. Just let me pass to visit your mother."

He stepped aside, his green eyes flashing sparks down at her. "I'll leave you to it. Enjoy." He strode down the corridor, his back stiff and his broad shoulders square.

Sympathy for her step sibling flashed through her. He hated that his breeding made him a tainted Kurr—ostracised by all pure Ellkiyn.

She entered the room. Oralia huddled in the winged chair by the window. Rays from

the solar orb poured in and bathed her in a golden glow.

Taminisha knelt beside the chair. "How are you feeling?"

Oralia looked at her. "I'm afraid of what I have done. Tokanin has taken to his sick bed and all he will say is he's made a decision."

"A decision about what?" Oralia's hand felt cold and clammy when Taminisha touched it. She almost withdrew the touch.

"The future. The message is clear. We must right the wrong or suffer the consequences."

"What wrong?"

"The Vaprus Ellkiiyn must be restored. Tokanin has outstayed his welcome as Regent Guardian," Oralia muttered.

"But Tokanin has kept his promise to my mother. If Shydee had not died, Tokanin would have already restored the Guardianship. The delay is not Tokanin's fault."

Oralia sighed. "Spirit says its time. Go now, I need to rest."

Taminisha slipped from the room, her heart racing and every nerve ending tingling. She'd always known this time would come and she wondered how Nyket would respond if Tokanin rejected him for the role of Regent as Taminisha believed her would.