

## Dual Patronage

At the beginning of our fourth year in school on Kephlon, I received a packet in the mail. Within the packet was a letter bearing a wax seal imprinted with Crown Prince Marcus' ring.

"What's that?" Max asked from the kitchen where she continued to busily chop up vegetables for our evening meal.

"I'm not sure," I replied a bit absently as I sat down at the kitchen table and broke the seal. Opening the letter, I found it marked with a powerful personal rune. A potent bit of magic that still worked here despite the fact that magic wasn't supposed to function in Kephlon. When I got a chance, I'd have to ask Uncle Marcus about how he'd embedded enough magic in a little piece of paper and wax to carry such strong magic to me. If the wrong person read this, the rune etched across the paper and seal would destroy both the letter and the reader.

"What is it?" Max asked, walking around from the kitchen.

"Stay back," I warned with a frown. "There's a protection rune on this. If you manage to get close enough to read anything, you and the letter will disintegrate."

"Really?" she asked, halting her approach. "That's a lot of magic to fit into a letter. Although I suppose the seal *could* hold a substantial amount of power. Getting it to still function here in this world would be a neat trick to learn though."

"Yeah, that's what I was just thinking," I murmured absently while reading through the letter. It wasn't just a letter though. I now had a new set of orders and with them a new target.

"What's it about? The letter, I mean," she asked, returning to the kitchen.

"I'm going to have to leave for a while. Family business I'm afraid." My target was in a world called Dasod. It was a high tech world, even higher tech than Kephlon. While the people of Kephlon were mostly peaceful and had put the majority of their efforts into medical research, the people of Dasod were a bit broader of mind and scope. They had fleets of star ships and a whole host of other interesting technologies. And their leader was making a secret deal with House Kyber.

Normally, this wouldn't have been of concern. But House Kyber had allowed my crazy aunt, Talia, sanctuary. And with Dasod's interworld passages leading close to one of the main RTC trade routes.... It took a lot to get the king and the crown prince to decide to kill someone. There was undoubtedly more to it that I didn't know. But I'd come to trust their judgement. And Rayson Chromallin, Chairman of the Dasod High Command, would die because of that trust.

My cover would be a meeting with the Hierarch of Crovice. Cousin Vance had apparently fallen ill and I needed to take his place for trade talks. I'd actually have to transport there, meet the fellow I'd supposedly be having the talks with, leave without anyone outside the Hierarch knowing, work my way to Dasod, kill Chromallin, and then return so I could be seen at the end of the trade talks. Since Crovice didn't have much working technology, that would complicate my travel arrangements a bit.

The timing certainly could have been better. My classes this year were already intricate enough that they required a great deal of attention. I supposed I'd have to hire a tutor when I got back to help me catch up to the rest of the class. Well, to catch back up with the lead I had over the rest of my class. My thinking moved on to moving on. Dasod was only a six hour trip from here. Like House Kyber, they'd built a mass transit system through the interworld passageways and into the worlds adjoining their own.

On the other hand, Crovice was a two day trip. I'd be able to drive across a couple of worlds. After that, the car would stop functioning and I'd have to ride a horse or other fast animal to a world where I could use a transport mirror to get to Crovice.

For the trip from Crovice to Dasod, I could use a much faster method. I'd simply mirror back to the Castellum Regillia and walk the machine. It had been long enough since my last walk and the transport mirrors at the core of the machine could send me to any world in the Maze, regardless of what did and didn't work there. Once the job was done, under disguise, I could catch a mag-train from Daso Prime, Dasod's capital city, back across worlds to Urleska. Urleska had a nice mix of both magic and technology and from there I could do a couple of mirror jumps ending up with me back at the trade talks with the Hierarch in his palace on Crovice. A bit complicated but not overly so.

Max would be able to handle any company matters that cropped up in my absence. The entire board knew her now as did most of the important company officers. She shouldn't have any trouble with the house or with school either. The local half dozen Dyle Pharmaceuticals were doing well. We had two new factories opening soon to supply them and a hundred more stores just like the first six that were scheduled to be built in the near future. It was possible that some details might crop up that the construction teams or the VP of Expansions might come up with but if so she could handle it. And if not, we had more than enough money here to hire someone who could handle it.

Having meandered my way back to my bedroom, I picked up my communications mirror and punched in a particular rune combination. The mirror reflection cleared and in its place appeared the reflection from a very small mirror showing only a plain wooden stand with a black diamond sitting in it and a single piece of paper with block writing. A single word. Dasod. Reaching through the mirror, I pulled through the tiny piece of paper. When I touched it to the letter Uncle Marcus had sent, both turned to a very fine ash that drifted away under the influence of the house cooling system. I'd now confirmed that the mission was real and that I had accepted the job.

"Well?" asked Max when I returned to the dining room. She'd apparently gone back to cooking our dinner.

"As I mentioned earlier, I have to leave for a while," I frowned. "Family business. Vance got sick and some critical RTC trade talks are on the line. I've been summoned to do my familial duty."

"Ooh, can I come?" she asked.

"Not this time sweetie. The talks are delicate and the fellow I'll be dealing with is most peculiar. These talks will be just him and me. And since Vance got sick on us, that means I'll be starting the talks at a disadvantage."

"Oh. I guess that means that I'll be stuck here all by my lonesome," she groused, watching me carefully from the corner of her eye to see if there was a chance I might change my mind.

"Yep, all by yourself," I grinned. "Don't skip class and try not to bankrupt the company."

"Ha ha. That's so very funny," she muttered darkly. "When do you leave?"

"In about ten minutes," I replied, walking back to my room to pack a quick bag.

"You're going to miss dinner," she called.

"Sorry. It's unavoidable."

"Don't take the blue car," she told me when I returned with my overnight bag. "I might have a date Friday and if so, the sportster would be the perfect car for it."

"I was planning on taking the sedan anyway," I lied. "Who's the potential date?"

"Simon Phelan. He's in the microbiological classes. You'll probably be bumping into him somewhere along the line. Anyway, we had a nice talk the other day. Something more might come

of it.”

“Well good luck,” I told her with a kiss to the cheek. “Sorry about missing dinner. It smells really good.”

“Thanks,” she replied, giving me a quick hug, all traces of her sulk now vanished. “You be careful.”

“It’s just a little diplomatic discussion,” I told her with a reassuring smile.

More than half delirious, I staggered into a wall.

“Lights on!” Max called from across the room where she held an automatic pistol pointed at me. “Don’t move! You move and I’m going to shoot you. A lot!” She looked so cute.

“I’ve already been shot.” I was rather surprised that my words came out in a whisper instead of the conversational tone I’d been trying for.

“What did you say?” she demanded.

Rather than reply, I put my hand against the wall to steady me against the slow rocking of the house. It rather reminded me of how a big ship gently rolled with the waves. Sitting down seemed like a really good idea. And suddenly I was doing just that with no apparent transition time. Perhaps I’d accidentally teleported to the floor. For a long moment I sat blinking at the trail of blood leading up the wall. It ended down where my hand was still pressed against the aforementioned wall. The blood must have originally come from me pressing the hand against my wound.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Max demanded, having moved around close and right in front of me. The pistol wavered a bit but if she shot, she’d still hit me. Kudos for Maxine.

With the hand that wasn’t holding me upright, I pulled my hood back. Coming here had been a bad idea. But that bad idea had been the best I’d been able to manage.

“Angels above! Clarissa, what are you doing in that outfit. You’re hurt!” She tossed the pistol to the side and leaned forward to grasp my shoulders.

“I was sloppy,” I whispered. “You’ve got to help me get out of these clothes and to a hospital. Help me to my room.”

“What happened?” she asked, draping one of my arms over her shoulder. “And how are you hurt?” With her arm around my waist, she helped me to my feet. The room rolled and turned as she guided me through the undulating house to my room.

“I got shot Max,” I told her as an even worse dizzy spell made the room spin and whirl. “You’ve got to help me.”

“Of course I’ll help you,” declared immediately. “I’m going to call emergency services.”

“No, you’re not,” I replied firmly. “You’re going to help me change, than you’re going to do first aid, then you’re going to drive me to Raphael’s House, the big hospital on Hill Avenue. After that, you’re going to make sure that my visit to the hospital remains secret and you’re going to hide this suit so well that no one will ever find it except yourself. Then you’re going to find Daddy. Daddy’s good at coming up with excuses. You won’t mention the suit to him or anyone else. Lives depend on nobody knowing about the suit. Including your own.” Max stood there staring at me open-mouthed.

“I’m so sorry to drop all this on you but I didn’t have a choice. Get me one of my jogging suits.” She just stood there staring. “Move!” She startled and then quickly went to my dresser and

began pulling out clothes. “Underwear too. What I’m wearing is very unusual for this world. Normal clothing won’t further complicate your story.”

“What story?” she half cried, half demanded. “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is complicated. I’ve been shot in the side. The people who shot me know they hit me. However, they don’t know my identity and it is absolutely imperative that they never learn it. Therefore, you will get me into the hospital and make sure me being there goes on no records at all. You have access to the accounts. Spend as much as necessary to make it happen. Buy the hospital if you need to. Do whatever it takes.

“I know this is a lot to take in all of a sudden but I know you can do it. Be careful handling my darksuit. There are weapons hidden everywhere. Quite a lot of them are poisoned. Bring me that bag. We’ll put my suit in it and then you won’t have to mess with them beyond finding a place to stash it.”

“What is all this?” she asked, helping me out of my outfit.

“I’ll tell you everything later,” I promised as the room went for another spin. A moment later I found Max wrapping bandages around my mid-section. Evidently it had been a long moment. “Sorry about that. You understand everything that has to be done?”

“Yeah,” she muttered as she continued wrapping me in bandages. “Dress you, get you to the hospital, make sure your visit is kept secret, clean up the house, hide the bag, contact your father. And during all of that make sure no one knows about the bag. What am I supposed to tell them about how you were shot?”

“Tell them it’s none of their business and then give them several million reasons as to just why it’s none of their business,” I explained.

“Don’t you pass out on me again,” she told me almost angrily. “You scared me half to death earlier.”

“I’ll do my best but I make no promises.”

I came around in a fast moving car. Max was driving and muttering under her breath. “You’re doing really well,” I told her.

“What kind of weapon makes a burn like that?” she demanded, throwing me a quick, concerned look before returning her gaze to the near empty road. This late at night, there were very few people out.

“An energy rifle. High end military. I’m pretty sure it flash fried my kidney. Probably need to get that replaced later.”

“Oh, that’s not good,” she declared with another worried look.

“I know. And now I’m going to further complicate your evening.”

“No,” she wailed. “Don’t you dare die on me!”

“Okay, just because you asked,” I replied with a faint grin.

“Don’t play games with me! That’s not funny!”

“I know it’s not. I’m not going to die. Not any time soon anyway. However, you have to make sure that my treatment goes quickly. I have to walk out of the trade talks in Crovice in three days time. If I don’t, my alibi will be blown. More than that, it will attract attention. Very smart people with bad agendas in mind will realize that me not emerging from the trade talks might very well be a piece to the puzzle they are working on. They’ll then start trying to fit that piece into the

puzzle that is the answers they're trying to find. We do not want them doing that."

"We can't get you a new kidney grown in only two days!" she declared, sounding almost hysterical. "Medicine is well advanced here, but I've seen the commercials and watched their broadcasts. They can't do that with the technology they have."

"I believe you're right," I agreed with a frown. "Sorry, I'm not thinking very clearly now. You and Daddy should be able to work something up between you."

I next awoke in a white hospital room filled with green plants. Daddy and Max slept in chairs across from me. How much time had passed? My side still hurt abominably. All things being equal, I was rather pleased to discover this.

"Hey you two. Wake up," I whispered. My mouth had that nasty, dry cottony feeling you get from being under certain anesthetics. Daddy woke up with a start. Seeing me awake, he looked around, stood up, and walked to the door. After a quick glance down the hall, he closed and locked it. With a quick look at me he turned to the still sleeping Maxine. However, instead of waking her, he pulled out a sonic pistol and shot her. The sound was directional and would have been too high to hear even had it been pointed at me.

"That had better be set to stun," I declared with more strength than I'd thought I had.

"It was. I couldn't risk her overhearing anything," he replied, putting the little pistol away. "Now, tell me what happened."

"What did Max tell you?" I asked. "And is there a glass of water around here somewhere?"

"Yes," he answered. "Let me get it for you." He then helped me drink. Much better. "Now," he resumed, "Tell me what happened."

I thought for a moment before slowly beginning, "It all started with a letter..."

"You owe me an explanation," Max told me quietly a couple of weeks later. With a quiet sigh, I set aside my medical books. I'd known this crossroads had been just around the corner ever since I made the decision to go to Max for help after I'd been shot. And now suddenly here we were and I still didn't know what I was going to do.

"Yes," I agreed. "You're right. I promised to explain what happened. I suppose I've been putting it off." I've never had a sister before Max. And after this conversation, I might very well go back to not having one. The thought made me want to cry. Of course, there were a lot of options open to me. Across the worlds there was sufficient magic and technology at my disposal to make her forget the whole thing ever happened. But I wasn't sure I could live with myself if I did that to her. It would be a very easy thing to do... which made me even more leery of doing it.

"I couldn't help but notice that we kept not having this conversation," she replied with a frown. "I want to understand. You hinted your life was dangerous before. But there's obviously a lot more to it than that. That suit you wore... I looked it over. It's not a warrior's suit with a warrior's weapons. It's meant for concealment. And the weapons in it are those of an assassin. Am I right?" Her eyes said she wanted me to deny it. But her head already knew the truth.

"You are correct," I admitted quietly. "I sometimes kill people. Being a rich socialite with royal blood is the perfect cover. Nobody would believe it." Her face fell but no tears came.

“So it’s all been a lie?” she breathed.

“No, it most certainly has not,” I told her firmly.

“How can you say that?” she demanded as some of her usual fire returned to her eyes. “You’re here on this world to better follow Raphael’s path. That’s the path of healing! Murder is not one of her basic tenets. How can you poison people one minute and set about healing them the next? How can it not be a lie?”

For a long moment I was silent. Taking a deep breath, I tried to explain, “Some people are a bane to the existence of other thinking, feeling people....”

“What gives you the right to choose who lives and who dies?” she demanded. Had it been anyone else, her tone would have angered me. But this was Max and I was more concerned that I’d already driven her out of my life. And I liked having a sister. I didn’t want to lose her.

“Mostly I do not. I receive my orders from elsewhere. Those people weigh every possible alternative choice before deciding that someone must die. Calling me in indicates that all other options have failed.”

“Who gives them the right to make that decision?”

“What makes you think that anyone has an inherent right to live?” I countered. Momentarily taken aback, she took a sip of her wine to give herself a moment to re-gather her thoughts. It didn’t take her long.

“The Creator gave everyone life. By murdering someone, you’re taking that gift away.”

“Yes, but we cannot know why that person was given life. The possibilities are endless and we simply have no way of knowing. Therefore, when a person does very bad things, we kill them. I’m speaking both from the point of view of an assassin as well as that of societal head. If we do not kill them, they will destroy many more lives. To use a medical analogy, it is better to kill a few cancer cells than to allow them to destroy those healthy cells around them.”

“That sounds like so much justification to me,” she declared.

“Does it? Let me put this in more common terms. A man rapes and beats to death three young boys. Which is the bigger crime... ending his life or allowing him the chance to possibly free himself and rape and kill more young boys?”

“That’s not a fair question!”

“Fair or not, it is a *real* question. This was a question that had to be answered. It happened once ten years ago in Regillus and an all too similar case took place two years ago in Tas Vibbon but that man didn’t kill the children... he just raped them. What would you have done had it been up to you?”

“How should I know?” she demanded defensively. “I wasn’t there. I don’t know details of what happened.” So, for the next half hour, I told her in gruesome, graphic detail what the first man had done to those little boys. A much paler, more subdued Max shuddered when I finished.

“There are treatments....” she began quietly, but she failed to finish the sentence aloud.

“So you would send him off to a clinic?” I asked.

“Yes. No. I’m not sure,” replied a little on the angry side.

“It’s much easier to be self-righteous when you don’t have to come up with real-life solutions to these problems.” She flushed red and her eyes took on an even more angry cast. “Perhaps I’m being unfair... or perhaps you haven’t thought this out as much as you have other problems. Sometimes it’s easier to be an idealist and use your heart to decide rather than your head.

“Let me make it simpler for you,” I continued. “You couldn’t decide what to do with the man. The courts did not have that luxury. They had to do something with him. Either release him

back into society, imprison him, treat him, or kill him. Sometimes there are combinations of the first three choices that are available to the courts. Depends on where you are.

“Regillus had the resources available to the court system that would allow them to treat the fellow while he served jail time. This is the option that was chosen for him. He had regular visits with trained professionals for the next six years. Towards the end of that last year, he took one of his counselors hostage and escaped. He then raped and killed two more young boys while he was at large.

“The fellow in Tas Vibbon was a little different,” I continued. “He didn’t care if his victims were girls or boys. So long as they were young and defenseless, he wasn’t choosy. The judge in Tas Vibbon had the man publicly emasculated, flogged, and eventually put to death by the sword. There hasn’t been a child raped in Tas Vibbon since.” I could see Max was about to point out some things so I beat her to it.

“Sure, Tas Vibbon is much smaller than Regillus. And back home I’m sure that the murderer initially escaping didn’t play too significant a role in Regillus’ slowly increasing murder rates. I wasn’t trying to imply that it had. But there’s no doubt that the severity of the punishment in Tas Vibbon deterred others from attempting the same perversion.”

“He didn’t kill the kids though. And yet he was punished much more harshly than the one who did!” she protested.

“True,” I agreed. “But he destroyed their innocence. He abused their bodies and damaged their souls. It will take years for those children to recover from what they suffered... if they ever do. Pity not the abuser but rather the victim.”

“But what if he had been abused as a child himself?” she asked, most of her anger now gone.

“What if he was? He had years to recover. And he would have been in a position to know better than anyone what damage he was doing. No. What it all comes down to is that this man was responsible for his own actions. He and only he was to blame. He built up a very dark balance by attacking those children. The judge made sure that he paid that balance in full. And part of that payment included ending his life.”

We sat in silence for a while.

“So,” Max began quietly, looking into the flames of the distant fireplace, “You’re saying that you only kill rapists and murderers and others who are a danger to society?”

“I’ve never been asked to judge anyone in my role as Princess of Edotoma. That’s fallen under the judicial branch of the democracy and frankly I’m glad. However, in some of my other roles I have killed people. Sometimes face-to-face. Sometimes while they slept or were otherwise unsuspecting. In every one of these cases, many more people are still alive because of my actions.”

“Or so you believe,” she responded with a frown.

“Yes. So I believe.” Max still stared into the fire. With a worried frown I forced myself to continue. “If you continue traveling with me, chances are that someday you’re going to have to choose who lives and who dies. Either by your hand or by simple inaction. I have tried and succeeded thus far in keeping you away from those situations. But my homeland has enemies. My family has enemies.” With a sigh, I told her, “And yes, *I* have enemies of my own. Some of these enemies want to kill me. Others would like nothing better than to throw me into a deep, dark dungeon cell to rot.”

“Maybe they’re right to do so,” she whispered. One of the things I loved about Max was her innocence. But innocence cannot stand intact against reality. I was about to destroy part of what I loved about her. Would something just as wonderful but more mature grow to replace it? I could

only hope.

“Get your traveling gear. It’s past time. We’re going to take that walk on the wild side.”

“Sure,” she responded in a quiet, toneless voice. “But tell me one thing. How can you truly profess to follow in Raphael’s footsteps? You choose to heal only the victims. The ones who desperately need healing are those committing the crimes you’ve spoken about.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” I admitted. “Maybe I’m following the easy path. However, there are a lot fewer good people who need healing when the bad people are all dead. All those bad people might be healed. There might be some way of untwisting their minds and souls that will make them good, productive members of society. But frankly, I don’t have the time to make the effort. My life is quite busy enough as is. I’m not going to waste resources on buildings, land, doctors, nurses, and all the support personnel needed just so they can try to bring back a few murderers and rapists from the brink of damnation. I leave that most difficult job to the angels.

“And speaking of angels, Raphael is not the only angel I follow. While I occasionally pray to all the archangels, Raphael is indeed the one I pray to the most. However, I have a second patron angel whom I pray to almost as much.

“Michael?” she guessed, looking interested despite her determination to be upset with me.

“No. I do indeed pray to Michael sometimes. He is the archangel of battle and the right hand of the Creator. While I’ve done a lot of fighting and have even participated in a war or two, I’m not dedicated to that path.

“No, the other archangel I follow is Azrael. The archangel of death. Life and death. Served from either hand. There’s been times I didn’t know how to give them. I’ve failed to save lives and I’ve failed to kill people who so very badly needed killing. It’s been a long time since I failed to end the life of one of my targets. I wish I could say the same about saving lives but there are simply too many ways for the human body to fail. That’s why I’m here at this school.”

“I don’t understand you at all,” Max told me with a frustration tinged sigh.

“I know. That’s why we’re going on a trip.”

“Where to? You mentioned the wild side. Where’s that?”

“The wild side is just a term for a bad world. In this particular case it’s a series of bad worlds controlled by one of the great houses.”

“Which great house?”

“You’ll see. You’ll see.”