

Through the Hostage

Prologue:

The blue-black hair was slightly wavier than she had remembered, and the deep green of the eyes colder. Otherwise, excepting the changeful pattern of scars, her commander looked remarkably similar to the figure she recalled, a little taller than she and currently noticeably dusty from some errand that had obviously sent her outside the Base. There was likely little point in asking where she had been: it was a question that her command hadn't had answered in the last six orbits, and it seemed unlikely that it would be now. Face to face at last, after several days of close observation:

"I want to speak to you," Taiva said abruptly, tilting her head slightly to meet Khyria's eyes, as she had always had to do, even when their respective heights had been rather less.

The winged black eyebrows rose sardonically, and Khyria Ilan, Cortu and sole commander of Wildcat Cortia, looked her over with vague irony. "For which I have developed a second shadow. I take it that until I either indulge you or injure you, I will continue to trip over you at every intersection?"

"It's important," Taiva said doggedly, despite the chill that the other's indifferent tone set in her.

Khyria's expression did not change. "I'm sure it is," she said soothingly. The mockery in her eyes was disconcerting. "So is what I am doing later. I suppose I might as well kill two birds with one stone, to use an old saying rather literally. Meet me here in two hours ... and we will see."

She swung neatly past Taiva and her door's locks engaged emphatically. Taiva scowled at the door. The locks were not necessarily a problem: in her state as unofficial and unsanctioned leader of the Cortia, getting at people who had locked her out had always been a vital hobby. Unlike the Cortu, who had access to any of the Cortia's quarters, she had frequently had to get in the hard way to persuade her colleagues of her logic. On the other hand, it might do no harm to do as she had been told, at least until Khyria failed to appear.

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Taiva was early to the rendezvous. From a remote watch on Khyria's quarters, she knew that no one had gone in or out through the door. How much of a limit that might put on Khyria's freedom of movement, she had no idea. She, and the rest of the Cortia, had barely exchanged more than a few words with their commander since early in basic training.

Exactly as her time-sense twitched at her, the Cortu's door opened and Khyria appeared, neatly framed by the harsh lighting behind her, immaculately uniformed and lacking any humanizing trace of the dust that had so marked her appearance earlier. Her green eyes fixed on Taiva, and she smiled coldly.

"On time, I see," she murmured in an odd tone of voice, and then her smile widened to an untrustworthy, brittle expression. "As time ticks, so does it pass – are you so careless of your own mortality?"

Taiva stared at her, caught by something in her obscure phrasing, but Khyria strode lithely past her, and the moment broke as she hurried to fall into place a stride behind and to the left of her commander.

"Where are we going?" she asked, but received no answer. Rather than stretch her tenuous welcome, she kept her silence thereafter, trying to mark their route in her memory. They were heading towards the edge of the Trainee area, which was sealed from the quarters of the full

Cortii by long custom and some very heavy security. Although she asked no further questions, her curiosity itched.

Abruptly, Khyria halted by an ornament, and crouched to fiddle ostentatiously with a boot top, a dark shadow in her black uniform beside the heavy holo base. A second later, she straightened, and even Taiva, who had been watching her, could not be certain whether or not she had picked something up. Exactly ten seconds later, the corridor went dark, and Taiva blinked, forcing her eyes to adapt and follow the tall figure glowing faintly with infra-red just ahead of her. Khyria was doing something at the wall just ahead of them, and there was an audible click as a hatch disengaged.

The glowing figure turned and looked at her, and then stood aside, indicating the open aperture with an obvious gesture. Taiva took a deep breath and obeyed, a keen apprehension eating at her self-possession. The opening closed behind her, and she was aware of Khyria, standing very close to her in what must be the close confines of an emergency conduit.

“Don’t tell me that you do that every time you come this way,” she said, almost involuntarily.

“Actually, I do,” Khyria’s voice said coolly. “It is the easiest, and therefore the most obvious route to where I am going. The aim is to use it as little as possible.” She moved past Taiva and continued walking, moving as surely in the pitch darkness as she had in the lit corridors.

It seemed like a long time later before they emerged from the subterranean maze in a completely unfamiliar part of Base. The corridors were noticeably wider and higher than was normal in the areas of Base that Taiva was accustomed to, and she cast a puzzled look at Khyria’s impervious back.

The other halted at an unmarked double door and laid her hand on the plate for ID. The door slid obediently open and she stepped through, Taiva hard on her heels. They were standing in a small cubicle, one that looked like a prosthetic extension to the impermeable material of Base itself. There was no further ID check here, just a simple swing door that opened under Khyria’s hand.

The room went silent as they appeared, and all heads momentarily turned. Taiva felt her pulse accelerate as the eyes fastened on her, along with the Lords alone knew how many weapons. Someone stepped towards them, ignoring her completely.

“Wildcat,” he said quietly. “Do you take responsibility for the outsider you bring with you?”

Khyria glanced over her shoulder for a moment, a small, cold smile on her lips, and a chill squirmed in Taiva’s guts. Some animal instinct told her that Khyria could have her killed now with a word, and the other’s careless words of that afternoon came back to her like a blow. ‘...might as well kill ...two birds with one stone ...’

Some change in her expression must have given her away, because Khyria laughed aloud before she turned away and answered. “She is my responsibility,” in the same formula as her challenger. The man half-bowed and withdrew, and noise gradually sprang up around them.

Taiva glanced around, and realised with a slight shock where they must be. Had she not been so involved with the immediate prospect of getting her head blown off, the odd proportions of the hallways and doors would have given it away. They were in one of the storage areas of Base, and a very long way from anywhere she could legally be seen. The chill ran down her spine, raising the hairs on her neck.

“Doesn’t a little suspense add to the fun?” Khyria’s voice asked mockingly from the other direction, and she turned to find her commander leaning insolently against the impromptu doorframe, a flame of some emotion that Taiva was unable to identify lighting her dark eyes and curling one corner of her mouth.

“You’re playing with me,” she accused, her nerves too unsettled to think of anything more intelligent to say. A corner of Khyria’s mouth curled.

“How annoying of me,” she agreed, and shrugged. “You wanted to come with me; here you are.” The mocking smile slid out again. “I hope you weren’t planning on an early night.”

Taiva swallowed, well aware of what Khyria was referring to. Her chances of getting back alone were minimal. Having neatly underscored her helplessness, Khyria’s edgy smile widened, her eyes almost black despite the lights. “You might surprise yourself, and enjoy it.”

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The harsh, functional lights seemed too bright, and the conversations had grown gradually louder, although the noise level was still low. The room was full, but not crowded, a sea of black Cortian uniforms and hard, tanned faces. Taiva’s self-imposed mission to try and get a private word with her commander had so far met with a complete lack of success.

None of those surrounding her was Trainees. She and Khyria, wherever the hells Khyria might now be, wore the only ringed Cortia brooches in the room. On the other hand, so far no one had challenged her presence. She had drunk quite a lot by that point, Khyria’s fault, but not enough to drown the sense of acute unease that dogged her. Out of a lot of rumours that regularly flew concerning Wildcat’s mainly absent Cortu, one that recurred frequently enough that it might even have some truth to it was that she was a member of one of the Base’s more obscure and less pleasant cults, known only as the hareni.

Taiva had had to look the word up when she had first heard it. It had fallen out of use long ago, after the development of genetic alteration to a useful level, and meant, literally, berserker. The word held unpleasant connotations even in its pronunciation. It was coming to her, inevitably, that this place where Khyria had brought her must be a gathering place of the hareni, and that the rumours must be true. Neither was a particularly comforting thought.

A movement in the crowd pulled her inexorably with them, and she found herself standing in the second row of a group gathered around a small table, neatly positioned under one of the clinical lights set in the ceiling. Taiva jerked reflexively in surprise as she caught sight of her Cortu, sitting opposite a stocky, dark man who watched her with an odd intentness across the empty table. Something about his attitude, the setting, declared some kind of contest, and she edged closer to the table, catching the tension in the air.

Khyria was lounging deceptively casually in her chair, her dark hair falling across her angular, tanned face, which gleamed with a light film of perspiration in the stuffy room. Her vivid green eyes were the only animation in her face, focussed on the weapon that lay directly in the beam of the spotlight in the middle of the surface. The weapon was archaic; a beam weapon of a model so old that she barely recognised it, the butt covered in red material instead of the customary grip, and it had been carefully refurbished.

Very slowly, her thoughts running together like rainwater on a rock, Taiva realised what she was seeing, in the middle of all the intense attention: the preparation for a charan challenge. The urgent jostling of wager-laying all around her suddenly revolted her, the forceful sensation sobering her abruptly. She flung her hair out of her face and shoved through to Khyria’s side, leaning to speak urgently into her ear.

“Don’t be a fool. Come away. This is suicide.”

For a moment, she thought that the other hadn't heard, or at least was going to ignore this interruption from her Cortia as she had all the others, and then her commander's head slowly turned.

"Not for me," Khyria said. Her laugh sounded dead. "The Lords love me. I am the one who cannot be killed."

There was a roar of acclaim from those standing near enough to hear the low exchange, and rough hands dragged Taiva away, abandoning her on the outskirts of the crowd. Taiva struggled to her feet, desperation driving her. It was far from part of her plan to have Khyria die now, before she had even had the chance to speak to her that she had been planning for so long. It occurred to her, coldly, that it might just as easily be she who died if she pressed the issue now, and that had also not figured in her plans. These were, after all, the hareni, infamous across Base whenever more than three Cortians had time to gossip, and she had already interfered with the charan match. She hesitated for a bare second, and then wormed her way back into the crowd.

It parted for her, surprisingly, and there were a few laughs. In the centre, surrounded by a ring of space, a woman was holding the weapon at arms' length, the barrel aimed at the ceiling. Taiva, her eyes drawn inexorably to the pattern of beam scars there, wondered with a chill just how often Khyria had sat where she was, watching this woman fire the five ceremonial shots at the ceiling. Five, the holy number of the Councils, the number of the Heavens and the Hells. The incongruous thought struck her wholly undesired, even as the last of the shots made another small, charred mark on the smooth ceiling material.

Desperation gnawed at her. Without Khyria Ilan, whatever she might have done to herself in the intervening years, the Cortia would most assuredly be wiped out in short order, and she along with them.

The crowd stirred as the man who sat opposite Khyria stood, a shadowed figure in the graphic clarity of the white overhead spotlights. Ilan lounged, wholly unmoving in her chair, only her eyes following him. The man took up the little weapon, and the crowd fell deathly silent. The silver insignia on his shoulders flashed, once, as he inhaled deeply. Taiva could see his expression, oddly blank, as he put the muzzle to his temple and rapidly pushed the firing stud. There was a flash, and a noise like a cough from the man, even as he collapsed across the table.

The crowd bayed, closing over him, and Taiva momentarily lost sight of Khyria. She shut her eyes. When she opened them again, she found Ilan watching her, and their eyes met for a single second before the other's unmoved green stare returned to the melee around the table, as expressionlessly as if the death that she had just watched were no more than a 3-D show.

The crowd suddenly withdrew and the woman who had originally prepared the laser reappeared. She laid the thing on the table with a small click. Taiva stared at it, noting the picayune details of the way the light reflected from the barrel ... the bloodstains, fresh and only slightly darker than the material, on the butt. The crowd fell silent, watching avidly. The woman fired it again, with the same accustomed, ceremonial flourish, and the attention centred, ravening, on the single, slouching figure in the chair.

Ilan stood, a performer's movement in slow motion, and picked the antique laser up, her long fingers curling comfortably around it. There was silence, until Taiva could hear her own breath as it caught in her throat.

As if she were in Ilan's mind, her imagination detailed the feel of the rough material of the butt against her palm, the sticky wetness of the fresh blood soaked into it, the metallic scent of blood, and the weight of the slim barrel following the line of her forefinger. Ilan brought the

barrel up in a swift, flashing movement, and for one endless split second, the barrel resting against her temple, she met Taiva's stare.

Ilan pushed the stud, and there was nothing. She was still standing there, disengaging the faulty firing chip with quick, clean gestures, a faintly wolfish smile on her lips. Taiva dimly heard the crowd yelling, around the small, dazed area that was occupied only by herself and the flick of Ilan's finger. Ilan laid the small weapon carefully back on the table and Taiva fastened on the movement of her long, scarred hands as they left the light, coming out of her trance abruptly.

By the time she reached the other side of the table, through the drunk and festive crowd, Ilan had disappeared again. Taiva looked around for her dark head, and saw instead the flash of a blade, descending. Reflexive force of habit sent her rolling out of the way across the floor, between the feet of the crowd. The knife followed, and Taiva became acutely aware that she was in a strange area, with no allies except the dubious presence of her commander.

She dodged upright and sidestepped as the blade streaked towards her ribs. Without any warning, there was an empty hand outstretched between her and the knife, and the metal halted its downwards sweep abruptly, a hairs' breadth from that open palm, and there was a splurge of talk. Taiva stayed where she was, the blood thundering in her ears, the adrenalin racing through her system and depriving her of any rational reaction.

Gradually it came to her that someone was talking, and she turned her head to look at her rescuer, certain in her own mind that the kind of arrogance that would put its own empty hand between her and a knife could surely only belong to one person. Ilan's profile was directed elsewhere, and her tone sounded entirely undisturbed.

"...not in the least. I brought her to amuse us, not to form another ceremonial sacrifice to the gods of custom and chance," that admonishing voice said carelessly, and her hand moved to grip Taiva's shoulder, steering her towards the door. Close to, it was possible to guess at how much she must have drunk, although her hand was steady and bordering on painful in its insistence.

Suddenly, the powerful grip released, and Taiva spun round at her companion's sudden movement, just in time to see a small throwing knife end its trajectory some five metres away in the eye of her attacker. He fell like a tree, his laser still in his outstretched hand, and Ilan turned easily back, in thundering silence, to recover her knife. She tossed it up in the air with a careless smile, looking around.

"By the hells, he had a one-track mind," she said with a laugh, and amazingly, laughter followed them out of the door. Taiva leant against the wall in the dark and deserted corridor, controlling a violent urge to be sick in reaction.

"Not a particularly good place to regret your excesses," her commander's ironic voice said quietly, from not very far away. "You and I are both going back to Wildcat." Taiva hesitated, and the other shrugged carelessly, looking down at her with some amusement. "Ah, the hells with it. Come or not, as it please you."

She swung off down the high-ceilinged corridor, her black uniform merging almost seamlessly into the gloom, picked out only by the silver insignia. Taiva pushed herself off the wall and hurried after her. Of one thing she was certain, and that was that without Khyria, she had no chance of finding her own way back to the Trainee quarters.

Khyria, apparently oblivious to her presence, picked her own high-speed route back to their corridor. Hurry as she might, Taiva emerged from that subterranean run just in time to watch her

commander's door close behind her. She walked over to it, and took a deep breath. Unexpectedly, it was not locked, and gave easily at her request.

She stood immobile in the opening, assessing the darkened room ahead of her, half-surprised that outlined against the brightly lit corridor as she was, she wasn't already dead. She jumped violently when the sardonic voice spoke thinly from the shadows not two metres beyond her.

“Don't hesitate, I beg you, on the edge of such an experience.”

Taiva took a deep breath, trying to ignore the fact that her hands were trembling, and walked in. It took most of her severely depleted stock of self-control not to turn and walk straight out again when she heard the door close automatically again behind her.

The Cortu's rooms were bare of anything except the minimum of regulation furniture, bleak and dark, obviously a place whose owner spent most of their time elsewhere. It was, she supposed, a fair enough description of Ilan's rooms.

Since about an orbit after the formation of the Cortia, when Khyria Ilan had disappeared into one of the most infamous and secretive of the many underground factions on the Base, none of them had seen very much of their elusive leader. Now, six orbits later, they were on the verge of undergoing the tests that would either kill them or confirm them as a full Cortia, and she had reluctantly come to the unpalatable conclusion that they needed Ilan. Taiva was bitterly aware that she could not discipline the Cortia. She had managed to coax, persuade and blackmail most of them through the bare minimum of training, but she had no real authority over them. Ilan was their only, outside chance of making it through the Crossing tests alive, and Taiva was the only one who was prepared, or indeed cared, enough to take the risk of trying to return Khyria to her place at their head.

After the evening she had just passed, she was sickeningly aware that it might not be possible. Whatever had driven Ilan to abandon her command and take refuge among the likes of Senja Ventiva and the hareni, it had altered her to a frightening degree from the person Taiva thought she had known.

“What was the point of that little display?” she demanded. Her voice was too loud, calling echoes from the empty rooms, and Khyria allowed the silence that followed it to hang uncomfortably before pacing out of the shadows to confront her.

Lazy, shadowed emerald eyes scanned her from head to feet, amused. “The charan?” Khyria's mouth curled in amusement. “Don't make too much of it.” Those eyes seemed to be the only point of life in the dark mask of her face, and the single light still burning in the dim rooms seemed to ignite a green flame in them.

Taiva stared at her, trying to reach past the barrier of the unknown that hung between them like a barrier of tainted smoke. She had been prepared for a lot of things when she had begun to consider this, but it was gradually dawning on her that nothing could have prepared her for the reality. Behind that immutable mask of a face and the mocking eyes lay someone she didn't know, someone whose aura of power, half-shielded and potent, only added to the sense of seething danger in the neglected quarters. The arguments she had hatched in her imagination for this contingency had been based on an appeal to the Cortu she had known, and even had she been able to recall them from whichever chasm had taken her logical thought processes, she doubted that they would move this Ilan to more than laughter.

“You're crazy,” she whispered at last, half-mesmerised. “Someone died tonight, and you still pushed that trigger. You're as vulnerable to dying as anyone else!”

“I do hope so,” Khyria’s voice answered thoughtfully, and then the gorgeous, false smile flashed. “The problem is, I seem to be incapable of even that simplest feat.” She let the ringing silence created by that casual remark sink in, and looked directly at Taiva. “So why are you cast up here? To appeal to my better nature?”

Taiva could see her clearly in the shadows created by the single overhead light, a dark shadow emphasised by the silver touches at waist, neck and shoulder. There was a short, sickening pause.

“So,” Taiva said in a coaxing voice, hoping that the racing of her heart wasn’t audible. If Ilan chose to kill her now, there would be no witnesses and no argument, and no one who would regret her. “You’re looking for the easy way out. I went with you, Cortu, to find out what makes you tick, and that’s it, isn’t it?” There was no reaction at all from the shadowy figure that stood so close, and Taiva persisted, trying to ignore the icy sweat trickling down her spine. “It looks as if you haven’t got the courage to lead, Cortu. But no one else can, any more. And if the Cortia doesn’t have a leader in the next few months, you’ll die anything but easily, Cortu. The Councils aren’t known for their merciful deaths.”

The disinterested voice sounded entirely unmoved by her taunt. “Wind it up, my dear. Bearing in mind, if you can, that insults are my daily bread, but strategy doesn’t appear to be yours.”

Taiva took a deep breath, which dissipated uselessly. Her voice emerged ragged and unsupported, and was instantly certain that Khyria had taken full note. “The Councils aren’t currently interested in the doings of a Trainee Cortia. But they will be, quite soon, and they’ll want to know where you are. I doubt that ‘the harení’ will be a satisfying answer. The Cortia needs you, not me, to discipline them.”

“Inspirational,” Khyria’s husky voice said with mild amusement. “It will have occurred to you,” the light, flaying voice continued, “that it matters not at all to me what happens?”

Taiva’s nerve cracked. “Unless you take command now, all of us will die!” she shouted, driven by her need to somehow force some response she could understand from behind the mask. The echoes died, and she realised that she was trembling. Ilan’s voice sounded entirely adamant.

“With me as their leader, they will die even more certainly. No.”

“With no leader at all, they have no chance,” Taiva replied. Her voice was shaking, and she struggled to master it, humiliated. Quite apart from anything else, she was coldly certain that emotion, any emotion, would be less than useless to sway Ilan. She could feel cold sweat on the palms of her hands, and rubbed them on her uniform. Despair was sliding insidiously past her best efforts to keep it at bay, despair and a kind of sick emptiness.

“So why are you, in any case, the lone outpost of virtue in the entire Cortia?” Khyria’s detached voice asked in a tone of idle interest. “Why bother to risk it? They’d probably kill you for your pains if they knew what you were trying to do.”

“Because this Cortia could survive,” Taiva said vehemently. Even as she heard the words, she realized that she was being led, and regretted it. “And I don’t see why the hells I should let my life be ruled by their lack of interest.”

Khyria’s mocking laughter set ambition and hope at bay. “Well, that was heartfelt, at least,” she said slowly, and paused, the detached amusement tilting her lips into a smile that was anything but reassuring. “All right, my dear. I will make you an offer. You believe that you will die without me, and I believe that you will die with me.” The green eyes snared her own, hypnotically. “Since proving the argument either way might pose certain practical difficulties, I suggest a metaphor. We will have a charan challenge, you and I, and if I die, you will become

the Cortu, with all my rights and authority. If we should both live, I will give you my word to lead.” She stepped out into the light, and watched Taiva’s pale face with faint, academic amusement. She didn’t, Taiva noticed, bother to detail the outcome should Taiva die.

Taiva swallowed, her mind racing as she stared at her commander. Ilan was deranged, she must be. The offer might sound as if it was made on impulse, but she distrusted her assumptions concerning Ilan: they had already almost killed her this evening, perhaps more than once. Perhaps Ilan wanted to kill her as well, and get this last nagging reminder of the responsibilities she had abandoned out of her chosen way to oblivion. That monstrous, apparently casual offer reinforced her unfocussed sense of dealing with something entirely alien, something unpredictable and inexplicable, and the chill feeling of danger descended on her like a wet cloak.

She imagined the feel of the butt of the weapon in her hand, and the act of pushing the trigger, and felt physically sick. Every instinct she possessed screamed against it. It was the slight, interested smile on Khyria’s face that finally decided her. The Cortu was coldly certain that she was incapable of doing it, and that infuriated her.

“All right,” she said quickly. “I agree.” The adrenalin-fuelled chill seemed to open a churning gulf in her guts, and she tossed her hair back out of her eyes, furious with her own fear now as much as with Ilan. She had never understood why the tradition of charan had hung on so long among the Cortii, and had never seen a match before tonight, nor wished to. Now, within the space of a single watch, she not only seen one but contracted to take part in one. It was as if the walls of her world had fallen and the chill wind of a reality she had never realised existed was searching her out.

Ilan was watching her, a shadow of the reckless laughter still hovering about her mouth. “So, you have found out one thing about yourself that you didn’t know before,” her rough, ironic voice said. “There are many things, not all of them rational, which can alter your views, and that just in the space of a few minutes.”

Taiva stared at her, the unexpectedness of the words catching her unawares. There was something there that had twitched at her attention, something that she should follow up, but the insight was lost in a fresh surge of anger at the mockery.

“I didn’t think that you would agree,” Khyria said, the intent green eyes watching her, with a shade of the reckless, unnerving laughter still hovering in them, but there was something else there now, something unfathomable. “What precisely makes you so desperate to avoid the recruitment pool that you are prepared to go this far?”

“The pool?” Taiva looked at her, dazed by the sudden question.

“The pool,” Ilan repeated patiently. “You surely don’t imagine that with or without my inspiring leadership, the Cortia would be completely exterminated in the Crossing. You would simply end up in the pool, to be recruited by the next Cortia in need of trainees.”

“Why should we end up in the pool?” she snapped. “I’d sooner die than end up as someone’s second-rate derian or fodder for the magaii laboratories!” That struck a reaction, a flash of something in Khyria’s eyes that took her breath away, but the other was already moving, pacing restlessly even as her sardonic laughter sounded again.

“Ambition, in fact,” she said idly, answering her own earlier question. “Why don’t you just kill me now, and take over?”

“You could deal with me without trying,” Taiva said aloud, unaware until she heard the words that she was going to speak.

Khyria’s smile was not reassuring. “I probably could, but I wasn’t proposing to fight you. Draw a knife, if you can, and kill me, and the Cortia is yours, to do with as you wish.”

The opaque, unreal feeling descended around her again as Ilan's green eyes fastened on hers, and she moved almost without her own volition, drawing one of her knives and laying it against the line of Ilan's jaw. The slightest movement of her wrist from there would slit the jugular in an instant. The other did not move or speak, merely watched her, the little smile playing around her lips, and suddenly the moment broke like a snapped thread and she turned away from the threatening insanity, sheathing the knife and closing her eyes.

It was what she had dreamed of, many times over, to have Ilan out of the way and the Cortia in her own hands, but when it came to it, she couldn't kill Ilan. Not like this, and also because whatever she might wish to believe, she knew all too well that she could never lead the Cortia now. Not only were they too accustomed to her cajoling them through the bare minimum of training to accept her as Cortu, but also she could never use the prerogatives of a Cortu to force them to obey. Ilan had just proved that to her, and now that she knew it, she wished that she had never found out.

"You must despise me," Taiva said finally. "You knew I couldn't do it." Her voice sounded odd, as if each word had been dragged out of her. Khyria's voice, answering, was wholly practical.

"It seemed necessary to find out why you were so convinced that you needed me, and that was easier than question and answer," she said thoughtfully.

Rage and humiliation seared across Taiva's mood like a hot iron. She turned on her heels to face her tormentor, and spoke deliberately. "If you have found all your answers, then set up the charan and get it over with," she said aloud. "I can't murder you and I may not be able to murder anyone else, but for the sake of completeness you should find out whether or not I am capable of murdering myself."

Ilan turned to face her, and spoke softly. "I only ask questions I know the answers to when it is unnecessary," she said. "I had the answer to that one in your eyes as you watched me." She paused, and let Taiva assimilate that. Her smile deepened slightly, and Taiva realised with some humiliation that her conflicting questions must be in plain sight on her face. "I won't force you to keep your word, but I will give you mine, here and now, without challenge, if you want it. I will lead the Cortia until it can be led by someone else, because you seem to see something in it, Lords alone know what, worth risking all that you have risked tonight for."

Taiva looked at her, feeling a deep chill that had nothing to do with her physical surroundings. She doubted that a quick death was the only hazard that Ilan referred to, and decided very quickly that she had no desire to find out. The reckless line of Ilan's smile almost overlaid the deadly seriousness of her eyes, and Taiva realised on the spur of the moment that however unlikely, it seemed that the Cortu meant exactly what she said. She didn't hesitate. "I accept," she said.