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## heart fate

### chapter 1

#### 406 years after Colonization, Druida City, Before Dawn, Winter

Lahsin slid through the shadows of T'Yew Residence, escaping. Her husband. His Family. Her life. She was as unobtrusive and light-footed as a mouse. But she was used to being mouselike in this place since the very beginning of her marriage to the master, FirstFamily GrandLord T'Yew, at fourteen.

He hadn't ordered her to his bed tonight. She didn't know why, only blessed the fact. She couldn't expect him to miss another night of rutting this week, and she was sure her Passage – the fever dreams that would free her Flair, her psi powers – would come soon. Passage would debilitate her.

She'd heard that Second Passage came like a fickle storm – first a strong wind and a spattering of rain, then dying down, then hitting with awesome force. Now at seventeen, the first dizzying eddy marking the start of her Second Passage had swept over her just yesterday. She thought. She hoped.

Because with the first indication of Second Passage, a Celtan was legally an adult. She could legally go, now, didn't have to endure an underage marriage.

She would go. Despite vows, despite the physical connection made during sex, she wasn't completely bound to T'Yew. Because she'd been wed at fourteen. She could escape. She prayed that the laws had not somehow been changed between the time the old book she'd found was published.

Most noble children didn't leave their homes when they were seventeen, more like twenty

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or twenty-two, if ever. Usually there was plenty of room for them in a great houses.

But she didn't wasn't a child, and this huge echoing castle was constricting her, stealing her air, every minute. She could do nothing right in their eyes, T'Yew's and his daughter Idy's. They often told her she was incompetent, helpless, useless. So she'd decided. To. Just. Leave.

Her fingers barely touching the cold marble of the wide bannister, she trailed them down, keeping track of her progress, counting the sweeping steps.

She should check on T'Yew. Her Flair was erratic and fluctuated in strength, but he and she were bound by sex and other links. She sent a spurt down the mental tie she kept as thready as possible.

He snored in his bed, that huge, horrible, Master's bed in the huge, horrible MasterSuite. Some woman was with him – the new servant from a distant branch of the Yews, here to work in the Family Residence.

Good luck to her, because she was good luck to Lahsin. If her luck held, she'd be away from Druida City and north to Alfriston before the Yews and her own Family, the Burdocks, realized she'd run away. They wouldn't look north. There was no reason for her to go in that direction. No Family holdings, and everyone knew she was sensitive to cold. Once they searched Druida, they'd continue southward, to Gael City.

Alfriston was a long two days walk away. She'd make it, she hoped. She had to be there, find shelter and work before her full Passage started and she'd be vulnerable for days. So far there had only been a half sephour of torment, enough to accelerate her plans to escape. She'd been useful to T'Yew as she was, after only one Passage, but if her Flair bloomed strongly, as both Families anticipated, they'd never let her go.

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If they caught her, her life would become worse. They'd keep her in nauseating depressFlair bracelets all the time except when they wanted to use her. It wouldn't just be a punishment. Like the hours in the dark dungeon. Like her husband's sweaty body straining and forcing into her.

Don't think of that, of him! If she did, terror would eat her alive. Panic would paralyze her. If she considered what they might do to her, she might simply shudder to death in horror.

Who knew what they'd say publicly when they discovered she was missing? That she was mentally deficient? That she needed a loving home, loving arms to support her during her Passage? She had to clamp a hand over her mouth to stifle the bitter laugh, hold still a few breaths. And that cost her.

So close to escape, her blood pounding in her veins at anticipation, at fear of discovery, she knew by the soft quarter chiming of the antique clock that she was behind schedule. She'd planned on being through the entry hall and to the side door by now. Instead she was at the bottom of the stairs, facing the front door. She blinked, trying to make out the shapes of the few elegant pieces of furniture, the doorway to the right that would lead to the correct corridor.

Do you leave, then, D'Yew?

She flinched, froze in her tracks. It was the voice of the house itself, the great Residence, speaking in her mind. Of course she should have expected it to feel her movements, but she thought she was beneath its notice.

I leave. My Second Passage comes. A thought occurred, giddiness swirled through her. A witness! The fligging Residence was a witness! You are my first witness, she spoke to the house in her mind as well as in low, hissing words. "I, Lahsin Burdock repudiate this marriage

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to Ioho Yew, GrandLord T'Yew. I Lahsin Burdock repudiate this marriage to Ioho Yew, GrandLord T'Yew. I Lahsin Burdock repudiate this marriage to Ioho Yew, GrandLord T'Yew." As she said the words, several tiny spiderweb threads linking her to him shriveled.

I hear you, the Residence replied coldly. I no longer recognize you as D'Yew. You are no longer mistress of this house.

She snorted at that. She'd never been mistress of this Residence. Lahsin panted, her rabbiting heart might burst from her chest. Would the Residence rouse T'Yew? Idy? Anyone else in the household? No one would help, all the servants were Yews, all would stop her. All knew Ioho liked her under his thumb.

But I do not let you leave. You are a wretched thing, but T'Yew wants you.

A whimper caught in her throat, rippled from her. She wouldn't give up. She grabbed her bundle and stumbled toward the door. The Residence didn't send even a tiny glow to the lamps to light her way.

She tested the door. Locked. A small chuckle came in her brain, the Residence itself, playing with her, having too much fun to call T'Yew or Idy. She muttered the password couplet and the physical locks and bolts snicked open. The door – all the doors and windows – were heavily spellshielded, as was common to FirstFamilies.

No choice. She'd always had a little Flair for spellshields, now she'd have to gather what she could, along with her courage, and test it. She would leave, even if she tempted death by trying to teleport, something she hadn't mastered. Again her mind scrabbled, spellshields or teleportation?

I do not let you leave, the Residence taunted. I do not let you leave or steal from the

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Family.

Flinching, words stuttered from her. "I don't have much. Only some clothes, old clothes, nothing jeweled. My, uh, the skycrystal necklace T'Yew gave me for my wedding. Before we married. He gave it to me, when I was Lahsin Burdock. It's mine." She wet her lips. "Some food. Bread and cheese and furrabeast travel sticks from the no-time. I, uh, missed several meals lately. This food would have been given to me when I was, uh, D'Yew."

You have guilt.

"Only a few coins. You know the Noble Council sends me a little monthly allowance. My Family gave me a dowry." Just a token and less than the bribe T'Yew had given them, not much, but something. Did she forfeit that to T'Yew? She didn't know. One thing she hadn't researched. She nearly moaned.

You have the Family marriage bands. Cowardly runaway thief.

She'd nearly forgotten them. Gathering all her wispy Flair, she said the Unbinding Words she'd secretly learned and memorized. The armbands fell off and clanged on the marble threshold. Lahsin started.

I am no longer D'Yew. I have nothing D'Yew would have. Let me go!

No.

The timer chimed again. Too late, too late, dawn was coming.

Worse had come to worse. She set her sack down, placed both hands against the door, leaned against it.

What do you do little no-Yew? Another snide chuckle.

She couldn't let the house distract her. Was that a creak of a floorboard overhead? She

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had to get out.

Screwing her eyes shut, she willed her Flair to come. It had to come. She sent all her desperation into the calling of it.

It hit her like a sizzling wildfire. She saw, heard, touched tasted the spellshield, knew the weaving of its fabric. Yanked it apart.

OUT! She didn't know if she screamed aloud or not. Couldn't tell because the Residence itself was screaming.

POP! She stumbled back at the force. All the shields were down. Every single one. Gone from all windows, all doors.

In fact, all the windows and doors were gone. The double front door fell outside before her in a slow motion.

Lahsin felt the Residence shudder, implement emergency procedures to protect the Family and itself, raise a weathershield. Draw on all its stored energy.

Too busy to hinder her now.

Appalled at what she'd done, unsteady on her feet, she snatched up her bag and stumbled into the night graying into day, circling around the door. The front door, the major door to the estate. She'd leave as she'd come. That felt good. Felt right.

Outside, she saw a glittering scarf of stars with one of the waxing moons caught in its shining swath, Cymru moon. Oh, she was nearly gone!

She ran.

Ran down the gravel path of the glider drive. Ran around the curving road, still in sight of the house because the trees were bare from winter. Ran and ran and ran to the front greeniron

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gate which she struggled to shove open only enough for her and her bundle to squeeze through.

No spellshield here either.

The whole estate? She'd blown the spellshields for the whole estate? Blinking and shaking her head, she decided she didn't know how she did it, but it was done. Now she was running and leaving those behind defenseless.

No, Ioho and Idy and the Residence and all the rest of her tormentors would never be defenseless. Never vulnerable. Never beaten.

Her nervous laugh began ugly, then picked up a note of exhilaration.

She was out! Out of the estate by herself for the first time in three months!

And she was no longer D'Yew.

Almost.

She had to repeat her repudiation of the marriage to three neutral parties, three entities with no interest in her – not her Family or friends or lover or HeartMate – before she was free. She felt the mental bonds to T'Yew she'd always kept narrow, loosen.

Clouds swept away from the second moon, Eire. She saw the road and knew where to go.

But she was too close to the estate. She breathed deeply. And ran some more, ever faster, ever freer! Soon she would be free, free of all hideous Family obligations. She'd never go back. Never, ever. Not to her Family – she only trusted her older brother – not to the Yews.

She thought she'd die before she'd be forced back. T'Yew would punish her if she fell under his hand again, the new punishments. There'd be blows. There'd be horrible thrusting of him into her.

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The Burdocks and the Yews, both warped Families. She would never be part of that again.

She ran down the wide road past FirstFamily estates. All FirstFamilies were warped. Her blood sang with excitement, with freedom.

Until she ran into a large, solid man who grabbed her as she rocked on her heels.

She hadn't even made it out of Noble Country.