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Mitchella sat straight up in her chair, eyes widening in horror, hand to her throat.

"What is it?" demanded Trif.

"The Turquoise House," pressing fingers to her temples. "Something's wrong. Something's bad. I need to get there now!"

Trif braced herself, wet her lips. "I might be able to teleport us there." She'd helped Mitchella work on the house, restoring it, and watching the place gain in sentience.

Her face white, Mitchella said, "Are you sure?"

Jerking her head in a nod, Trif said. "We are linked and both know the house, so we can visualize it well. You'll lend me Flair and urgency." She set her shoulders, began the breathing sequence that Winterberry taught her. Grappled with her unruly Flair and sent it down straight paths – known 'porting pathways in her mind.

Mitchella stood and joined Trif, squeezing her hand. "Let's do it. Here's how the courtyard looks." An image appeared in her mind, formed by Mitchella. It had glowing yellow gridlines on it. That would make it easier.

Belief is EVERYTHING, Trif heard Ilex's words as if he spoke them calmly beside her. From the corner of her eye she saw the gray light of the day and modified Mitchella's visualization from sunlight to cloudy.

"Good," Mitchella said on an exhaled breath, and Trif realized that Mitchella believed utterly that Trif could 'port them to the house with no trouble.

Of course you can, purred Greyku from her bag. The kitten reinforced the image. The three melded Flair, Mitchella's small but perfectly steady and understood, Greyku's young and bright, Trif's strong and directed.

"On three," Trif said, sinking into the heightened awareness that she needed as she began to feel the place in her mind take on three-dimensions. "One courtyard. Two courtyard. Three."

The air popped as they appeared in the center of the cobbled space. Exultation surged through Trif – she'd done it. No grayness, no flickering. Just complete control.

Then her Flair spiked and the heat of it tingled from the soles of her feet through her to raise the hair on her scalp. She muttered under her breath, stumbled.

Everything looked quiet at the house – the clean cobblestone yard and trimmed bushes, the solid door – seeming peaceful. But as she watched the turquoise colored walls pulsed in a disturbed pattern.

Mitchella ran to the house. It began pulsing gently in a disturbed pattern. She set her hand on the door. "Tell me." Cocking her head, her face strained as she listened. Then she cried out and ran past Trif to the gate, shoving it open, turning to the left.

Trif followed to see Mitchella disappear through the portal of the house next door.

Put me down. I want to run and see, too, Greyku demanded. Grumbling, Trif did.

When they reached the house, the door was already open and Mitchella nowhere to be seen. She screamed.

Hurrying, Trif followed the sound to the mainspace where Mitchella crouched over a young woman who lay crumpled on the floor. Trif's heart clutched and her breath stopped in her throat. She hadn't seen death often, the Clovers were a hearty and long-lived family, but she

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knew the woman was dead.

Greyku screeched. Dead thing. Won't stay. She retreated outside.

"Oh, Lady and Lord!" Mitchella whispered.

Trif joined her, tentatively reached out a hand and touched the woman's shoulder. Cold. Trif shivered.

Mitchella jumped to her feet. "Her baby!"

Dimly, Trif heard a small, fitful crying. Before she could say anything Mitchella had shot out of the room. Trif stared down at the young woman, slowly stood and glanced around the room. It was furnished with a minimum of old, rough pieces. The walls showed damp and mold and gray patches. Everything about the house spoke of a once affluent Family now impoverished.

A moment later Mitchella appeared, holding a bundle. Tears welled from her eyes to trickle down her cheeks. "Thank the Lady that we arrived in time." She jiggled the blanketed baby. "Cordif doesn't seem to be hurt." She bit her lip. "If...if...the Turquoise House hadn't heard him crying and called me, he might have died here alone." She shuddered.

Trif stared down at the woman. "Who is she? What's happening?"

"She's – she was – Murica, GraceLady Gale, the last of her line, except for Cordif here." Mitchella shrugged. "She had little more Flair than I do, and is – was – a fourth level PerSun." She shook her head. "I don't know what's happening."

With a firm nod, Trif said, "Well, I know that we have a mysterious death on our hands. Black Ilex Winterberry!" she called, sending the mental cry with a touch of fear and alarm. They'd linked during his lessons on teleporting, but how closely, and whether he'd hear her–"

A slight "whoosh" announced his arrival. "Trif, what's wrong?" With one observant glance he took in the room, Mitchella, herself, and the body. He strode over to the dead woman. "Tell me what happened."

Clearing her throat, Trif said. "Mitchella is working with the house next door – midwifing it into being a sentient Residence."

"The Turquoise House called to me," Mitchella said. "I only understood that something was very wrong and I had to get here fast." She looked at the young woman. "Even though Trif 'ported us here, we were too late. The house told me that it heard bad noises from next door." She cuddled the baby.

Ilex had squatted by the body and was running his hands a few inches over it, reading it's aura? Did dead bodies have auras? A chill quivered at the base of Trif's spine. She would never care to find out, how proficient Ilex was!

He glanced at Trif then looked at Mitchella. "Trif 'ported you?" His voice was expressionless.

"Yes, she did." Mitchella smiled. "She's been such a help. I'm so glad she's here. And proud, of course."

"Of course." He rocked back on his heels and studied the body.

"She's dead," Trif said.

His eyes were sad when they met hers. "Yes."

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Trif gulped. "Was it...."

"Unnatural?" He shook his head. "I don't believe so." He stood, lifted his hands and sent a swirl of energy throughout the room. The force of it raised motes of dust to catch the light. When everything settled again, he shook his head. "I felt no presence other than GraceLady Gale's and her son's in this room for the last day, but for you two." He moved over to Mitchella and looked down at the baby. "May I?"

Mitchella hunched protectively over the baby, but Ilex just waited patiently. Finally she straightened and held him out. "He was dirty and I used a spell to clean him and the blanket." Her lips trembled, then she pressed them together. "I don't think he's eaten recently. He needs to be cared for."

Ilex held the baby easily, staring down at him. "I sense no knowledge of anyone else here from him, either."

"I'll take him."

Lifting a brow, Ilex said, "In these instances, we of the guard call the Maidens of Saille who run the House for Orphans."

"I'll take care of him," Mitchella said fiercely.

Trif got the idea that Ilex was thinking the same thing that she was. Mitchella would fight for the infant.

"He knows me," Mitchella insisted. "It's better for him to be with someone he's familiar with."

Sweeping a hand around him, Ilex said. "I'll teleport the Lady's body to Noble DeathGrove where a Healer will examine her. But I'll have to report everything regarding the circumstances I found here.

Mitchella sniffed. "Cordif will do well with me. With Straif and me."

"And you have the ear of SupremeJudge Ailim Elder who has already placed a child with you," Ilex said. "I'll go through the house to glean additional information, and probe for any hidden treasure belonging to the boy, though I don't think there's much to inherit except this place, which should probably be sold and the gilt invested for his future."

"How do you know?" Trif asked.

He lifted and dropped a shoulder. "It's my business to know. I'm a guardsman." He scanned the room again. "This is not the first untimely death in this Family. There is much concern about these older Families who are dying out." He looked at the body and sighed. "I'll speak to the Healers and see if this occurrence was expected."

"I'm sure she would have told me if she had health problems." Mitchella's brows dipped.

A corner of Ilex's mouth lifted. "I'm sure she would have." He gazed at her, then Trif. "The Clover women are easy to talk to." Again he shook his head. "I've heard quite a bit about GraceLady Gale, but not that she made provisions for her son if she died so young. Or about the father."

Mitchella clutched the baby to her breasts. Her lip curled. "His name is not on record Murica didn't tell me who he was – we weren't that close. Yet." She swallowed. "But she said he wanted nothing to do with his son." She lifted her chin. "That's unnatural, but I think he was

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married. Not to his HeartMate, of course." Shifting, she said, "I'd like to get Cordif home and call the Healer T'Heather to examine him."

Ilex made a little bow to her, smiled wryly. "I see GraceLord Cordif Gale will have only the best from your hands."

"Yes."

"Remember he has a name and heritage."

Her lips tightened, chin rose. "I'll see if T'Ash will come and give us an idea whether he might have Flair, what sort and how much."

"An oracle should have done that at his birth," Ilex said.

Looking pointedly around at the shabby room, Mitchella said, "Cordif's only a couple of months old, and Murica didn't have any relatives to be an Oracle, or gilt to pay one at his birth."

"Ahem," Trif cleared her throat. "Mitchella, what of Straif's opinion—"

"—Straif wants more children, too," she replied.

"And Antenn?" prompted Trif gently. "What will he think of a new younger brother?"

Ilex took Trif's arm. "You're being unusually pessimistic."

Trif grimaced and shut up.

The baby wiggled and let out a small cry. "We all must consider Cordif, first. Guardsman Winterberry, please take care of poor Murica, then can't you teleport us all to T'Blackthorn Residence?" Mitchella asked.

Staring at them in turn, Ilex shrugged. "Very well." With a solemn spell and gestures, he sent the shell of Murica Gale to the DeathGrove. Then he swept a hand before him. "Let us depart from outside. I will seal the house until I, and some other guards, return to examine the house in detail."

They walked to the front grassy area and waited for Ilex to spellshield the entrance. Greyku was waiting for them, grooming a forepaw. She looked up and her ears rotated forward as she stared at Ilex. Greetyou, Ilex.

"Greetyou Greyku."

The kitten smiled. I always like hearing that. She turned her head and fixed her gaze on the swaddled infant in Mitchella's arms, then pranced over to her. I have not seen a human kit. May I?

Mitchella's eyes narrowed, but then she slowly crouched and moved a corner of the blanket aside. Greyku had to stand on her back paws and stretch to see the baby's face. The tip of her tail twitched. Uglier than most humans.

"He's beautiful!" Mitchella protested.

Greyku just rumbled a noncommittal sound, then lowered to run back to Trif, who picked her up, cradled her on one arm. The little cat butted her head against Trif's arm, insisting on being petted, so Trif did. She went over to look at young Cordif.

Mitchella beamed down on the baby boy. Trif glanced at the red-faced, round-headed child whose black hair stuck out in all directions. She shared a glance with Greyku, who smirked. "A wonderful baby," Trif said. It was a safe observation, and true. All Clovers believed every baby was wonderful.

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"Yes, he is," Mitchella rocked the boy.

"All set," Ilex said, joining them. "Lady D'Blackthorn, since I am the strongest teleporter here, I think it would be best if I held the baby."

I'port well, too, Greyku broadcast.

"Yes, you do, and I value your help," Ilex said.

Greyku preened. Trif sighed. "Let's go."

Reluctantly Mitchella handed Cordif to Ilex, then linked her left arm in his right. Trif hung onto his left biceps. He felt infinitely comforting.

"On three," he said. "One Clover. Two Blackthorn. Three."

And they materialized in the parlor from which they'd departed. Trif was close enough to the chair she'd been sitting in to sink back into it.

So much had changed in just a sephour! Mitchella crooned to the baby, who fretted, then instructed the Residence to request T'Heather's professional services.

Ilex bowed. "I'll be going—"

Trif jumped back up and crossed to him. His face was as impassive as usual, but she found gentle kindness in his eyes. She smiled. "Thank you for hearing me, for coming and helping us." She lay her hand on his arm, and he covered it with his own.

"You're welcome," he said. "I'm glad the occasion wasn't too terrible for you. You didn't know GraceLady Gale, did you?"

"No."

Some tension eased from his stance. "It's a sad situation." He looked at Mitchella. "But she will ensure the babe isn't neglected."

Trif glanced over to Mitchella, who stood at a sidebar newly covered with baby clothes. "After her infatuation dims, she'll be thanking you, too. And probably Straif as well."

Frowning, Trif said. "How much trouble did I cause you, taking you away from your duties as I did?"

"None. Only put me a little behind schedule."

"It sounds as if you might not eat dinner again tonight."

"I have work," he said.