

## Prologue

FOR FIVE DAYS, Cherneth rode toward the west, toward the four-towered keep of Gorendt with the hope of securing himself a position in the forces of Prince Kazan. It was well known that Kazan's legions were the best on this side of the great Adrex and a befitting place for an Odun warrior such as himself.

The father-shaman had begrudgingly released him of his tribebond now that the last of his kin was dead. Having never taken a concubine--tempting as that was--and his only brother, having fallen less than one moonturn ago fighting against the Huons, Cherneth knew he must leave his people.

He nudged his hardy black and white horse down the rocky embankment that rose above the East Sherehn River. From the high vantage point, he spotted a small clump of trees that would do well as a campsite. The sun rapidly edged the western skies, just showing over the crown of the mighty Adrex Mountains. Soon, the snows would come and he knew he must not take too long in his journey.

He did not know Gorendt--the few Oduns who had seen it and its great keep were the old ones, battle-scarred warriors who spent their long lives fighting the fierce Huons, the Qualani, or on occasion, the well-armed and well-trained Gorendtians. The old ones were full of praise and fine words for them.

"Worthy enemies," said one, nodding wisely. "Their a'kenns are strong within them."

"My a'kenn is the red elk, The-One-Who-Wanders. I also wander as the red elk and fight as bravely. These men of Gorendt will need a warrior such as myself," Cherneth boasted.

But the father-shaman shook his head slowly. "The tribes of Gorendt are not like us. They no longer follow the herds of break or ride with the mothersun. They live in towers where you cannot see the sky. And you must also beware the warriors of the `Fa."

Cherneth snorted at the warning. "The Leashed Ones! They have no a'kenns; their souls are empty."

The old ones agreed with the father-shaman. The Leashed Ones were unworthy, but they were cunning. They knew all the Ways of the Odun.

But Cherneth had been determined. He sold all his horses, save for the painted horse--his favorite. The horse would bring good luck to his a'kenn. He even asked the father-shaman to make a charm of protection for the horse.

He made his preparations the night before he left--making sure all the fletchings in his quiver of arrows were in perfect condition and that his knives were sharp. He shaved his head to make certain the mothersun would find him. Cherneth did not say goodbye to anyone, but left when the mothersun was just rising to watch them.

The journey had been uneventful and now as he approached the swift-running Sherehn, he gave thanks to his a'kenn for its protection.

Hobbling the painted horse, he allowed it to graze on the last of the summer grasses and then made a small fire to prepare his own meal. Cherneth did not understand the old ones and their worries. He had seen no one--hadn't even smelled the flesh-eaters.

Cherneth bit into the succulent rabbit. The old ones were as fretful as women. They even worried about Talesians! Ha! Talesians were ghosts now. No one had seen *them* for nearly three hundred turns of the mothersun.

Still the old ones had cautioned him: "You will give ground to the Talesians, Cherneth. Their a'kenns are powerful, more than the Gorendtians. Their blood is fierce and they die without fear. Even the Leashed Ones think twice before confronting them. Be warned."

Again, Cherneth shook his head at their advice. He was not afraid of Talesians either.

The sturdy paint suddenly lifted its head, catching an unfamiliar scent of something or someone approaching the camp. Cherneth never ignored the horse's warnings and immediately dropped the rabbit and pulled the long knife from his belt.

He waited, tense and alert, hearing nothing, but like the horse, he lifted his head, sniffing the air. He could smell nothing either, but felt the hairs rise on the backs of arms. Cherneth knew something was out there, just beyond the rim of his camp. He strained to hear a sound, any sound, but all he could hear was

the faint rushing of the Sherehn. Glancing at the horse, he watched the animal's eyes and ears focus toward the river. Its nostrils flared softly as it whickered in friendly greeting to another of its kind.

Cherneth had no time to turn to see what the horse was watching. He suddenly felt something cold and hard pressed firmly to the back of his neck, preventing him from standing or turning. He heard the faint rattling of chain mail and the chink of spurs. From nowhere, five forms stepped from the gloom into the firelight. Cherneth felt his blood turn cold and sluggish. There was no mistaking the dark gray and blood-red surcoats covering their glittering black mail. Each of them held a long, metal staff--one end topped with the head of some fantastic beast, mouth opened with the tongue slavering over razor sharp teeth. The other end, the foot of the staff was hollow and aimed directly at him. Fleeting, he wondered if the head of the beast was their a'kenn.

A voice behind him spoke: "An Odun! We were lucky this time. I am weary of stinking Qualani. Do not move, plainsman. Not until you are told. Drop the knife."

Cherneth hesitated. His blood cried out to fight. To yield to these collared dogs would be the most terrible disgrace. He clutched the knife and whirled to strike the man behind him, but he never came near his mark. Blinding, excruciating pain seared through his skull, down his spine and into the very bones of his hands. He dropped the knife from senseless fingers.

"You are brave, but foolish, Odun," the calm voice went on. "The Reverend `Fa gives high merit to the courageous, but you must save your courage for her divine will."

Cherneth was unable a single muscle--the pain bound him to his knees, immobilized him before his tormentors. His breath came in short, aching gasps. He tried to stand, to fight the agonizing hold on him, but with each struggle no matter how small, the pain rose even higher.

"The more you struggle, the worse it will get and if you struggle too hard, it will kill you."

The pain was nearly unendurable. It paralyzed him even to the point where he could not speak or cry out. Again, he tried to struggle and the pain soared in his skull. He felt the hot trickle of blood from his nostrils.

"Do not try again, or you will die," the voice warned.

Helplessly Cherneth watched the five in front of him lower their staffs and obliterate the signs of his campsite. They buried the fire and flung the remains of the rabbit toward the river. One of them saddled the painted horse and another took his longbow, the arrows, and the rest of his weapons and disappeared into the brush. They returned shortly, each leading a dark-colored horse, saddled and harnessed in black.

Abruptly Cherneth felt the pain ease, but he had no strength or will to fight them. Something long and white, a tasseled rope of some kind was wound around his throat and snugged tight. The pain stopped only to be replaced with...nothing. Cherneth felt at once aware of all that was happening to him, but powerless and empty. He had no will to fight, not even the slightest wish to defy them. It was as if he had been drained of every desire, every thought--as empty as a dried-up waterskin. Vaguely, Cherneth felt his hands being bound behind him, then was dragged across the campsite and forced onto his horse.

His captors took up the reins and led him away, toward the north. Cherneth knew there were mountains to the north--mountains that contained something terrible.

If he could only remember....

## Chapter 1

*"TO: MY LORD High Prince and Ter-Rey of Talesia and  
All The Eastern Lands and Tribes of the Dominion--  
The Sunturn being 3570--The Sixteenth of the Moon's Phasing  
The Tenth Turn of My Lord's Reign  
May Verlian Give You Grace*

*Sovereign Lord:*

*I would not trouble Your Highness in such a bold manner, however, this letter brings grave*

news that cannot wait. Ten days ago, through information received from agents, we have learned that the Princess Alea, daughter to Prince Kazan of Gorendt, was abducted by a band of common roadwilderds and taken captive to Sherehn Keep--now a ruin, as you know. Their leader, Reddess, has demanded five thousand talins in gold for her release or she will be killed.

It is well known that this troublemaker, Reddess, and his men number no more than thirty or forty. It is also our conclusion that Reddess is secretly in league with Prince Kazan to falsely accuse Riehl of this kidnapping and to use it as an excuse to declare war. Already, we have received threats from the prince that if his daughter is harmed, he will move his armies against us.

As Your Highness is well aware, Prince Kazan wishes his son Alor, who is also Alea's twin, to ascend Riehl's Falcon Throne, regardless of the fact that he has no legitimate claim.

We, of Riehl's Council, are outraged by Kazan's scurrilous accusations. They are entirely false. We ask for Your Highness' intervention on our behalf and to abort Kazan's perfidious scheme to incite war, an action that clearly violates your own decree.

The Council has striven to govern Riehl according to the laws of the Dominion without the guiding hand or leadership of our own good Prince Murliff--who recently was taken from us and Summoned by the Goddess Verlian--may She keep him.

The matter being fully disclosed to you, we await your Will. Your Obedient Subject,  
Bordun De'Tai, First Councilor  
of the Council Circle at Riehl Keep."

The scribe cleared his throat then rolled up the meticulously rewritten copy and watched as his companion, the Councilor De'Tai, readjust the fur collar of his tunic and settle himself into the cushions of the high-wheeled coach.

"Thank you for refreshing my memory Za'Rus. I thank the blessed Goddess His Highness has received that letter. I hope the Council is satisfied!"

Za'Rus readjusted his own somber-hued tunic with white, frail-looking hands and cast him a worried look. "You think the session did not go well, Councilor? If I may say so, the Council seemed gratified and relieved."

The councilor made a slight disparaging noise in his throat. "You mean by the response we received from His Highness? I only pray Verlian, his warriors will come in time. He did promise they would come quickly. Read his message again, Za'Rus."

The scribe eased a handsome portable writing desk from its case and then pulled out the document, careful not to disturb the seal of black wax and dark red ribbons that bore the Ter-Rey's insignia.

"Shall I read all of it, Your Grace?"

De'Tai sighed and settled back deeper into the cushions. "No, just the pertinent section."

Za'Rus cleared his throat again and held the document a little closer to the window so he could read the bold black writing.

"Let me see. `...have received your letter ...awareand concerned...` Ah, yes. Here it is. `...I am sending a detachment of my most trusted warriors to inspect Riehl and the situation. They are under my direct authority to observe, to obtain information, to advise, and to take whatever measures necessary to secure and defend my Will' ..."

De'Tai held up his hand, signaling the scribe to stop. "That'sthe part: `to take whatever measures necessary...' Prince D'Assurielmay hold absolute authority over our wretched skins, but he and his most-favored warriors are still Talesian barbarians."

"Councilor, that was over three hundred sunturns ago! His Highness is a highly knowledgeable, learned man, hardly to be put into the same classification as his ancestors. I must disagree with you. I believe he understands our desperate situation perfectly."

Councilor De'Tai smiled at him. "You speak like a diplomat Za'Rus. Riehl should have you as its First Councilor, not me. I wish I could share your optimism, but I am afraid I am the old dog here. Trusting Talesians is difficult for me, but then, I had little choice. Asking the Ter-Rey, Prince D'Assuriel, for help was not my idea but that of the Council Circle." Councilor De'Tai sighed again. "Why did Murliff have to die now, with no living children, no heirs?"

"There is the princess, Your Grace, his granddaughter," Za'Rus interjected softly. He placed his slim fingertips together, making a pale temple before his thin mouth. "She is the last legitimate heir."

"The Princess Kitarisa?" De'Tai snorted derisively. "That animal Kazan, who is the poorest excuse for a father *and* a prince for that matter, would sooner see her dead than be allowed to return and rule Riehl. Besides, you know my feelings about the granddaughter. We have no way of knowing how she has been influenced by Kazan. She may have become just as corrupt. No, Kazan wants his whelp, that whoreson Alor or the girl, his twin Alea, to rule. By the Divine Goddess I will never see that happen!"

"I do not think Prince D'Assuriel will allow that to happen either. I am sure he is well-aware of Kazan's petty schemes -- he does not trust him either."

"Perhaps, but His Highness has never journeyed to this side of the Adrex. If he chooses to intervene for us now, he has chosen a peculiar time to become involved in the affairs of his Eastern holdings."

Za'Rus studied his troubled companion, hoping to find some words of comfort. De'Tai deserved high marks for his well-known tact and balanced approach to most political situations, but Za'Rus also understood his vehemence concerning Prince Kazan's self-indulgent and utterly worthless son. The very idea of a Gorendtian sitting on the Falcon Throne gave him shudders of revulsion.

They both felt the coach shift as the restless horses shuffled and chaffed against the harness, eager to be off. De'Tai rapped on the ceiling. The driver called to the team and the coach surged forward. Both of them grabbed for a strap to steady themselves.

Za'Rus pondered De'Tai's words. The Talesian courier and his guard had arrived that very morning from the west, over the North Pass of the Adrex from Daeamon Keep. It had been difficult, even for the fearless Talesians. Attacks from Wrathmen and roadwilds were a constant worry. The northern route also took them precariously close to Qualani lands, and there was always the threat of the flesh-eating marglims.

Za'Rus watched his eminent companion lean back against the cushions to try and afford himself some semblance of sleep. The good man was exhausted from the long day's work; the endless discussions, the worry, and responsibilities of his high office all weighing down upon him--an impossibly heavy yoke for one man.

Za'Rus returned the valuable document to the desk and then pulled out fresh paper and hardquill. He needed to write down the highlights of Councilor De'Tai's discussions before he summarized his extensive notes. The rest of the Council would each need a copy of the proceedings and there was much to transcribe. In the end, however, nothing would be conclusive until they heard from the Ter-Rey himself.

Riehl's Prince Murliff had died widowed. His only daughter, Princess Liestra, Prince Kazan's first wife, was now dead too, and their daughter, the Princess Kitarisa had been lost to Riehl since her birth, buried in the complexities of Kazan's court intrigues. She was the last rightful heir and their only hope, but convincing Kazan to let her return to rule Riehl would be near to impossible. Kazan had lofty plans for the son of his dancing girl.

Courteous entreaties had been rebuffed, soundly renounced. The difficulty opened up endless unpleasant outcomes. To resist Kazan's wishes would undoubtedly bring on war. If the council pushed the issue, demanding Kitarisa's return as rightful heir, that too could bring on war and Riehl was no match for the well-armed Gorendtians. If they went to war, both sides would be breaking the High Prince's Will--the absolute rule of peace. No one, not even the headstrong Kazan, would be foolish enough to provoke the High Prince, the Ter-Rey.

Za'Rus involuntarily shuddered at the thought. Three hundred turns of the sun had not dimmed the memory of Talesian brutality. The old texts spared no detail concerning their carnage and their cruelties. Had time truly changed them? In spite of his reassurances to De'Tai, Za'Rus felt a chilling stab of uncertainty lance up his spine.

He offered the Goddess, the Blessed Verlian, a brief prayer: No war with the Talesians.

*By Your blood, Divine Goddess, spare us from the swords of the Talesians!*

THE DAWN BROKE weak and cold, the sun barely showing through the gray haze of the low clouds. A big horse, gray as the dawn itself, stamped impatiently and blew streams of warm vapor from

its flared nostrils, eager to be off. The day had begun and it was time for battle.

The man on its back spoke one curt word to check the horse--he was not ready to leave until he had seen everything from his high vantage point overlooking the listless river below and the immense, crumbling keep built where the river divided and flowed around it. He needed more time to study it, to evaluate its vulnerability and judge distances for their approach. The others would be awaiting his decisions.

Assur had pushed both his men and the horses for six days, almost to the limits of their endurance, but as exhausted as they were, none would dare show it.

The horse moved again and this time he spoke sharply in deep, guttural tones. The great gray finally ceased its nervous fidgeting.

He sat astride a warhorse, saddled and harnessed in his colors of dark red, black, and flashes of gold. Expensive trappings for a barbarian. Five knives of the finest Siarsi steel, their grips of hammered silver and inlaid with gold and break horn, lay sheathed behind his right leg in the heavy saddle cloth. He carried two swords on his back, slung over a jerkin of intricately woven leather, its design made for protection against sword cuts and the cold. His long, nearly-black hair fastened tightly at the crown by an intricately designed silver ring, fell to his shoulders in a heavy shank. A short-cropped beard trimmed his jaw, bracketing a firm, straight mouth that framed a face deeply tanned from endless days in the sun. Black-marked eyes, dark blue as winter water, and fierce as a lion's were his most arresting feature.

No mark identified him, but he carried himself with an air of decided authority, clearly indicating he had no tolerance for defiance or disobedience.

The others were similar to him in stature and dress and each bore the two swords strapped to their backs. Only the man at his right, showed any marked difference. Fierce, raised scars, deliberately cut and blackened into lean cheeks, marred his face. His lightly graying hair was also drawn back, but two thin braids, woven with leather and fine glass beads, hung from each temple.

A noise made him turn in the saddle. He steadied his horse while Kuurus nudged his own horse next to the big gray.

"How bad is it, my lord?" he asked.

"It could be worse, but by nightfall our chances will be better."

"I wish we had more time to watch this place. Verlian's blood, there could be a legion in there!"

"A poorly trained one, Kuurus. They lack discipline and order-- they are easy marks. Here, see for yourself." Assur handed him the glass eye to study the keep below.

Ancient Sherehn Keep had been built at the fork of the Sherehn River on an island, a rock, forcing the river around each side of it, forming two branches: one continuing on in a rambling southeasterly fashion and the other becoming the West Sherehn that wound its way to the west, near the base of the Adrex and by Gorendt itself.

The ancient engineers, well aware of the river's ability to flood, had built an intricate system of protective walls on the north and sides of the keep, with release valves to allow for the excess water. One massive drawbridge spanned over the now-dry moat surrounding the south face and west walls, and a networking of three bridges crossed both forks of the river, giving easy access to the island keep. In times of war or flood, the bridges could be drawn back, but their ancient mechanisms were now long gone to rust from disuse and lack of maintenance.

The keep itself was massive, old, and it rose from its island base a battered hulk of red granite, now crumbling into ruins from disrepair. Once the outpost and country retreat of a long dead prince, it had served thieves, roadwits, and the last of the scavenging tribes.

The warriors were well hidden in the trees just above the western shore of the river. The fierce one, Kuurus, holding the glass to his eye, studied the ruined turrets and battlements, counting guards.

"I count only four at the top most battlements, my Lord Assur," he said, handing over the glass.

"By the looks of them, they will be more interested in the revelries Reddesh will provide for them tonight, rather than guarding those walls. Their backs will be to us."

"My lord, allow me to take Brekk and Jarad to the east side and set fire to the breach wall and the stable."

From inside his leather jerkin, Assur removed a map, a sketch of the keep. He studied the rough drawing.

"The inner wall here is designed well, but we don't know how many men are inside. The fire must be high if they are to be diverted enough for us to get inside."

"It shall be high enough, my lord," Kuurus promised.

Even as the last threads of light vanished in the west, Assur still held them back until the night's revelries had begun. An oxcart filled with laughing, bold-eyed women, lumbered across the main drawbridge. In a very short time, those within the entire keep would be drunk on free wine and dancing. Assur and his men would still have to hurry--they did not know the lay of the keep well enough to make any mistakes. If they did, Kazan's daughter would be killed unless the ransom was paid. If they succeeded, Kazan would pay for their services--and Talesian mercenaries did not come cheap.

Reddess' clumsy attempts to cover his tracks had been easy to detect. His band of scavenging thieves did not know the land nor did they have the skills to elude cunning Talesians. Petty theft and drunken brawling were the worst of their crimes and for the most part, generally overlooked. Abduction of Kazan's daughter would not be overlooked.

Assur fixed the glass eye on the river barge moored on the eastern fork of the river. They would burn that first.

It was dark only a short while before the men on the battlements turned their attention to the festivities below. From beneath their own jerkins, they pulled out forbidden flasks of strong ale and soon were lolling against the crumbling walls.

Assur signaled Kuurus and his men. Silent and swift, the three hurried down the embankment to the nearest bridge. Had they been seen from the ramparts above they might have been stopped, but the irresistible sounds of tambour and flute, the high-pitched laughter of the women, diverted the guards' attention from their duties.

Kuurus and the others slid down the edge of the dry moat and ran under the main drawbridge. It was too dark to see anything with the glass, but Assur knew they were close to their mark. At first there was only the smallest spark in the darkness, but soon the barge was ablaze.

"Fire!"

Aroused from their stupor, the four guards on the battlements saw the fire and frantically called to their comrades below.

Assur signaled the others and they too slid down the embankment and raced for safety under the drawbridge. Overhead, they heard the thudding feet and frantic cries.

"The stable! The stable is on fire, too! Get the horses!"

Assur nodded to a grinning Jarad. Kuurus had done his job well.

Screams and cries filled the night. Panic stricken horses broke free from their drunken handlers and thundered across the bridge into the blackness of the forest. Above the chaos, Reddess shouted orders and growled furious oaths as his men desperately tried to save the interior of the keep.

From the darkness, Kuurus and the others suddenly appeared under the drawbridge to join them.

"They will be busy for hours," he said, a broad grin splitting his scarred face.

Assur nodded. "Good."

As silently as they had begun, the six barbarians eased onto the drawbridge and melted back into the shadows of the walls.

Two half-dressed women stumbled across the bridge, clutching at each other. A small dog skulked nearby and stopped to sniff at Kuurus's boot, but a well-placed poke with his sword tip sent it scurrying away.

The entire inner court was a melee of frantic people, terrified horses, and fire that flared and roared into the night. Flames licked at the main walls of the inner keep, burning the tinder dry hay of the stables and the old timbers supporting it. The light flickered and danced like hot demons, casting eerie shapes and shadows against the great walls.

Using the shadows and the chaos as cover, the warriors easily entered the now empty main hall. In the feeble light of the guttering candles and rank torches left on the walls, Assur made a low noise of

disgust. Filth and offal littered the entire hall. Overturned tables, spilled, rotting food and excrement, both human and animal covered the floor. In the corner, under a torn, ancient tapestry, a pig and her litter grunted in peaceful oblivion.

The fire in the massive hearth, the only bright spot in the huge hall, still burned, but its ancient splendor was ruined by the half-cooked, half-consumed carcasses piled before it.

The ringing noise of a fallen platter sent them melting behind pillars and into the deep shadows. An old retainer, stupid with wine and sleep stumbled into the hall, clutching at the great table for balance, sending the long forgotten feast crashing to the floor. Assur slipped behind him and pressed his sword lightly to the old man's throat.

"If you value your life, old man, you will tell me where the princess Alea is being held."

He started to protest, but the sword bit deeper, silencing his urge to cry out.

"Up the main stairs to the fourth corridor on your left. She is in the last room on the right," he managed to choke.

The old man would never know who they were. Bound, gagged, and blindfolded, he was hastily tied to a pillar and left to whatever fate would become him.

The first, faint threads of acrid smoke began to fill the hall as they climbed the stairs. Only one dim torch flickered from its rusting bracket, barely dispelling the blackness of the corridor. Assur could just see the doorways stretching down the corridor and strained to find the last one.

From the deep shadows they heard a guttural cry, a sudden

flash of a blade and the bright clang of steel against steel. Young Del sidestepped the assailant, effectively blocking the stroke aimed for Kuurus' neck. Without pausing, he drove his own blade into the attacker's mid-section allowing the body to fall heavily to the floor.

Tense and keen, the six crept toward the last door, straining to see in the darkened hallway. Assur motioned three of them to take a stance on the other side of the doorway. The girl could be guarded even inside the room. He nodded and with a single blow, Kuurus kicked open the door.

## Chapter 2

TWO WOMEN stood huddled at the back of the filthy, ancient chamber--one, a golden-haired beauty in the ragged remnants of a once regal gown. Her blue eyes were red-rimmed from constant weeping as she clung to her companion, trembling with terror. The other woman was scarcely taller than the golden-haired girl, but older. She was past her first blush of youth and at first glance, Assur thought she was the girl's maid. Her own gown was torn too, but equally as fine. Her soft, dark eyes, filled with terror at the sight of so many barbarians, held a glimmer of defiance. Dark brown hair, probably once confined into a ladylike coiffure and headdress, now tumbled freely down her back past her waist in an incredible, shimmering cascade. Where the younger girl was all pink and roses, this woman was as cool as silver and as distant as the moon. She drew herself up as much as her slight frame would allow. Swallowing hard, she lifted her chin, bravely meeting his gaze.

"Do with me what you wish, but I beg you, please spare her," she pleaded softly, her voice shaking with fear.

Assur lowered his sword and motioned for his men to do the same. "We will not harm you. We are here to save the daughter of Prince Kazan."

The dark-haired woman looked puzzled for a moment. "We are both the daughters of Prince Kazan." Assur hesitated and glanced at an astonished Kuurus.

"Why were we not told there were *two* daughters?" Kuurus muttered irritably, flinging up his arms in disgust.

"Our orders are to find and return the Princess Alea," Assur said firmly.

"How do I know that? How do I know what you will do with her? Maybe you will kill her, or use her vilely. Maybe you will ravish both of us?" she asked, trying to sound determined over the quaver in her voice.

"Do you doubt the word of a Chaliset warrior?" Kuurus growled threateningly. "If you doubt us, then

stay here and die!"

The dark-haired woman appeared to weigh his words, glancing from one fierce face to the next. Assur deliberately lowered his sword and shook his head to convince her. Finally, she seemed to have accepted the situation.

"It is she whom you want. She is Alea," indicating the shaking blonde girl. "I am Kitarisa."

Assur noted the thread of sadness in her voice, but quickly dismissed it. "We must hurry if we are to get out. My men have created a diversion by starting a fire on the east side of the keep. If we are to get across the drawbridge without being noticed, we must go now."

"We only have the one extra horse," Kuurus exclaimed. "If we try to take both, we will be slowed down too much."

Kitarisa shook her head, at once grasping their dilemma and pulled free of the girl's tenacious grip.

"You must not go back that way. Reddess's men are drunk but they are not stupid. Once they realize the fire is a hoax, this is the first place they will look. Come, I know a better way."

She moved to the shabby bed, picked up one of the cloaks and pulled it around the girl's shoulders.

"You must stop crying Alea. Father has sent these men to rescue you. Be a brave girl now." She kissed the girl's forehead and patted her arm, then turned to face Assur. "I know a back way. If we hurry, she will not be missed for hours."

She brushed past him into the hall and moved to the right, completely avoiding their entrance route.

From the depths of the keep they could hear the shouts of frantic men, trying to put out the blazing fire. Horses whinnied and the hunting hounds barked and whined in fear.

Kitarisa led them through a series of seeming blind corridors and down a narrow stairway, curving deep into the bowels of the keep. There were few torches to light the passageways and stairs and as she approached the last step, she stopped and drew back. She motioned them to be silent.

"Do you see that light coming from the doorway?" she whispered.

Assur nodded.

"It is the guard's common room, the last one this far west in the keep. I am certain they do not even know what has happened above."

"How many?" Assur asked in an equally low voice.

"Four, no more than five. They are probably drunk, too, but we cannot be sure of that."

Assur nodded again.

"The only other difficulty is the alarm. At the back of the room, to the left, is a pull-rope. If that is pulled, it will sound a series of bells in the great hall and in the soldier's quarters--it was supposed to signal a water breach in this part of the keep, but it can also alert them of your escape."

Assur signaled to his men, conveying his plan of attack. "Stay back and keep her quiet," he ordered firmly.

Kitarisa shrank back against the damp wall of the stairway, pulling Alea close to her, allowing the men to pass.

Silently, the six men eased into the corridor and crept to the light coming from the open door of the room.

Raucous laughter and the stench of sour beer, spoiled food, and unwashed bodies spilled into the grim passageway. Assur nodded to Kuurus and two of the men. They darted across the narrow expanse of the doorway to the other side, unseen by the drunken revelers inside. Kuurus held up five fingers, indicating the number he had seen while moving to the other side of the door. More than good odds. Assur waited, listening until the ribald laughter had reached a loud enough level when they would be least aware of an attack. He gave the signal and the six mercenaries sprang into the room.

Like the great hall above, two filthy tables, covered with weeks of rotting food, befouled trenchers and cups littered their surfaces. Rats and other vermin feasted boldly with their human hosts. Two of the men were sprawled in a drunken stupor over the table to the right, oblivious to the attack. The two others, seated at the left table, swayed drunkenly against each other and singing a coarse song about a certain tavern wench. Too late, they noticed the six men, swords drawn and upon them before they could move.

Kuurus grabbed the first man's hair, pulled his head back and slit his throat as easily as gutting a fish.

Del and Brekk dispatched the other three so swiftly, they never realized what had happened.

At the back of the dark, little room a small fire still burned in a hearth that served both as a place for cooking as well as a latrine. The last guard, still on his feet and in possession of a clear head and a sword, made a lunge for the bell-rope. Assur blocked his path, striking away the attempted blow, sending him reeling against the hearth.

The man was neither drunk nor inexperienced. He rallied and faced Assur and drove hard at him, Assur just managing to parry the thrust. The guard had no chance and he knew it, but he refused to give any ground.

In quick order, Assur exchanged two more blows with the unfortunate guard. As dispassionately as if he were destroying one of the rats on the table, he saw his opening and drove his sword deep into the roadwild's throat, just above the breastbone. Choking on his own blood, the luckless guard toppled forward, dead before he hit the floor.

As silently as they had come, the six warriors slipped from the room into the dank corridor. Assur motioned for Kitarisa to hurry.

"Do not look into the room," he muttered, taking her arm and pulling her quickly past the sights and smells of their carnage.

The princess needed no encouragement and Alea, too frightened to even look up, followed her.

Once more they followed her down the dark corridor until they came to one final set of stairs leading down to an enormous vaulted chamber; the floor entirely covered in red sand. Far to the left and deep into the interior they could just make out the crumbling remains of hundreds of stalls, row upon row, disappearing into the gloom.

"This used to be the stables, when the keep was an outpost to fight the Oduns," she went on in her hushed whisper.

"You seem to know this keep well," Assur murmured.

"I ought to. Before it was abandoned, I was permitted to come here to be with my grandfather. As a girl, I used to explore every corner of the keep."

They eased to the foot of the stairway; Assur's men were still tense and wary. They fanned out into the open expanse of the huge chamber. Incredible pillars, as thick as trees supported the entire length of the chamber, and beyond the pillars, at the far end, thrusting high up into the dark ceiling was what appeared to be a drawn up ramp, sealing off an enormous opening, wide enough for six horses ridden abreast. Its ancient, rusting mechanism loomed in the eerie half-light like a monstrous beast, ready to spring and devour the first intruder into its black lair.

"The noise alone ought to call back the Summoned," Assur commented and Kitarisa nodded in agreement.

"There is a smaller entrance that only allows people. I will show you."

To the left of the massive drawbridge, a separate opening, a smaller entrance doglegged sharply to the right and then to the left, designed to hamper an attacker on foot.

Suddenly, Assur felt Brekk touch his arm.

"My Lord Assur, you must see this..."

Assur followed Brekk across the darkened sand to the ruined networking of ancient stalls, with the others close on his heels. Brekk thrust the fluttering torch into the gloom of the nearest stall. Kitarisa and her sister gasped softly. Swords. Dozens, hundreds of swords arranged with military precision, lined the inner walls of the stall.

"My lord, there are more here," Del called from the next stall. Like the first, the second stall was filled with arms, including spears. The next stall held shields, the next crossbows. There was no need to examine each stall, as each one, on back into the deepest interior of the vaulted chamber contained an arsenal of weapons, provisions, saddles and harness, helmets, leather goods and foodstuffs.

"Enough for an army," Kuurus muttered.

"But which one?" Assur added. "What does a roadwild need with all these weapons?"

The Talesians eyed each other uneasily.

"Not another abduction," Brekk commented dryly. "There is enough here to supply an army for many

moonturns--a long siege."

Kuurus lifted his head, suddenly alert. "Someone comes."

Like wraiths, Assur and his men vanished into the shadows and behind the massive pillars. From the darkness a lone guard emerged carrying a rapidly guttering torch.

If he saw them he would most assuredly call out and Assur was uneasy as to how far the sound of his shouts would carry in this blackened echo chamber...and there could be others.

"Wait for your chance," he heard Kitarisa murmur faintly.

To his astonishment, Kitarisa tugged down the top edge of her gown to reveal her pale shoulders. She bent over allowing the long, gleaming hair to fall to the floor and then stood up, tossing it back, giving her at once a sensuous, wild look. She stepped from behind the pillar.

"They told me I would find you here," she said sweetly.

The surprised guard almost dropped the torch as he took in her white, creamy shoulders and soft, full lips.

"I got so bored up there." She shrugged, indicating the upper halls. "Reddessa said there were some nice soldiers down here and so lonely, too." She eased up to the guard and placed her hands on his chest. "I hope you like dark-haired women." Kitarisa pouted prettily and shook the rich hair. "Reddessa always seems to have blondes around."

"I like `em, like `em fine," the man stuttered.

Bewildered and delighted, the man looked about frantically to find a place to set the torch so he could return her embrace. A rusting bracket hung on the nearest pillar and he hastily set the torch into it. Eagerly he slipped his arms around Kitarisa.

"Specially ones like you."

He bent to kiss her but she easily pushed him back, feigning coyness.

"Oh, not here. I don't even know your name yet."

"It's Duras."

"Duras. Well, I am Fiana. Let me look at you in the light so I can see how handsome you are."

She turned him by the shoulders so his back was to the torch and to Assur. Willingly the man turned, a huge grin of delight spread across his coarse features.

"Have you been down here long? It must be so lonely," she said sympathetically, slipping her arms around his neck.

From the gloom, Assur eased from behind the pillar, the reflection of the low light glinting dangerously on the edge of his sword.

Kitarisa lifted herself up on her toes and pulled the man's head nearer to her. "And the lonely ones are such sweet lovers," she sighed. The guard gathered her close and again bent to kiss her. The pleasure of her kiss was short-lived.

Sudden, excruciating pain registered on his face as Assur's blade drove deep through the guard's ribs, into the lung and finally his heart. He sagged heavily on Kitarisa, dying, his eyes wide open with astonishment. He fell to the sand, his mouth working in silent anguish, until death finally ended his suffering.

Kitarisa wiped her mouth with the back of her arm and readjusted her gown. She was once again the cool and distant woman as before. "Come on!"

With no more regard for the man than dead vermin, she hurried through the dogleg passage to the outer door. Kitarisa struggled with the ancient door and the rusted iron bolts, until Jarad gently tugged her hands from the task. In his element, the big barbarian easily slammed the bolts back and pulled the heavy door open. Without hesitating, Jarad, Kuurus, and the others slipped out into the night.

"Go! Go now," she ordered Alea.

Fresh tears ran down Alea's cheeks. "No! Come with me! Don't leave me with them." She sobbed and clutched at Kitarisa.

"Alea, you must go. Father has paid these men handsomely for your return. They have risked their lives for you. Go!"

"But what about you," she cried. "They, they will..." She choked on her words, unable to finish.

"They will have poor sport with me," Kitarisa said firmly, trying to cover her own terror. "Reddess will sell me. I am much too old for his tastes. Go, Alea."

She shoved the reluctant girl through the door.

"You are a very brave woman," Assur said quietly, his admiration for her rising with each word.

"I am a fool. What I did...back there...was too easy. He was unbelievably stupid by half."

"I do not mean that, I mean showing us this passage way, trusting us. Our orders were conveyed to us from your father. I cannot understand why his instructions did not include you."

"He has his reasons. You had better go," she said coldly, noticing his impatient men waiting outside.

Deliberately she avoided his penetrating gaze and he was quick to notice the faint trembling in her hands as she clutched the edge of the door.

"If we had another horse--"

"Go!"

It was then he saw the wet gleam of tears on her lowered cheek. She was incredibly brave, but she was as frightened as the other girl, perhaps more.

"When we return, I will speak to your father--"

He did not finish. She was gone, swallowed up into the blackness of the keep and its unspeakable horrors.

IT WAS AN EASY sprint across the dry moat-bed and up the embankment where Courronus, the youngest, waited with the horses. The fire, now out of control, lit the night sky in a roaring inferno. The horses danced at the ends of their reins and rolled their eyes in terror. It took all their skills to keep them from bolting.

From the keep they heard the screams of Reddess' remaining panicky horses, breaking free of their handlers and bolting across the main drawbridge to freedom. Reddess' men ran everywhere, shouting and cursing, trying to hold the last of the terrified horses or make a futile effort at fighting the fire.

"We must go, my lord," Kuurus ordered tersely, "or they will spot us in this light."

Assur shoved Alea onto the jiggling roan and then mounted his gray. He allowed himself one last glance at the roaring inferno and then nodded to the others.

The seven barbarians heeled their tall horses around and fled into the night.

ASSUR BROUGHT UP the rear, keeping the powerful gray just behind Alea's horse, making sure the girl did not fall behind. She was a poor rider and clung desperately to the reins and the roan's meager mane. He silently growled an oath to Verlian. If the stupid girl fell...

With Kuurus in the lead, they could keep a steady, ground-eating pace for a long time until they reached their camp where they could rest for the remainder of the night.

As he watched the girl struggle to keep up with the others, Assur fervently wished it was Kitarisa and not Alea they were supposed to have saved. It angered him to think that such efforts had been made to save a sobbing, hysterical girl, when the worthy one remained in that burning hulk to either die in the flames, or suffer the cruelties and abuse of Reddess' men. Rarely had he witnessed such courage, even among some of his own warriors. He was equally angered by Prince Kazan's callous indifference to his daughter's fate.

"Kuurus!" he called out. "Hold."

The horses skidded to a halt, panting from their exertions. The exhausted girl, unused to hard riding moaned softly from the saddle and leaned over to rest her head against the roan's stubby mane.

"My lord?" Kuurus questioned.

"Take the princess on to the camp; wait for me. If I am not back by the mid of the day tomorrow, you are to go on and return her to Prince Kazan and collect your reward."

Kuurus frowned, troubled. "Where are you going, my lord?"

"Back."

"Back? But that is madness. You will be captured and killed. By now they must know of her escape." He nodded to the huddled princess.

"I am going back to get Alea's sister, Kitarisa. No one told us *not* to save her."

"My lord, we don't have enough horses. We'll be slowed down. This is a dangerous land and--"

"I will be responsible." Assur leaned across the space between them and patted Kuurus' shoulder reassuringly. "She is worthy of saving. We would have never made it without her help. Besides, I would not leave a marglim in the hands of those swine."

Before Kuurus could protest, Assur swung his horse around and headed back toward the distant, raging light in the night sky.

"COME HERE," the big man growled.

Kitarisa huddled against the far wall of the bedchamber, a tiny knife clutched in her trembling fist. It was only a fruit knife, a toy, she had purchased years ago, but it was all that stood between her and the hideous, filthy man in front of her.

The man chuckled at the sight of the knife. The knife did not frighten him. He flexed his beefy hands showing her how easy it would be for him to pry it from her hand and then use it to cut the rest of her gown from her body. The only thing that seemed to disturb him was time.

The fire had not reached this portion of the immense keep, and in the confusion and smoke, he was the only roadwild who had remembered the two women and knew they were unguarded. He had been disappointed when he found Alea missing.

"Where's the blonde wench; someone else get her?" He grunted, then gestured to her again. "Come here, girl," he repeated. "Gimme the knife."

She retreated another step, holding the knife higher. "Don't come any closer. I will kill myself with it."

The big man laughed. "Alive or dead, it won't matter. Your pretty body will be warm, long enough for me to get what I want."

Almost too easily he swung at her wrist and knocked the knife out of her hand. He moved quickly, his speed belying his bulk and pinned her to the wall. His large hands were everywhere at once; on her arms, her belly and her breasts. With one hand he held her by the throat, forcing her head against the wall. With the other, he grabbed greedily at her skirt, pulling it to her waist. One knee was shoved between her legs as he began pressing wet, vile kisses on her mouth and throat.

Kitarisa fought him with every ounce of her strength. Panic and shame rose in her. Her heart beat wildly in her chest as she tried to push off her attacker. With unbelievable luck, Kitarisa saw an opening and struck at his face with her nails and managed to catch his cheek, cutting the skin as neatly as if she had used the knife. The man howled and grabbed his face with one hand, freeing her enough for her to fight him in earnest.

"You bitch!" he roared.

Viciously he slapped her on the side of the head, sending her reeling to the floor. Kitarisa scrambled across the cold stones to find the little knife. Just as she reached it, one large dirty boot came down hard on her arm.

"It won't matter if its on the bed or on the floor, will it now?" he leered, expertly flipping her on her back. Deliberately, the huge man started to lower himself on her, but never made it.

From nowhere, something slim and gleaming whipped around his neck and bit deeply into the fleshy folds of his throat. The man froze. An unseen hand grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked his head so far back, Kitarisa saw his throat muscles bobbing and jerking with nervous swallowing.

"Get off of her," a low, deep voice ordered.

The man let go and eased into a kneeling position, his head still straining backward.

Kitarisa looked up and saw the barbarian's eyes, glittering with ill-concealed rage and deadly intent.

"Get your cloak, Kitarisa, and wait in the corridor," he said firmly.

Scrambling to her feet, she lost no time in complying. She grabbed her cloak and the small satchel containing what was left of her personal articles and ran from the room, huddling in the corridor, afraid to look back, knowing full well what he was doing.

In moments he emerged, wiping the blood from his dagger on a scrap of bed linen.

Smoke began to fill the corridor. He grabbed her arm and began running in the direction of the secret,

back entrance.

Unlike the sobbing, stumbling Alea, Kitarisa's steps were sure and swift. His own strides were too long and relentless for her, but she never once asked him to slow down or stop.

They ran down the curved stairway and past the common room, still unnoticed with its dead occupants, and into the ancient, vaulted stables; Kitarisa determinedly keeping up with him. Only at the zigzag door did he stop and approach with caution. Sword drawn, he eased around the first turn, paused, and then around the second to the door. It was still open, his horse tied just outside, waiting.

They could hear the fire now, roaring and crackling into the night. The shouting had grown fainter as more and more of Reddess' men had either fled or been killed.

"Get on," he ordered. The barbarian's horse was much taller than any of the horses she had ridden and she struggled to reach the stirrup.

Seeing her struggles, Assur re-sheathed his sword and lifted her onto the restive horse. In an instant, he was up behind her, right arm firmly about her waist. He spun the big gray on its haunches and urged him across the dry moat.

"There they are!"

From the gloom, Kitarisa saw three men on foot and one on a horse heading straight for them. She felt the barbarian's beard tickle her ear and cheek.

"Hold the reins and duck your head to the left."

With his hands freed, Assur again pulled out his sword. Holding it high over his head, he spurred the war horse toward the oncoming one; a savage cry ripped from his throat. Fearlessly, the powerful gray thundered straight toward his opponent. Within ten feet, Assur's horse suddenly bent his shoulders toward the left and galloped diagonally to the right. Kitarisa had only moments to realize what the horse was doing and barely managed to duck her head to the left.

Like a great battering ram, the warhorse slammed full force into the shoulder and chest of the oncoming horse. The wretched animal reeled from the blow, stumbling back, while struggling to keep its feet--the impact itself nearly unseating her.

Off balance and unnerved, the rider lost his momentum to attack and Assur took full advantage. A soft whistling sound rippled over her head. In the weird, flickering light of the burning keep, Kitarisa watched the blade come down and cleave the man from neck to breastbone, but Assur allowed no time for her to take in the grisly sight. He spun the gray around again and headed straight for the three remaining roadwilderds.

The others stopped, having no stomach or skills to fight such an opponent and fled back into the keep. No time would be wasted pursuing them either. Kitarisa glanced down and watched his left hand take the reins from hers. His right hand, still gripping the sword, took a firmer hold about her waist, while the hot blood of his enemy ran down the gleaming blade.

Once more, he heeled the horse around and headed up the dry, outer rim of the moat, across the bridge, and into the forest.

THE BIG GRAY settled into a deep, steady jog and after what seemed an eternity of silent riding, Kitarisa at last had the nerve to speak.

"You should not have done that, you could have been killed."

"It is done," he answered quietly, his breath fluttering at the back of her neck.

"Then I am in your debt. I owe you my life."

"I consider the debt paid. I could not leave you behind after what you did for my men."

"Well then, thank you." She paused a moment. "I do not mean to be an annoyance, but I need for you to stop...a moment. I need to...I need..." she ended lamely.

He did not press her any further, but halted the horse and slid off. He held his hands up to her and she allowed him to take her waist and ease her down from the saddle. He was very close and she could nearly feel his heart even through his leather jerkin and her own cloak.

"Do not go far. There are said to be marglims in these woods."

Kitarisa slipped away to attend to her needs, not daring to look back at him. When she returned, she

found him resting easily on a large rock, holding the reins at the ends while the horse cropped peacefully at the sparse grass.

"Better?"

She nodded.

"Why not sit down a moment? We could do with a rest."

Kitarisa sat on the nearest boulder, arranging what was left of her ragged skirts over her knees. The moon was bright, even though only a slim crescent and in its soft light, she could at last take the time to really look at him.

The warrior was like no other man she had ever seen--frightening, savage, and certainly not from any of the lands around Gorendt. Once her old nurse had told her of the people far to the west that were both fierce warriors and highly cultured and she wondered if he was one of them. He did not speak like a barbarian or a common mercenary.

His long, almost-black hair was drawn high behind his head and tightly bound with an intricately carved silver ring. No other jewelry adorned him, save for a smooth silver collar about his neck. It was wide as three of her fingers and gleamed in the wan light.

He looked like a great cat at rest, quiet but alert. The fierce eyes were calm now, even languid. A trim beard and moustache framed a face with high fine cheekbones, flat cheeks and a straight, firm nose. Dark brows swooped over slightly almond-shaped eyes and she suddenly found herself staring at them.

Two sets of odd, yet strangely magnificent markings embellished his eyes. She had dismissed them earlier as shadows made from the dark interior of the old keep. Kitarisa felt a brief impulse to laugh, but suppressed it. She would not dare risk ridiculing such a man or provoke his temper.

A bold, black line swept from the inner corner of each eye, just under the lashes of the lower lid and stopped at the outer corners. A second, wider set of markings, as if applied in black paint, flared up and back from the outer edges of the upper lids, nearly touching his brows, giving him a fierce, cruel look, like a bird of prey. She could not decide if they were either painted on or tattooed into his skin.

"We are born with them," he said with a trace of a smile. "They are to remind us of who we are and where we came from."

"I have never seen a man with eyes like yours. How is that done?"

"They are the marks given to us Verlian."

"By the Goddess?"

"You do not remember your history, princess? When the Goddess' holy daughters each took a man as husband, the Goddess marked them so She would know Her own." He nodded upward toward the pale sliver of the quarter moon. "Ancient Talesians believed Verlian lives in the moon and those three smaller moons to the left...?"

Kitarisa looked at the three gleaming moonlets to the left of Verlian--the three smaller moons orbiting in a precise vertical line next to their great mother.

"Those are Verlian's daughters: Ponosel, Chalisetra and Siarsia. All our tribes claim descent from Her three daughters." He touched one of his eyes. "All Talesian males are born with these marks, but not our women."

Kitarisa suppressed a shiver. Talesians: blood-drinkers, child-eaters--the barbarians who decimated the Eastern Lands so long ago.

"So, you are Talesian. I wondered as much. You do not sound like a common mercenary or a barbarian."

"An educated one," he said simply, not offering any other information.

"And terrifying," she added.

"There has been too much bloodshed today, even for a barbarian," he said with a another slight smile.

"In any case, I am grateful to you, but I fear your efforts will be in vain. My father will not reward you. It is only Alea he wants returned."

"He is a fool. You are worth ten of her."

"In his eyes, I am less than worthless," she said flatly. "I am the daughter of his enemy."

Assur scowled. "I do not understand. Are you not of his house?"

She studied him briefly, wondering what to tell him, but somehow knew he could be trusted. In spite of his frightening demeanor and terrifying gaze, she sensed she could tell him nearly anything.

"For years the people of Gorendt and Riehl have fought over a long forgotten cause. When my father was a young man, the two provinces decided it was time to stop the fighting and mend their differences. He was forced to marry the daughter of the Riehl prince, Prince Murliff, my grandfather. My mother Liestra, was Murliff's only daughter and when she married Kazan, a treaty was drawn. But my father hated the marriage and he hated my mother. She was the enemy. Their one and only obligatory union produced me but we were both despised and rejected. My mother lived out her life in one wing of my father's keep with me as her sole comfort. Only for the most formal state functions was she tolerated outside her chambers."

"When I was seven she died--my nurse said from a broken heart. I believe it was poison, but I have no proof. My father then married his dancing girl, Fiana, and in less than a year, Alea, and her twin Alor, were born. Fiana did not survive the birth and I am sure if he could have arranged it, my father would have blamed her death on me, but I was here at Sherehn with my grandfather. Father would not stand to have me about with Fiana's time so near."

"Why did you not return to your grandfather?" Assur interjected.

"The laws of Gorendt did not allow it and my grandfather did not want to do anything to upset the fragile truce. I cannot leave Gorendt until my bride-price is paid...and that will never happen, you can be sure of it." She too, smiled a little wryly. "In a way, it is a pity you came back for me, at least having been sold into slavery I would have been free of my father."

"I was informed you were to be killed, if the ransom was not paid," he said, nearly surprised.

"I doubt it. I would have been worth more sold to Odun slavers than dead and my father never keeps anything unless it has some value. The day we were captured, Alea and I were out riding. My father found it most convenient to find a purpose for me, to make me earn my keep while living under his roof. I was instructed to be both Alea's companion and chaperon until she married." She sighed and stood up. "Reddesh' men were far too swift for our poor old riding horses and they overwhelmed our guards before we had gone a hundred paces. I must assume he then hired you to rescue her? Do not worry. You will be paid handsomely."

"And what of you? Why would he not wish you to be returned?"

"I have already told you. I am despised. My abduction would have been a convenient excuse to be rid of me, now that I have outlived my worth."

"But surely Alea will tell him?"

Kitarisa again sighed heavily, already weary of her story. "Alea is a vain and spoiled child. She will agree to anything father wishes. Besides, I am a potential rival for all her suitors and she cannot bear a single rival," she added with a trace of despair in her voice.

Assur remained silent for a moment, absorbing her appalling story. "What will he do when you are returned?"

She shook out the folds of her cloak and pulled the hood over her hair.

"Does it really matter?" she said bitterly. "You will have your gold and all of you will return to Talesia rich men."

"It matters very much *Princess* Kitarisa."

She turned away from him and moved toward the horse, but not quick enough for him to miss the tears on her cheeks.

"What is your name?" she asked from the muffled depths of her cloak.

"Assur."

"Just Assur?"

"It is all you need to know, for now."

## Chapter 3

THEY RODE ON into the night, but this time Kitarisa sat behind Assur since it was more

comfortable and easier for both of them to keep their balance. He did not speak, but listened to the steady, heavy thuds of the horse's hooves and the sounds of the forest.

He was keenly aware of the woman behind him--she clung firmly to his waist in order to keep herself steady and centered on the horse's rump. She was warm and soft and to his annoyance, he was having trouble focusing on the trail before him. He was tired too. It was past the mid of the night and he desperately needed the rest. So did the horse.

Nearing the campsite, he saw Kuurus spring forward, his sword already unsheathed.

"Wait until I am asleep before you butcher me, Kuurus," he said wearily. "I will not feel it then."

He kicked his right leg over the horse's neck and slid to the ground. Kitarisa swayed precariously and just as she toppled forward nearly asleep, he caught her.

"So, you went back for her?"

"She saved our skins," Assur said bluntly. "You would do more for a roadwild, buying the next round of ale."

Carefully, he laid her down next to the sleeping Alea.

"Were you followed, my lord?" Kuurus asked, re-sheathing his sword.

Assur shook his head. "No. We are well out of danger now. Wake me in the mid of the morning."

He turned on his heel, dismissing the warrior and headed for his own bed--Kuurus would care for the horse.

"Yes, my lord," Kuurus murmured, bowing respectfully.

AS KITARISA KNEW, Alea was going to be difficult right from the start. Out of any foreseeable danger, the girl took full advantage of her position and started in the moment they prepared to leave in the morning.

Wisely, Kuurus decided Alea was to ride behind Brekk and Kitarisa would ride the roan herself--the decision sending Alea into a rage.

"I will *not* ride behind anyone," she stormed. "My position *demand*s I ride a horse of my own."

Kuurus tried to be tactful, but rapidly lost his patience with the recalcitrant girl.

"Princess, I mean no disrespect, but you will be safer behind Brekk and we will be able to move faster."

"Are you saying that I cannot ride well enough?"

"It is just that the Princess Kitarisa appears to be more skilled..."

"I can ride well enough! I will not be laughed at. Imagine me, a daughter of the Dar Baen house riding behind a...a common brigand, like a milkmaid."

"That is enough," Kitarisa snapped.

"Who are you to take sides? You agree with these barbarians? You wish to see me disgraced? I must have a horse of my own. I will not be humiliated by riding behind a man who looks like an animal--a freak."

Something in Kitarisa finally snapped, her patience pushed beyond the limit by Alea's whining. She was exhausted and sore from the long night's ride, and every muscle hurt from sleeping on the hard ground. Taking the girl by the shoulders she spun her around and shook Alea till her head flopped back and forth like a rag doll.

"How dare you insult them! How dare you jeopardize their efforts. You owe every one of these men an apology. They risked their lives saving you from Reddesh. You will stop your complaining immediately, Alea, and do exactly as they say. If you don't, I am quite certain they could arrange for your return to that keep! Is that what you want?"

Alea was sniffing now, her tears and sobbing ruining her pretty looks. "I'm sorry. I'm just so tired."

"We are all tired. Our nerves are raw, but your whining will not help. Do as you are told and get on that horse."

"I do not want to ride with him," she continued petulantly.

"Alea," Kitarisa sighed with exaggerated patience, "you cannot ride as well as I and you know it. We must hurry--what if you were to fall and break something?"

"I will not fall," she said stubbornly.

"We cannot take that risk, get on the horse."

"No. If you make me I will tell father."

"I don't care," Kitarisa said, exasperated. "Do as you are told, Alea."

"What if I refuse to go and decide to stay here?" Alea spread her skirts and settled herself on the nearest log, determined not to budge.

"Then stay here and be eaten by marglims." Kitarisa gestured to Assur and his men. "Do you think they will care? Now you listen to me. You stop behaving like a spoiled, worthless child and get on that horse! And if you open your mouth just once I will thrash you within an inch of your life. Get up!"

Kitarisa jerked Alea to her feet and shoved her to Brekk's horse.

"You cannot make--"

Kitarisa did not let her finish. Furious, her temper finally broken, she slapped Alea hard across the face. She could hear the collective intake of breath from the barbarians, but she did not care.

"Get on that horse and keep quiet," she gritted.

Reluctantly, Alea allowed Brekk to pull her up behind him on his horse and gingerly she wrapped her arms around his waist. The look she cast down to Kitarisa was one of pure hate but Kitarisa had no time to argue with the girl any longer.

She strode over to the patient, little roan, brushing aside Assur's hands and scrambled onto his back. She did not wait for the others but clucked to the horse and headed out of the camp.

For most of the day Alea held her peace and they rode in relative silence. Kitarisa kept away from Assur and the ferocious Kuurus. She did not want their patronizing or their sympathy. She wanted quiet and the chance to think. In a very short time she would be back in Gorenndt Keep and she looked upon her return with dread. Kazan would surely punish her for striking Alea--Alea would make sure of that.

Then there was the matter of her very presence. It was clear her father had planned only for Alea's rescue, not hers. He would not pay Assur or his men for her return, in fact, Kitarisa wondered briefly if he would honor his contract at all knowing they had actually taken the time to bring her home, too. She at once dismissed that thought. Kazan would pay. She could not imagine him daring to break an agreement with someone like Assur.

Kitarisa found herself watching his back as they moved single file along the narrow trail. The morning air was chill and the Talesians had wrapped themselves in long, beautiful fur cloaks, each a masterpiece of workmanship. In the daylight, Kitarisa was quick to notice that all of Assur's men resembled him with their curious and rather splendid eye embellishments. None of them looked like common swords-for-hire. They carried themselves with too much nobility and each obeyed Assur with intense deference.

They all wore their hair the same, held tightly behind their heads with a silver ring--the long, heavy shank falling past their shoulders. She thought about the clipped, manicured men in Kazan's court and how they would sneer at such a barbarous affectation.

Each wore a gleaming collar too, but not as wide or as fine as Assur's. She was certain old Nans was referring to the Talesians when she spoke of them so long ago.

"They be fierce as lions," her old nurse intoned, "but keen and fine. When I was a girl my da', he take me to see the Ter-Rey, the High Prince to be crowned. Took ten days just to get there."

Kitarisa wondered briefly if it had taken Assur and his men ten days to travel all that way just to rescue her sister, but the most curious thing of all was why her father had gone to such great lengths to hire Talesians, when there were plenty of Gorenndian men eager to earn her father's gold.

It was plain Assur had no great need for money. Every piece of his equipment from the great gray horse's finely worked bridle to the swords on his back, spoke of a man accustomed to the finest. Even his men were attired and equipped with the best--certainly far better than her father's soldiers and in spite of the rough conditions, none of them looked bedraggled or shabby from their hard exertions. They were a silent team of ruthless men who carried out their work with precision and utter fearlessness. She wondered if all Talesians were like them.

Lost in her musings, she did not notice when Assur reined his horse back to ride along side her.

"You are very quiet. Are you worried about returning home?" he asked.

"Yes. I am sure I will be punished for slapping Alea. She is a vain, spoiled child and I am sorry she insulted your man. I hope I will not have to lose my temper again."

"Under the circumstances, it was understandable. What that girl needs is to be punished, and often. Do not worry, my lady, I will make sure not one of my men verify her story. She will either look like a fool for accusing you, or a complete liar."

"Thank you, but *he* will believe her."

"I will not allow him to punish you," he concluded. He said it with such conviction, she almost believed him.

"Still, I apologize for my temper."

"It was what she deserved, my lady. As I said before, you are worth ten of her. It is a pity your father cannot see that."

Kitarisa said nothing, but rode on. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed he was watching her intently.

"You ride very well."

"I have been riding since I was quite young. It is the one thing my father did allow me to learn. I have always enjoyed it and I miss the hunts with my grandfather. Sherehn Keep was a beautiful place when I was little. I was allowed to stay there during the summer and we rode every day--hunts and picnics. It is a shame it is ruined now," she said a little wistfully.

"Why was it abandoned?"

"The keep itself lies on Riehlian land. When my grandfather was alive, he used it as a hunting lodge and as an escape from the pressures of his duties. When he died, his brother, Prince Ta'Ret, my great-uncle, had no use for it. He sold it to a wealthy merchant who used it for a storehouse and trading center, it being right on the river. Sadly, even he did not keep it in good repair and when the Great Flooding came about ten turns ago, the east breach wall was badly damaged from the flooding. He never repaired it but simply abandoned it. Since then it has housed roadwits, thieves, Qualani and even a tribe of Huons."

"And no one has ever fought to take it back?"

"No."

"A mistake, it is a grave mistake. The keep is ideal for defending such a vulnerable border. I am surprised your great-uncle would sell such a valuable piece of property."

Kitarisa shrugged. "Perhaps it had to do with the treaty. Ta'Ret died too, soon after Prince Murliff. You seem very knowledgeable about defending keeps and fighting battles?"

"It is part of my trade."

By early afternoon, Kuurus finally signaled them to stop in a small clearing in the woods. Kitarisa and Alea slid exhausted from the horses and were only too grateful when two of the men handed out a light meal of cheese and some flat, cracker-like bread that tasted remarkably good.

"We will have meat tonight," the warrior, Del, apologized shyly.

Kitarisa smiled at him. "This is fine for now, but something hot will taste good."

Throughout her entire contact with the Talesians, Kitarisa noticed that all of them rarely talked. Only Assur and occasionally Kuurus seemed to have anything to say; the others spoke when absolutely necessary or when answering to orders. Even Alea noticed it and was quick to point it out.

"Don't any of you talk? Can't you say anything?" she complained.

The seven Talesians eyed each other, until at last Assur spoke.

"All of us have been trained to silence since we were youths, particularly in matters of war, my lady. Silence and surprise are excellent weapons, but do not worry, once we are out of danger, you will notice we can speak very well. Too well."

Again, the wry, tight smile as he looked meaningfully at Brekk and the youngest, the redheaded Courronus.

Kitarisa stood up and gestured to Alea.

"Come Alea, let us stretch our legs."

She tugged at Alea's sleeve and the tired girl silently obeyed.

"Not too far," Kuurus warned.

Kitarisa nodded and moved off into the edge of the woods with Alea in tow.

"They are strange, ugly men," Alea commented. "Why are their eyes like that?"

"They are Talesians. Their leader, Assur, told me they are born with them. He said they are supposed to remind them of who they are. They believe the Goddess marked them."

"Well, they look horrible. They look like...they are hideous. And the ugly one with those scars! Ugh! I wonder if they are going to kill us?"

"I do not think so. And, I think they look magnificent in a sort of ferocious way. They remind me of eagles."

"You are ridiculous, Kita. You--"

Kitarisa suddenly held up a hand, silencing her. The air smelled slightly musty and rank and she felt a quick chill of terror shoot up her spine. Instinctively, both of them crouched down, listening. From just beyond a low rise in the forest they saw them. There were at least eight, maybe ten--the chalky gray skin was unmistakable: marglims. Flesheaters.

Kitarisa motioned Alea to stay silent as they hurried back to the camp. She ran straight to Assur, her eyes wide with terror.

"Marglims," she managed to whisper.

At once alert, Assur took her elbow to steady her.

"Where? How many?"

"Eight, maybe ten, just beyond that hill."

The others needed no instruction. At once their swords were drawn and they fell into an offensive stance.

The horses smelled them too and whinnied nervously; their eyes rolled showing the whites.

Grunting and shuffling, the marglims had heard the horses, breached the low hillock, and descended on them like a vile plague.

Of all the frightening stories adults used to elicit obedience from children, the warnings about marglims were the ones believed. Marglims: the vile ones, flesh-eaters.

The Talesians wasted no time for the marglims to reach them. With wild battle cries they flung themselves at the hideous, gray creatures, swords arcing and striking with deadly accuracy.

Clutching Alea, Kitarisa watched as Assur's men attacked the marglims, leather-skinned and bony creatures, with long arms that ended with three, claw-like talons. Great scoop-shaped ears sprouted from their squat, oval heads and two large tusks grew from their lower jaw. Immensely strong, they fought with only their hands and teeth, occasionally using an axe or a knife. They stank of carrion and blood. And they ate...anything.

There was blood everywhere, oceans of it. As the battle grew in fury, Kitarisa pulled the trembling Alea near a tree and crouched down, covering the younger girl with her own body to shield her from the horror. She could barely think or even move, but only stare in mute terror.

Their courteous, mysterious saviors were suddenly transformed into savage killers. Kitarisa watched the fiercest-looking one, Kuurus, hurl himself at two of them, sword slashing. In two neat blows, he decapitated one, whirled lightly on his toes and brought the sword down on the other's shoulder, splitting the creature nearly in half--its screams of death filling the forest.

Each of the Talesians fought with a cold fury--deadly earnest and unyielding. In the midst, Assur struck at one of the marglims, its hideous face slobbering and gabbling as it tried to pin him to a tree. Using his shoulder, he rammed into the creature's belly sending it staggering back. In a heartbeat, gripping the sword with both hands, Assur thrust the sword deep into the marglim's throat. Blood gushed from the open wound in a vile torrent, spilling down its leathery skin to the ground where the beast toppled into a stinking heap.

One by one the hideous creatures fell. Although strong, they were immensely stupid and slow. Only by sheer numbers could they be a serious threat to a trained fighting force, but Assur's men took no chances. Assur quickly assessed the carnage. All the marglims lay dead in piles of severed flesh and reeking blood. He nodded to his men.

"Del, Courronus, get the horses. Brekk, the rest of you look up beyond the hill and see if there are any more."

He turned toward Kitarisa, when they all heard a shrill scream pierce the air. One, lone marglim, smaller than the others had crept into the clearing unnoticed and managed to pull Alea away from Kitarisa. It would never let her go unless they severed the arms from its body.

"Assur! Help us!" Kitarisa shrieked, as Alea was savagely torn from her arms.

Gabbling and slobbering, the marglim dragged Alea from the clearing. Alea screamed in terror, trying to fight the creature, but her screams seemed to excite the marglim even more. It howled in triumph, lifting her high over its head as if she were some kind of prize.

Kuurus and Assur surrounded the beast and attacked, repeatedly driving their blades into it, shifting quickly to avoid striking the terrified girl. Grunting in pain the marglim stumbled and lost its grip on Alea. Kuurus raised his sword and brought it down in one mighty blow, severing the creature's arm at the shoulder. Too frightened to move, Alea sagged in the grip of its other taloned hand.

Like a pack of savage wolves, Kuurus, Assur and two of the others swarmed over the marglim, striking and cutting, forcing the vile creature to its knees. Groaning and bleeding from its many wounds, the beast sank and dropped Alea. With a final blow, Kuurus drove his sword deep into its chest. Death blood spewed from its mouth, splattering Kuurus on his face and shoulder.

Assur did not allow any of them to linger over the dead marglim. Grabbing Alea, he motioned all of them to get to the horses.

"My lord, I cannot!" Kuurus gasped, clutching his belly in agony. "I have swallowed its blood."

Assur and the others went ash-white. Marglim blood was harmless on the skin even if cut, but ingested it was certain death.

"Can you ride?"

Kuurus nodded weakly. A frightening urgency pervaded all the Talesians. The horses were gathered and swiftly mounted. Even Alea did not protest and obediently scrambled up behind Brekk. Grabbing for the roan, Kitarisa dragged herself onto his back and kicked the horse into a bone-jarring gallop.

Riding between two of his comrades, Kuurus managed to hang on, doubled over, clenching his teeth in pain; the wild eye markings and face scars made him appear even more terrifying.

Assur set a brutal pace, taking them through the most dense part of the forest to the west, beyond the Rift Cut.

Kitarisa knew roughly where he was leading them, far north of Gorendt into the easternmost reaches of the Adrex Mountains. There were plenty of valleys and glens where they could stop safely.

When the last pale thread of light left the sky, Assur finally stopped. The small clearing overlooked a wide valley, easily guarded, and a fresh, fast-running creek flowed not far from where they were to camp.

Kuurus nearly fell from his horse, his face white with agony--the livid cheek scars stood out in hideous contrast to the paleness of his skin.

"Get him down and get a fire started as soon as you can," Kitarisa ordered firmly.

Assur and the others looked at her, bewildered.

"He will die soon, my lady. Verlian will Summon him," Brekk was quick to comment.

"No, he is not going to die."

"Marglim blood is poison to death; no one survives it," Assur added.

"No. He is not going to die," Kitarisa repeated. "You must get the water boiling. Alea, get the bag from my saddle."

Assur frowned at her, unconvinced. "Are you sure of this, my lady?"

"My Lord Assur," she said, standing to face him. Unconsciously, Kitarisa had begun referring to him as "my lord" as easily as the others--somehow it befitted him. "Kuurus will not die, if you let me attend to him. I know what to do, I have seen this before."

"You have seen someone survive the blood-poisoning of a marglim?"

"Yes, but we must hurry. Please, my lord."

Assur studied her for a long moment. Kitarisa knew she had not failed him once since they had fled

Sherehn Keep, but it was vital he believe her.

He nodded, making his decision. "What should be done?"

"Help me to remove his jerkin and tunic; get his cloak, the fur one to wrap him in, and remove all his weapons so he will not hurt himself."

Assur nodded to his men and they jumped to obey.

*Boil the water, girl, and make a strong, black tea of the borgonwort flower.*

From her satchel, Kitarisa removed a small silk bag that held the dried blossoms of the borgonwort. It, like the other herbs she kept, served well for the petty little aches and pains Alea so commonly complained about--Kitarisa discovered by keeping a small supply of medicines and herbs, she saved herself and those attending Alea much hardship.

When the water boiled, she dropped the dark brown blossoms and leaves into the water, turning it to a bright amber color.

Kuurus was thrashing now, the blood of the marglim roiling in his stomach. Sweat covered his body as he fought the effects of the poison. With firm hands, Kitarisa held his head and poured the hot liquid into his mouth. The fierce Talesian choked and sputtered, but she did not stop until all of the cup's contents was down his throat.

*Pour as much of it as they will hold, child, till the vomitin'comes .Let `em retch till all the blood's out.*

Gently, Kitarisa helped Kuurus turn and expel the vile blood. His skin felt hot and sticky and she stared in amazement at the number of scars criss-crossing his lean body. When Kuurus finally lost the last of it, he sank back exhausted, his eyes fluttered open long enough to let her know it was all over.

"Will he be all right now?" Assur asked in a low voice.

Kitarisa looked up at him and suddenly realized that his eyes, those remarkable eyes were dark, vivid blue. She stared at him and for a moment was lost for an answer.

"He should be, if he is strong enough. He must fight the fever. If he survives that, he will recover completely."

For the next two hours, Kitarisa sponged Kuurus' shaking, drenched body with strips torn from her petticoat and from Alea's, while the six Talesians watched on anxiously. Curiously quiet, Alea knelt by Kitarisa to assist her as if she had at last realized the value of these strange, serious men, particularly the one lying before her.

Kitarisa finally stood up, wiping her hands and face with a scrap of dry cloth.

"He will sleep now." She sighed heavily, passing a tired hand over her hair. Kuurus was indeed asleep, the shaking had stopped and he rested quietly underneath the fur cloak.

Kitarisa turned and made her way to the little creek. The cold, fresh water felt marvelous as she sponged her neck and shoulders, allowing the cool liquid to run down between her breasts.

"This is twice, now, that I owe you for the life of my men, particularly this man," Assur spoke from behind her.

"He saved Alea's life, what else could I do?"

"Still, I am grateful to you."

"Then we are even, Lord Assur."

"Perhaps."

He came to stand next to her, watching her ablutions. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him taking in the soft, whiteness of her breasts just showing from the top edge of her gown. Too weary to be self-conscious, Kitarisa simply folded and squeezed out the wet rag.

"Will Kuurus survive?" he asked.

"Yes. His fever has broken and the marglim blood is gone. Kuurus will be weak for several days and he must not be allowed strong drink; no wine or ale."

"I will see he obeys. You realize, of course, he will take an Oath of Duty on your life, once he realizes he will live."

"I do not understand; an `Oath of Duty'?"

"Saving the life of a Talesian, particularly one of the Siarsi Tribe is a serious matter. Our law is clear.

Kuurus must swear a solemn Oath of Duty to you. He is yours to command, my lady. He will do anything for you. Anything."

"I do not want his oaths," she said, exasperated. "I just want him to get well."

"He will, but he must never forget what you have done. Nor will I," Assur added softly.

"No more oaths, please," she said with some asperity.

"Kitarisa, why do you turn aside kindness, when you so readily give it?"

She looked up at him, trying to read his meaning. The dark eye markings did not mar the gentleness in his gaze and it was impossible not to miss the warmth in his voice.

"I spare myself the pain, my lord. I cannot afford it." She offered him no self-pity, but rather hard reality. "I am tired and I am going to sleep now. Kuurus will be all right if someone stays with him."

Abruptly, she turned on her heel and strode back to the camp, not knowing she had left Assur troubled--deeply troubled.

## Chapter 4

THE NORTH TOWER, the oldest tower of Gorenndt Keep commanded the best views of the city, but it was only accessible by a long narrow corridor, poorly-lit, forgotten and never guarded. Even if one could be persuaded to stand guard in its dark, narrow recesses, it was not necessary. The occupant of the tower required no protection. Few knew of the tower's resident and Kazan was determined to keep it that way. Only one, silent wraith of a girl in immaculate white robes, delivered the trays of food and then retreated to the sanctity of a remote chamber when her tasks were completed.

Kazan reluctantly approached the first of the winding steps leading to the tower's upper chamber. He was rarely frightened, but the impending interview filled him with dread.

A rat scurried past the heel of his boot and vanished into the shadowed edges of the stairwell.

The stairs were steep, the tower having been built in the old days of the empire when it was needed as a lookout for encroaching Qualani or the mindless Huons. It had even been used that terrible day when the first watch saw the oncoming deluge of Talesians. How many warriors had climbed these very steps to report on the progress of a battle? How many had sought out the advantage of the tower's height to send a rain of arrows down on their unsuspecting enemies, Kazan reflected as he approached the great oak door that sealed the tower room from the rest of the keep and the world.

He knocked lightly. A cool, detached voice bade him to enter.

"Have you come to report your failure?" the serene voice went on as he shut the door behind him.

All he could see was one slim, white hand resting on the arm of a high-backed chair--the deep shadows concealing the occupant from him. The fingers curled, beckoning him to approach. Long, white nails, more like talons, flexed momentarily and resumed their resting place on the black wood of the armrest.

The chamber was simply furnished with the one tall chair, intricately carved and embellished with deep inlays of old ivory, break horn and blood-colored carnelian. A narrow, draped bed stood against the side wall; two or three trunks were placed near it. In the center of the room was a round table, also deeply carved like the chair and upon it, silver candlesticks and the strange paraphernalia of the room's occupant. A brass brazier, standing on taloned legs radiated warmth and the faint smell of incense, keeping the room comfortable and fragrant. To the back, one of the many mullioned windows had been opened to allow for fresh air.

"There have been some unexpected changes in our plans Holy Sister," Kazan said, hoping his voice did not betray his apprehension.

"Changes? The only thing I require is a complete explanation."

Kazan forced himself to face the colorless, ice-water eyes. Hair as white as the purest snow, spread like a veil over her shoulders and arms, down the sides of the chair, nearly to the thick carpet under her feet. A pale, beautiful face, that once held the promise of compassion and wisdom, was now marred by corruption and cruelty.

She glared at him.

"Please explain, dear Kazan."

"I have been informed the High Prince, the Ter-Rey himself, has sent a band of mercenaries and they have managed to free both Alea and Kitarisa."

"Did you not instruct Reddess to kill her if the plan failed?"

"I did--his instructions were clear, but the barbarians came too early and they did something completely unexpected; they burned Sherehn Keep to get Alea out. The Talesians took them both. I presume the Riehlans found out about the abduction and somehow got a message to the Ter-Rey."

"And Sherehn is now in ruins, with all your precious weapons in ashes," she finished for him. "Your ineptitude is only surpassed by your stupidity. I will not tolerate another blunder. You are a fighting man, or were." She gestured to his spreading middle. "Talesians are well-known for their superior fighting abilities. Common roadwinds like Reddess are as inferior to Talesians, as stupid oxen are to blooded horses."

"Reverend Fa, it was *you* who wished this abduction to take place. How was I to know the High Prince would find out and send his warriors? My own men pace and rage in their garrison--they are itching to fight, but I must hold them like leashed hounds, forbidding them to leave lest they break the prince's peace. A sorry excuse indeed!"

"My *instructions*, Kazan, were for you to arrange the abduction itself. The council in Riehl found out and has told the Ter-Rey, temporarily halting our plans. But it is done. Alea's return is assured and the Talesian barbarians will, no doubt, inform His Highness of this awkward misunderstanding. Your precious twins may never fulfill your lofty ambitions."

"I will see Alor sit on the Falcon Throne and Alea will marry into the House of Maretstan."

"Alor! Bah! He is worse than useless--a sniveling boy."

"Nevertheless, Holy Sister, I mean for him to hold Riehl."

"Such grand ambitions," she sneered softly. "It is Kitarisa you must contend with now. As long as she lives, Kazan, neither one of your spoiled brats hold any claim to Riehl's throne."

"Then what do you recommend? Poison again?"

"No. I must think. This must be planned with the utmost care."

"And the Talesians? What of them?"

"They are dangerous. You must watch them carefully. The Blessed Medruth has warned me of them. Their leader is intelligent and more cunning than I suspected. He is most assuredly a spy for the High Prince."

Kazan snorted in disgust. "The High Prince grows cabbages and fishes for blacktrout!"

"Yes, the elder prince, the Descending High Prince, takes his ease now, but it is the younger, the Ascending Prince we must watch."

The woman stood and moved to the window to gaze down upon the subdued activity of the city, her back to Kazan.

"Leave me now. You will pay the Talesian mercenaries generously. Make a show of your gratitude."

"And Kitarisa?"

The white-robed shoulders shrugged. "Do as you wish, but she is not to be harmed, not yet. I want no more mistakes. See that you do not disappoint me like Reddess. He has paid the highest price for his blundering."

She turned abruptly, rustling the heavy skirts of her robes and moved to the table in two strides.

"Prince or thief, it makes no difference to me who defies the Will of the Divine Medruth. She must be obeyed. All will suffer the same fate."

On the table was a large, tightly-woven basket. She snapped open the lid and Kazan nearly gagged seeing its contents.

Still grimacing in his death throes with the eyes left open, the face of Reddess' severed head stared up at him. Kazan staggered back a step, nauseated and for the first time felt a streak of genuine fear strike through him.

"Learn from his mistakes, Kazan," she said coldly, shutting the lid over her hideous trophy.

"As you command Mistress Malgora...Holy Sister," Kazan managed to whisper. He bowed and

hastily withdrew from the tower chamber.

SHE WATCHED Kazan's retreating form and smiled thinly.

*A fool, but a useful one.*

Malgora turned again to the windows and lightly touched one of the panes, pressing it open to allow for more of the cool air to enter.

She scanned beyond the limits of the tower, the far walls and high ramparts of Gorenndt Keep until her gaze rested upon the dark, shadowy bulk of the Adrex. She smiled a slow secret smile.

"We will yet lure our brave eagle from his nest," she murmured softly. "A royal bird who will eat from our hand and wear our jesses. Worthy prey."

TO EVERYONE'S surprise, it was Kuurus who awakened first, demanding food and attention.

"What is a man to do to get something to eat?" he growled in mock annoyance.

Kitarisa knelt by him, pressing her palm to his forehead.

"I see you are feeling much better. Are you chilled?"

The gruff Talesian eyed her.

"So, it was you who saved me? I was sure I would be in Verlian's Hall by now, dining on lamb and honey."

"I have seen marglim poisoning treated before. I did not doubt for a moment you would survive. Besides," she added with a light smile, "you are far too tough to let a bit of marglim blood stop you."

Kuurus grinned. "I have been saved from Verlian's Summons. Surely you are one of Her Daughters, my lady. I shall be twice blessed."

Kitarisa patted his arm. "You were *saved* by borgonwort, my friend; it forces the blood out and cleanses the system. I have prepared more, but do not worry, the retching is over. Now you must rest."

He made a face, but meekly accepted another cup of the hot liquid.

"I believe I have seen the unseeable--Kuurus submitting to orders from a lady, as gentle as a day-old lamb," Brekk joked good-naturedly.

It was clear all the Talesians were relieved to see their ferocious comrade alive and obviously doing well.

"I will have your liver for my first meal, boy," Kuurus threatened, but with a wide grin on his scarred face. The men laughed at his empty promise.

Kitarisa caught Assur standing off to one side and smiling too at the bit of nonsense between her and his men. It never occurred to her that any of them could show such light-hearted bantering. The smile lit up Assur's entire face, making him appear almost boyish. It was a strange paradox, knowing that in an instant they could turn from joking, coltish boys, to terrifying, brutal warriors.

"Well, you are not going to have Brekk's liver, *or any* liver for that matter, for at least two days. And no strong drink!" She wagged a warning finger at him.

"You have met your match, Kuurus," Assur said, "and I will see that you obey her, and if necessary by the point of my sword."

All of them laughed again at Kuurus' dilemma.

"And mine," Brekk chimed in.

"And both of mine," the shy Del added.

"There are five blades on my saddle that say you will obey, Kuurus," Jarad rumbled, the biggest of the seven.

"You are all dead men," Kuurus muttered darkly, but clearly enjoying his comrades' ribbing.

Kitarisa sighed. "If you great bullies are done threatening my patient, I will try to get something into him."

The only thing she knew he would be able to keep down was a bit of bread and some broth, but having neither, she managed to soak a piece of their flat, cracker-like bread in the tea and spooned it into his mouth. Kuurus made another face but ate the concoction and did not protest any further.

"I know it tastes terrible, but this bread will stay down and the tea will continue to cleanse your

stomach."

"I am grateful to you, my lady. I would gladly eat anything you wished. You must allow me to take my Oath of Duty, when I am stronger."

She patted his arm again. "It isn't necessary. You saved Alea's life. It was the least I could do."

Genuine alarm flickered through his black and boldly marked eyes.

"You must allow me this. Upon death, no Siarsi may enter the Great Hall of the Goddess when She Summons him. You *must* allow me this duty."

"Very well, but later, when we return to Gorendt."

By late morning, Kuurus felt strong enough to stand and be helped to his horse. They were still a good two days from Gorendt but Assur chose a slow, plodding pace.

The youngest Talesian, Courronus, sidled his horse near Kitarisa, keeping a wary eye on Assur.

"I hope you will allow me to thank you for saving Kuurus' life; my whole family would thank you if they could."

"You sound as if you are related to him?"

"Yes, my lady. He is my uncle."

"Your uncle, indeed? You are a...Siarsi, too?"

"I am," he said, a little proudly.

"But, you do not have those terrible scars and neither do the others."

"I have not earned my scars. Only when I strike down my first enemy."

"You killed a marglim, maybe two, I saw you."

"Marglims are not enemies, my lady, they are mere filth. I will deserve the scars when I have made an honorable kill."

"I see. And the others?"

"Oh, they are Chaliset. The Chaliset tribe do not scar, they take the firemark. Only the Siarsi may scar."

Kitarisa shuddered. Fire markings, whatever they were, and face scarring--no wonder they looked like barbarians.

"I am almost afraid to ask what `fire marks' are."

"The Chaliset are allowed to have the sign of their house marked on the inside of their arms, when they have fought and killed in their first battle. A white hot iron is pressed to the skin, burning the sign of their house into the flesh."

Courronus spoke easily, almost casually about the terrible markings as if he were talking about spring planting or shoeing a horse.

Kitarisa shuddered again. "I see. All of this...marking must be rather painful?"

"Of course, but pain can be controlled. It is what we are taught, from when we are very young." He nodded in Assur's direction, "My Lord Assur took his marking when he was only fifteen," he finished proudly.

She studied Assur's cloaked back. He killed his first enemy at fifteen. A new degree of respect and fear filtered through her, both for Assur and for his men.

"And your ladies, your women? Do they go through all this painful marking and scarring process?"

Young Courronus looked at her, aghast. "Oh no, my lady. That would be...it would be a...well, it would be *becrue!*. Verlian has forbidden it--our women do not fight."

"I meant no offense, Courronus."

She decided to switch subjects to something less upsetting.

"You all seem to do rather well as mercenaries. I have seen a few swords-for-hire and none of them look as well-fed or as well-armed as you."

He appeared to struggle for an answer. In spite his fierce appearance, Courronus was quite young and taken to embarrassed blushing. "My Lord Assur leads us and we must follow him," he answered a bit lamely.

Their pleasant conversation abruptly ended by the sound of Assur clearing his throat. Kitarisa glanced up and felt her blood chill. Riding only a few paces ahead of them, Assur turned in the saddle, his dark,

ominous look directed at Courronus.

The young Siarsi swallowed. The warning was clear. He made a slight bow of his head to her and reined his horse back to take up his position at the rear of the file.

"Excuse me, my lady," he said quietly.

IT WAS DARK when they rode into Lekk's Bend, a small village at the headwaters of the Tamis River. Few people walked the quiet streets and those they did see, scurried away like frightened mice. Occasionally, a pair of suspicious eyes would peer from behind a drawn curtain.

By the set of his shoulders, Kitarisa could tell Assur was not pleased. The townspeople were too suspicious of them even though they were a rarity in this part of Gorenndt. The fear ran deep. Three hundred sunturns could not dim the harsh memory of Talesian cruelty.

Even when Brekk asked in a most courteous tone where the nearest inn might be, he was answered with silence and sullen looks. Both Kuurus and Assur bristled at the insult.

"Your reputation goes well before you, my lord," Kitarisa murmured from the depths of her cloak.

"It appears we will have to tread lightly here if we are to get anything to eat, or find a place for Kuurus to rest."

The Red Breok, the village's only inn stood at the end of the main street; a small sign bearing its namesake swung in the light wind over the doorway.

All conversations ceased the moment they stepped into the common room. Kitarisa swore she heard someone draw in their breath in fear. The low voices started.

"They be Talesians," someone whispered. "What do they want with us?"

"Barbarians, cursed be them," another muttered.

"They'll not get my children," a third voice uttered in low, angry tones.

The innkeeper nervously approached them, wiping his hands on a towel. He eyed Assur and the frightening Kuurus.

"Your service, sirs?"

"We require three rooms for the night and stabling for eight horses," Assur demanded.

The man ran a nervous hand over thinning hair. "Here now, I'll have no trouble with you--no fighting and wenching. This be a decent place."

Kitarisa saw the man's brave effort to defend his inn while trying not to quake at the sight of so many weapons and the deadly stares from those terrifying eyes. Assur was scowling, and in spite of his weakened state, Kuurus began fingering the hilt of his dagger.

"Good innkeeper, as you can see we are Talesians on a long and perilous journey home," she said, slipping her hand through Kuurus' arm and giving it a little squeeze. "We were attacked by marglims. Did you know there is a band of them in the north woods? We lost two of our horses and all our baggage! It is too upsetting. My goodness, we must look a fright to you. Verlian protect us! But my dear husband here, and brother," she nodded to Assur, "fought them off. My husband was injured some. Now we will only be one night and no bother at all. Of course, we are famished and my sister and I would love a bath, if it is not too much trouble. Oh my, look at my gown! We look like roadwilder!"

Kitarisa prattled on, rapidly defusing Assur's temper and the poor innkeeper's fear. He smiled at Kitarisa's feminine chattering.

"You say you were attacked by marglims? A sorry thing indeed. Three rooms? I...I have, I believe I can accommodate you. Of course," he hesitated, casting a glance at Assur, "it will have to be in advance."

"Oh, of course!" Kitarisa let go of Kuurus, took the innkeeper's arm and began leading him toward the stairs to the upper level. "Now you must not mind them. They only *look* fierce but they are such lambs!"

She looked over her shoulder and gave Kuurus a wifely wink. "It is probably their stomachs, they are so hungry. Why they have been eating just crusts! Poor darlings. There were marglims. Did I tell you about the marglims? They killed two of our horses and of course, took all our provisions. Why it is a wonder we are alive to tell you! Verlian's Blessings upon us."

Kitarisa was certain she heard chuckling in the common room--her prattle all too familiar-sounding and

she noted Kuurus was quick enough to cast the woeful look of a beleaguered husband to the watching patrons.

She kept up her mindless rattling until they reached the rooms the innkeeper had chosen for them. Like the rest of the inn, there was little furniture, but the beds were clean with fresh linen.

Once Kuurus had been settled in one room and a light meal sent for him, Kitarisa attended to Alea. There were no provisions for a bath, so they had to settle for a large basin of hot water and good, strong soap. She sponged off the exhausted girl and forced her to eat some of the delicious soup sent up to her.

To Kitarisa's relief, Alea was too tired to argue about anything but quietly submitted to her ministrations and willingly went to bed.

She managed to tend her own needs without any help, washing her face and arms, then vigorously brushing her long hair and deftly plaiting it into one, thick braid. Her gown was almost in rags and she wished she had her little bag with her sewing things. Kitarisa chided herself for leaving it on the horse. She would simply have to go down and get it.

Someone knocked at the door. It was Assur standing on the threshold, his shoulders nearly filled the doorway. Kitarisa took an instinctive step back from him and looked down.

"You and the Lady Alea are comfortable?" he asked softly.

"Yes. Thank you."

"You deserve high marks for diplomacy, my lady. You have completely overwhelmed our good innkeeper. My men are downstairs stuffing themselves."

"Well, what did you expect? These are simple people, country folk. He was frightened out of his wits, what with you glowering at him and Kuurus about to cut out his tongue."

Assur gave her a slight smile. "Are we that terrifying?"

"My lord, you more than live up to your reputation. I am certain not one of these people has ever seen a Talesian and now they have seven in their village. They will talk about this for many turns to come. I am also certain that innkeeper thinks he is tending to a pack of wolves."

"Well then, would you care to join the 'wolves' for some supper?"

Kitarisa finally smiled at him and she noted the stalking, serious light in his eyes had begun to fade.

All of the Talesians, except for Kuurus and his young nephew were seated at a long table near the fire--the locals having hastily, and wisely, given up their places for them. With their plates piled high, the Talesians ate like they traveled, in complete silence.

Breck ate steadily, while Del, as always, ate with his head down. Jarad appeared to have half the kitchen's food on his side of the table, making quick work of a large joint, while Sherlin had already finished one succulent roasted hen and mopped up the juices with a slab of bread while eagerly looking for more.

The innkeeper, smiling and perspiring from the exertion, happily refilled their plates and cups. Assur had been generous with his gold.

As he and Kitarisa approached the table, the four of them stopped eating and started to stand, but she waved them to stay seated.

"I would not take you away from your meal. Please, continue."

Although tired, Kitarisa requested only a bowl of the good soup and some fresh bread. It felt wonderful just to sit and eat and not worry about someone or feel like something was peering over her shoulder.

She watched the Talesians eat and had to smile to herself. They were full of surprises. She had seen her own father wallow his way through joints of meat and quaff massive flagons of ale, his manners no better than Reddess' roadwilderds, and here were supposed barbarians, eating as neatly as the most refined courtiers.

When the last scrap of bread had sponged up the last morsel of food, Assur handed the delighted innkeeper another handful of gold.

"My thanks, my lord," the innkeeper stuttered. "What else may I get for you?"

"You have done your work well. Only good beds and a place for the horses."

The man bowed and scurried away to obey.

The common room had emptied since their arrival and now satisfied and comfortable, the Talesians allowed themselves to relax a little and enjoy the melodies and songs from a boy playing a nine-stringed dalcet.

Kitarisa grew drowsy, lulled by the good food and the warm fire. She leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. The boy's gentle music flooded over her, washing away the tensions and terrors of the past days' events. She remembered Rhynn. The last time they had been together--their meetings had been furtive, dangerous, and always strained with the fear of being discovered. But the last time had been infinitely sweet, full of plans and hopes. He had been so good, so dear. My poor, poor Rhynn....

"You must go to your bed, little sister," a deep voice rumbled softly in her ear, a voice she felt more than heard. Kitarisa struggled to open her eyes. It took a moment for her to register the fact that her cheek was resting firmly against Assur's shoulder. He smelled pleasantly of leather and oiled steel and something else like...the woods, like cedar. Like Rhynn. Her eyes flew open and she jerked upright, her face aflame with embarrassment. She was fervently glad the light was so low in the common room that no one would see her scarlet face, although she did notice none of Assur's men seemed to be paying any attention to her at all.

Jarad nursed the last of his wine and listened intently to the boy's playing. Sherlin having found a scrap of an oiled rag, was industriously wiping down one of his swords. Del had taken it upon himself to tend the fire and was rearranging the logs in the hearth. And Brekk, finally overcome with exhaustion, had fallen asleep at the table, head cradled in one elbow, the soft light glinting on the silver ring binding his hair.

"How long have I been asleep?" she asked, pushing at her hair and gown, trying to compose herself.

"Not long, but I must confess, it was most pleasant."

Kitarisa was so close to him, his eye markings seemed to blend into the soft shadows, allowing her a glimpse of him as he might have appeared had he never been marked. It suddenly occurred to her that he was quite handsome--the cruel-edged look was gone, replaced by something almost tender. Even the hard line of his mouth had become softer, disturbingly gentle. Kitarisa pulled away from him and prepared to stand.

"You are right, I must get upstairs and check on Kuurus...on Alea..."

"Kuurus is asleep; you must not trouble yourself with him. And I am sure Alea is asleep. You must rest too, since we will leave very early."

She stood and shook down her skirts. "Yes, I will. Thank you, my lord. I am sorry if I embarrassed you. I will go now."

Assur caught her hand firmly in his, halting her. "You did nothing of the kind. I would wish it to happen again. Kitarisa..." His voice was soft, almost caressing, but he never finished.

A cold gust fluttered through the common room as the great door banged open.

Like a well-oiled piece of machinery, the five barbarians moved in tight precision to meet the intruder. Assur dropped her hand and in one smooth movement pushed her behind him. He drew the long sword from the sheath on his back and took his stance.

Sherlin and Jarad were on their feet in an instant, swords in hand and at once keen and alert. Del whirled away from the hearth and like Assur, in one motion prepared for anything that might come at him. Even after having been asleep, Brekk too, was on his feet, poised and ready.

"Well, well," a tall man murmured, slowly moving in their direction. "What have we here? Talesians! The messenger told me there were Talesians in Lekk's Bend and I wanted to cut out his tongue for lying. It seems I was wrong."

The man was encased from head to foot in glittering black mail. Over the mail, he wore a deep gray surcoat, slashed in blood-red along the collar line. An emblem of a white serpent coiled around a knife was fastened over his left breast; the same emblem adorned the black helmet he held tucked under his left arm. He approached Assur, removing his gauntlets, slapping them against his thigh. He appeared to be some kind of captain and several more men, similarly dressed, moved from behind him to form a sinister barrier against any chance of escape. Instead of swords, each carried a long staff, crowned with

the head of some fantastic, unknown beast.

The hard, cruel look returned to Assur's gaze.

"Do not raise your sword to me, barbarian. You know the penalty for striking a Wrathman--a brother of the Order."

Assur's sword tip never wavered from the proximity of the captain's throat. "I do not take orders from the witches' pets."

The man went rigid. "Witches is it? You are on dangerous ground, barbarian. The Holy Reverend `Fa does not take lightly to heretics like yourself. Strike me down and you will pay for it in blood. You are outnumbered here, and far from home."

Kitarisa felt Assur's anger rise to near breaking point.

"Assur," she said quietly, "perhaps if we discovered their intentions?"

"Our `intentions', good lady," the captain snapped, "are to rout out the heretic, the subversive, and those who would offend the name of the Divine Medruth. However, we have been called to other duties. The Princess Alea has been abducted. Prince Kazan has called upon us to assist him in the search for her. It is thought she may be held near here."

The captain studied the tip of Assur's sword hovering near his face--it had not lowered even a fraction. He frowned.

"You would break the High Prince's peace, the will of your own Ter-Rey? As accursed as you are, your prince still rules us," he sneered.

Assur's hard, blue gaze never left the captain's dark one as he reluctantly lowered his sword, but did not re-sheathe it.

"What business brings you to this humble village, Talesian?"

"Family business," Assur answered curtly.

"Family business? I did not know barbarians*had* families. I thought they ran in packs, like dogs!"

His companions laughed with him at his rude joke.

Kitarisa held her breath. The Talesians went rigid, dangerously close to the limits of their tolerance. Everyone detested the meddlesome and often vicious Wrathmen, the elite corps for the Covenant of the White Sisters, but none detested them more than Talesians. If Kuurus had been present, she was certain the captain would be little more than a bloody heap on the floor. Only by supreme self-control did they not strike down the insulting captain and his guard.

"I fail to see why we must be subject to such insults. Have we offended, Captain?" Assur asked in a low voice, barely concealing his fury.

"Captain Syunn, barbarian. You have not offended the Divine Lady yet, Talesian, but I will be watching you. In the meantime, we will search this place and question. First, you will tell us your purpose and destination."

"We are Talesians, returning home on a personal matter. We number six, as you can see. We were attacked by marglims, north of the Rift Cut. Will that be enough, Captain?" Assur nearly growled his words at the Wrathman.

"It will suffice. I will question the innkeeper and any others."

He turned and then noticed Kitarisa.

"My, my. We have a pretty one here."

Boldly, he lifted her chin with one finger. "I did not know Talesian women were so fine."

The bright blade flicked up to within a hair's breadth of Captain Syunn's jugular. Assur looked like a tiger, only a heartbeat away from the kill.

"I do not wish to `offend', however, if you do not remove your hand from my wife, I will offend greatly."

The captain met Assur's deadly gaze, hesitated, then appeared to think better of it.

"I should know better than to provoke a dog. Be gone on the morrow, barbarian, or I will send my own hounds on you. The liet'fa," he said gesturing to the long staffs, "are severe taskmasters and have no preference for marglim or barbarian."

The captain motioned to his men, forgetting his interrogations and strode from the common room,

slamming the heavy door behind them.

Kitarisa sagged onto the nearest bench, trembling.

"They frighten me more than marglims," she whispered.

"They are bought dogs, dishonored and not worthy of their swords," Jarad growled, settling his own blade back into the sheath on his back.

"And hard dogs to shake, once on your trail," Assur said grimly.

The others resheathed their swords, still rattled from the tense confrontation.

"We leave at first light. Get your rest."

Kitarisa rose and headed for the stairway, but felt his hand gently grasp her elbow. She was aware of him looking past her, staring directly into the startled face of the innkeeper, when Kitarisa suddenly realized Assur's slip, his cool lie to the Wrathman. With deliberate slowness, he bent down, brushing his lips lightly against her cheek.

"Goodnight, dearsister," he said loud enough for the innkeeper to hear.

The innkeeper met his ominous look. Confused and frightened, the man backed away and fled to his kitchen.

"Do you think he informed on us? What if he goes to the Captain now?" She glanced up at Assur, noting a flicker of worry cross his lean features.

"I pray Verlian he does not. The Wrathmen need little encouragement in seeking out and torturing their so-called 'heretics'. It would go badly for you and Alea--they would never believe who she is. Looking for a princess is as good an excuse as any, and if it means breaking a few backs for the sake of their cause, they will not see the difference."

"They would kill you, too."

"They would have to capture me first. And if they did that...they would know what it means to die by a Talesian sword."

"Assur, how did they know about Alea's abduction? My father would never ask for their help," she asked in a low voice.

"It crossed my mind, too. They have many ways of finding out things they wish to know. I am certain our good innkeeper told them about us, but I doubt he would have known about the abduction. Somehow the Wrathmen do know."

He gave her a gentle nudge to the stairway. "Go now. We leave at first light."

Kitarisa mounted the stairs slowly and looked back at her fascinating and frightening rescuer. He was not looking at her, but seemed deep in thought. Perhaps he was more worried than he appeared. Or perhaps he was more concerned about his mistake by not referring to her as his 'sister' in front of the Wrathman Captain Syunn.

Kitarisa felt something warm flicker through her, a feeling she thought had been long dead to her. She remembered Assur's lips on her cheek and his voice. He had called her "wife."

Kitarisa...wife....

## Chapter 5

KITARISA WAS only too glad to leave the inn even though it was bitterly cold and the light had barely begun to touch the sky. Alea complained about the cold only once until she met with Assur's dark scowl and then prudently kept quiet.

He and the other Talesians made it all too clear there was to be no conversation until they were well away from Lekk's Bend. The Wrathmen would not be far, and while the Talesians would have given them a good fight, they were also greatly outnumbered.

Kitarisa knew they were keeping their worry in tight check, particularly Assur. He was edgy and sharp, his orders given in brusque tones and he would not look at either her or Alea. At one point where the trees became dense and shadowy, all of them drew their swords and rested them across their thighs in tense readiness.

Kitarisa too, found herself worrying over the episode from the previous night. As with the Talesians,

her father had little use of the meddlesome Wrathmen. They were not welcome in Gorendt and their movements were always carefully watched. People disappeared, particularly young girls whenever the Wrathmen were near. It was no secret the White Sisters took their novitiates, usually girls from the poorer families who had no means to pay the Wrathmen off or the ability to fight them.

Gorendt kept its patrols in constant motion, searching for the hated minions of the Sisters and when they were discovered, the confrontations were always ugly.

Kitarisa knew her lessons well, old Nans having drilled them into her from the moment she was old enough to understand.

"You must be wary, girl. You have the healing touch and they'd want you with them--but not like in the old days. No indeed."

"Why, Nans?" Kitarisa had asked, her child eyes open wide with horror.

"They be accursed, girl. Aye, accursed. In the old days, even before the empire, they were loved by all. Healers then, good women and true Daughters of Verlian. They were blessed by the Goddess Herself. In those days, they wore the red robes and they were welcomed everywhere. O'course, in those days, we were all still living as tribes. Lawless days then, but still, the Daughters went everywhere unharmed, living off the goodness of the people. They could cure any sickness, mend a bone, or heal any hurt. `Tis said they could near bring back the dead!"

"How did they do that, Nans?" Kitarisa had asked eagerly.

"Mysterious ways, girl. My own mam said she once saw an old Daughter, a good one living in secret, cure a man with a bad fever. She said the Daughter `called for the affliction'; called it right out of the man, took it into her own body, she did. She took the fever herself, and then my mam said she spoke her words and the fever were sent away."

"She could do that, Nans?"

"Oh, aye. And they all did it, but then it were a long time ago. Then the barbarians came and something terrible happened. There were a great lord--it were the Ter-Rey I think, or his brother, mebbe. It were the time of Ka'Tiya the Beloved. `Tis written in her book of memories, Kita. It was then that this lord had a boy, and this boy were sick. The lord called for a Daughter to cure him and she came straight away, but she were young and new to her craft, because the boy died. The lord were angry and fit to kill the Daughter himself, but the Daughters were the protected of Verlian."

"Instead, he beat the girl near to death and sent her and all of `em to the Catacombs--banished them he did and then he burned their sanctuaries."

"Now in those days their Reverend `Fa were the Holy Daughter Medruth--a fiery one she were and when the little Daughter died of her wounds, she cursed the man who would never allow them to heal again. He sent them all back to the Catacombs and if they came out, he'd have `em killed."

"Then they were good, once?" Kitarisa had asked.

"Aye, they were, but they changed and it were Medruth who saw to it. They changed, Kita. No longer the good Daughters; Medruth turned away from Verlian. They now be only *Sisters* to each other. Bad magic. Now, they can suck the life from you. Take your very will it work for their ways--make you do anything they wish. Twisted, they are! You must watch for them girl, especially their hounds, the Wrathmen. They obey the Sisters--they are their hounds and they do their bidding."

Old Nans story had stayed with her for many sleepless nights and when she was older, Kitarisa learned never to be alone, especially outside the keep. It was for this reason Rhynn had been sent to watch her and Alea. Wherever they went, Rhynn was with them, and it was he who had set the capstone on her fear of the Sisters. His own little sister had been taken when she was a child of seven and never seen again. His hatred of the White Sisters knew no bounds.

Intrigued by Nans' tale, Kitarisa pestered the old woman about the written memories--a book, forbidden to be read, but kept in her father's library. She decided to find out for herself and late one night, slipped unnoticed into the library to find the rare book.

Her tutor, Master Jemathet, had always avoided discussing the barbarians. Talesian history was forbidden and Jemathet had seen enough of Kazan's punishments. He would do nothing to defy the prince's wishes.

Kazan's library was rarely used and Kitarisa knew he would never miss the book. The only books he ever read were the musty old histories of the empire, books on battle tactics, and the Wisdom of Yen-Marr, the ancient warrior-philosopher.

Kitarisa found the fragile book on the topmost shelf and noted with some asperity it had been shoved into the shelf, backward. The book was so old, many of its brittle pages had begun to fall from the binding. It smelled musty and damp, and mildew had formed on the leather cover.

She gently turned the tissue-fine pages, studying the delicate old printing. It was written in Volten, the language of the last empire. Kitarisa's knowledge of Volten was at best rudimentary, but many of the old words were similar to Common Speech and she managed to read through much of it before coming to the pages she wanted.

*The Diaries of Her Highness the First Ter-Reya Ka'Tiya of Talesia--compiled by Wordkeeper Ahganst--the Sunturn being 7205, the Eighth of the Reign of Cael III, and the Fifteenth Turn of the High Prince and Ter-Rey, D'Aettilek dar Daeamon .*

Kitarisa frowned. Was this the same Ka'Tiya old Nan's had whispered about--the Ka'Tiya known as the Beloved? And why was she `beloved'?

*The first act my lord undertook upon his return to Daeamon Keep was to try and undo the damage his brother, the Lord Suldan had begun. Lord Suldan had committed a grave mistake while my Lord Aettilek had been away fulfilling his service to the emperor.*

*Lord Suldan had unwisely banished the Holy Daughters, closed and burned their sanctuaries, leaving Talesia bereft of their healing mercy.*

*My Lord Aettilek was given the unpleasant task of ordering the execution of his own brother and then to ask of the Reverend `Fa, Medruth, her forgiveness--a difficult task in itself for a proud man such as my lord.*

*However, the damage was done. Medruth would not forgive Lord Suldan's crime. Instead, she placed into effect a cruel curse, one that has surely affected the course of Talesian life and custom forever. A dreaded plague, a dark curse was placed on all Talesian women. The dead were everywhere--old women, girls, little babies. They lay in the streets. There were so many, there was little time for decent funeral pyres. It was a curse that I fear will take its toll for many generations to come. Three in five of all Talesian women and girls died in two short passes of the moon and of those who survived, perhaps one in three were able to bear more children. I have studied the structure of Talesian society for many turns and have been witness to this imposed cruelty. It was my opinion then, and one that proved correct, that this change would cause great strife within my lord's people.*

*Is it any wonder why there is such bitterness and hatred against these cruel women? My Lord Aettilek vowed unending vengeance against the White Sisters. And I must agree....*

Kitarisa had closed the book and tried to recall her histories. Three hundred sunturns ago the Talesians had conquered the Eastern Provinces and forced their princes to pay dearly to the Ter-Rey the High Prince. Paying the tribute money lasted for several turns after that. And, then it came to an abrupt end. The tribute money stopped and the Eastern Lands were left to rule themselves as they wished, as long they remained subject to the Ter-Rey and kept his peace. Less than fifty turns after the barbarian siege, the Empire collapsed with the death of Caal III, Shadressian's grandson, a weak, ineffective man, given to wine, dicing and debauchery--and it was nearly the same time as the writing of Ka'Tiya's compiled diaries.

Was this curse the reason why the barbarians left the Eastern Lands alone for so long?

The world had long known about the Sisters and the Talesians' curse--this knowledge only adding to the fear and distrust of the barbarians. And yet, the Eastern Lands and all the Provinces of the Dominion were never bothered again. Until now.

It took another day and night of hard riding before they saw the four, square towers of Gorendt Keep, grim and formidable even in the noonday sun. The streets were dark and sinister as if from another, more menacing age. Shadowy, suspicious people hurried about their business, casting furtive glances their way. A feeling of suppressed dread permeated the city. Shopkeepers avoided the eyes of their customers and

hurried through each transaction, afraid even to go beyond the most minimal of verbal exchanges.

The open marketplace teemed with straining carthorses, cursing drivers, and bustling shoppers, but there was still an underlying vein of fear--pulsing and threatening.

With both of them cloaked and hooded, no one recognized the two women being escorted through their own city and Alea had the good sense to keep still, largely due to her pride, not wanting to be noticed in her current bedraggled state.

The novelty of so many Talesians this far east of the mountains brought more than furtive glances. Mothers tugged their children to their skirts. A few men turned pale at the sight of them and nervously fingered their own sword hilts.

A bold-tongued, ancient crone hissed at them, "child eaters!" and spat in the street.

Kitarisa clutched the folds of her cloak and peered down at the wary citizens. It had been a long time since she had been allowed to ride in the streets of Gorenndt and she had forgotten their fear.

Older children scuttled out of their way hiding behind wagons or staring at the warriors with wide, curious eyes. The alarming sight of so many Talesians, bristling with swords and knives, their heavy shanks of hair fluttering like banners in the wind and intimidating eye patterns, only rekindled Gorenndt's inbred distrust of strangers. They were as exotic as rare, wild animals and doubly-feared from sheer ignorance. Few had even seen a Talesian. All that anyone needed to know of them was that the High Prince was Talesian and he, like the seven riding through their dismal city, was a barbarian who drank the blood of children and killed without the slightest provocation.

It did not take long for the news of their arrival to reach one of the numerous mounted patrols scouring the streets looking for idle miscreants, or to bully hapless merchants.

The curious crowds scattered like chaff as the mounted patrol clattered up to them, deliberately blocking their path from further progress into the city.

"Come no further, barbarian," the leader ordered. "If you are looking for a fight, then prepare to die here. We want nothing of your kind to break our prince's peace."

The captain pushed back the mail coif; bright yellow hair sprang into the sunlight.

Kitarisa bit her lip. *So like him* .

"If you cut us down here, good captain, then you slay your own as well."

Taking the hint, Kitarisa lowered her hood. "These Talesians have brought us home, Captain Mar'Kess. Have we changed that much?"

The captain's eyes widened as he realized who she was.

"Your great pardon, Highness. I had no knowledge of this. His Highness, your father, did not inform us either. And, the Princess Alea is with you, too?" He nodded, noticing the other hooded woman.

Alea reluctantly lowered her own hood, her lips pressed together in annoyance, realizing she had not arrived mounted on her own horse, but still riding behind Brekk.

"Yes, Captain, I am here and quite safe. Will you please lead us home at once," she ordered, the old arrogance slipping back into her voice.

"Of course, at once. We had not expected--"

"For us to be returned by Talesians? My father will be greatly surprised, too...I am sure. Nevertheless, Captain, you will treat them with all courtesy."

Kitarisa paused and watched Assur and the captain eye each other like fighting stags--weighing each other's worth, looking for weaknesses and testing for strengths.

"Assur, this is First Captain Raldan Mar'Kess, one of my father's best captains. Captain, this is Assur. He goes by no other name, but he and his men have proven themselves most courageous and have brought Princess Alea and myself home with great care."

"Sir." Mar'Kess bowed slightly from the waist and Kitarisa was pleased to see Assur return the bow.

"Your princess is too modest, Captain. She is as brave as any warrior and brought one of my own back from his Summons. We were attacked by marglims and he was luckless enough to swallow their blood. She saved him from a certain death."

"Indeed? *Ihad* heard there was a way to cure the poisoning."

"She will have my Oath of Duty," Kuurus rumbled from his position at Kitarisa's left. "The Siarsi do not

forget such an honor."

Embarrassed, Kitarisa waved impatiently at the captain.

"Please, we are exhausted. Lead on, Captain."

"Of course, Highness."

The captain gestured to his men to take their places at the rear of the long file of Talesians and spun his blood-bay horse around to flank Assur's right.

"Marglims, eh? If they come close enough, I will send out some men to rout the stragglers. Where did you encounter them?"

"North, near the Rift Cut. I believe we killed them all, but then we did not stay to find out."

Captain Mar'Kess smiled. "Wisely done. I, too, have dulled my sword on a few marglim bones." The captain shuddered. "Their smell alone makes a decent man want to puke. Your pardon, my lady. I shall send out a patrol tomorrow; the harvest will begin soon in the outer reaches and we don't want anyone turned to marglim fodder."

"We also encountered Wrathmen who claimed they were also looking for the princess. Were you aware of this, Captain?" Assur asked.

The captain looked at him, startled. "I did not. His Highness, Prince Kazan, does not tolerate Wrathmen within our borders. We want nothing of their vile ways among us. We have lost many daughters to their Order...stolen from under our noses! I shall inform His Highness of this, you can be sure."

Unlike Sherehn, Gorendt Keep was not protected by a moat, but four great walls, each with three rows of iron spikes as thick as a man's arm, thrusting out from the highest ramparts. The first and highest row was imbedded so that the pointed ends thrust upward, the second row pointed straight out and the third row, barbed and by far the most deadly, was arranged so the spikes pointed down.

The first inner courtyard seethed with activity--horses being shod, weapons sharpened or repaired, provisions unloaded from heavy wagons for both horse and soldier.

The second innermost courtyard was wide and empty; the stones under their horse's hooves were swept and clean. At the far end, a low set of stairs had been built, designed not only for greeting guests and access to the keep, but to allow for the easy mounting and dismounting of horses.

One of Mar'Kess' men had been sent ahead to inform the prince that his daughters had returned and it was only a matter of moments before the prince himself appeared, without ceremony, to greet them.

A heavy man in dark-brown leather and the green tunic of a hunter hurried down the steps. Once fair hair, now thinned and faded to nondescript gray, topped a blunt, square face lined with harshness and unyielding will. Black eyes, hard as flint, scoured the gathering of Talesians and soldiers looking for only one face. The fineness of his tunic could not conceal the bulk of heavy muscles and impending fat around his middle--a body once hard and fit, now gone slack with age.

Captain Mar'Kess dismounted and bowed to the prince. "My lord, both Princess Alea and Princess Kitarisa are safely returned by these Talesians."

Alea did not wait for any assistance, but slid from Brekk's horse and ran to her father's embrace. Prince Kazan looked over his daughter's shoulder at Assur and nodded.

"My thanks. You may tell the High Prince I am thankful for your swiftness. You will be amply rewarded."

For a moment, Kazan allowed for Alea's hysterics, indulging his favored daughter by holding the sobbing girl, patting her hair and murmuring encouragements. From behind him a flutter of women descended the steps, clucking and fussing over the girl. They scarcely noticed the soldiers or the Talesians for that matter, but quickly enfolded Alea in silk coverings and their concern and hurried her away.

"I cannot recall when I last saw a Talesian and I confess, I have not wished to encounter one, but for this...I am grateful to you," Kazan said, watching Assur and the others dismount.

Assur bowed stiffly, his face tight and emotionless. With deliberate care, he assisted Kitarisa from the little roan. She approached the low steps and made a slight curtsy to her father, keeping her head down.

"I was informed you had two daughters when I received the orders to take on this task, my lord. I had

to assume a father would want all of his family returned to him."

Kazan's face went a shade redder as he took in Kitarisa's slight form bent before him, annoyance clearly written on his features.

"You should have saved yourself any unnecessary risks." His eyes narrowed, looking down at her.

"If not for the fact that she is royal herself and deserving of being rescued from Reddesh and his dogs, the princess twice saved the lives of my men and that of Princess Alea, putting her own in jeopardy."

"A noble effort," Kazan said coldly. "However, Princess Kitarisa has always been known to be too headstrong for her own good. You will be paid for her return, but let us not spoil this happy occasion with talk of transactions. You and your men deserve rest and care. We will dine tonight and settle what is due you."

He motioned behind him to an officious-looking man with sharp, clever eyes.

"Mangerin, see that our guests and their horses are well-cared for, rooms made ready and to any other needs they require."

"At once, Highness." The little man made gestures to Assur and the others to follow him.

Assur did not move--his men emulated him, standing stiffly by their horses, awaiting permission to enter the keep.

"The Princess Kitarisa has personally saved the life of one of my men from marglim poisoning. I would ask she be allowed to receive his Oath of Duty while we are still assembled," his voice came deceptively soft.

"Your barbaric rites have no meaning here," Kazan said curtly. "However, I will allow it."

Kuurus, already bristling with anger, jerked the shortest blade from its sheath on his saddle, moved quickly to Kitarisa and dropped to one knee before her. In one deliberate stroke, he made a short cut on the inner side of his left arm, above the leather armguard. The bright blood welled from the wound. He took Kitarisa's left hand and made brief his vow:

"It is my blood you have saved and my blood you now have, for all that is my life until Verlian Summons me."

Kuurus kissed her palm lightly and then pressed it to the wound, his blood staining her. He folded her fingers over it as if to seal his vow. "I ask that you take my Oath, my lady."

Kuurus stood and bowed to her, his black-marked eyes brilliant with devotion.

"You have but to ask of him," Assur interjected quietly, watching her bewilderment. "Anything."

"An oath such as that is a dangerous thing to give to a woman, particularly this one, Talesian," Kazan said irritably, watching Kuurus return his knife to the saddle cloth. "You have made enough of a spectacle of yourself Kitarisa. Go to your apartments, girl, and clean up. You smell of horses and marglims."

Forgetting himself and to whom he was speaking, Kuurus flared at the prince: "She has saved my life and she has my blood. I am bound to her will even to take my own life if she wishes--she cannot be denied my Oath."

Assur held up his hand, silencing Kuurus' hot words.

Kazan stiffened and all the Talesians bristled, becoming more outraged by the moment, while the Gorendtian soldiers shifted uneasily, uncertain of what the barbaric visitors would do next.

Kitarisa paused and placed her hand lightly on Kuurus' arm. "I accept your Oath, Kuurus, with honor." She looked back at Assur and the others. "Thank you all for what you have done for me. I will go. I am not worth the risk of seeing any man's blood spilled."

She turned, gathering her ragged skirts and climbed the steps--her every movement revealing her weariness and despair.

When she had disappeared from view, Kazan recovered his good humor.

"Now," he said pleasantly. "You must refresh yourselves. Come. Mangerin, please see to our guests."

## Chapter 6

THE KEEP HAD been immensely old when Gorendt arose new from the ashes of the ancient Al'Raisah Empire, the First Empire. The keep was dark and menacing having been used only as a

fortress and outpost for the emperor's most feared warriors. It had been renovated and expanded countless times and once its entire interior had been gutted and refitted. In spite of a millennium of internal changes, the keep itself did not change. It remained a towering, black hulk, dedicated to war and death--a grim influence permeating beyond its lethal walls into the city and the rest of the province.

Assur and his men were made comfortable enough in the well-appointed, but hardly sumptuous rooms. A large bathing room, finished in green and sand-colored tiles was most welcome, but Kazan's attendants were not. Terrified of their lord's guests, the servants were only too glad not to have to attend to them. However frightened, they made certain there were plenty of thick towels and jars of costly bathing oil for the Talesians' use.

Kuurus eased into the hot, steaming water, groaning with pleasure.

"At least they have this--I only hope the food will be as good. I am weary of teki-bread and Lady Kitarisa's potions," he said, rubbing some of the washing oil into his chest.

Assur sank down next to him and had to admit the bath did wonders for his aching back.

"Princess Kitarisa's 'potions' saved your worthless skin. Do not forget that."

"I cannot *not* forget that, my lord, but still, a joint of something, anything, will be a vast improvement."

"And a flagon of good wine," Jarad added from his end of the deep pool.

"You mean, a 'cask' of good wine," Sherlin corrected, grinning at the biggest of them.

A wet, heavy sponge sailed across the expanse of the pool, hitting Sherlin squarely in the face. All seven of them laughed, helping to relieve their exhaustion and long, self-imposed silence.

"Ah, well, it will be wise to keep our heads here," Kuurus admonished. "I do not trust any of them, especially Kazan."

Assur squeezed water from a sponge over his head and face, allowing the warm water to wash away the last of the grime and filth from their travels.

"Kuurus is right. We must remain on our guard. 'Sleep by your blade, but let her stay awake'" he quoted the old adage. "I don't like any of them either, but you will behave properly. After all, they will expect us to eat our meat raw with a broken bone instead of a spoon."

"Where do they get such ideas?" Brekk asked, squeezing the last of the soap out of the long ends of his hair.

"You forget your lessons, Brekk, and Suldan's legacy," Assur reminded him. "We have not been on this side of the Adrex for nearly three hundred turns--we being too busy breaking our own stubborn skulls. A sorry excuse. All that these people remember is the blood and death. Time has little changed that memory."

"Well," Kuurus mumbled, as he slowly sank deeper into the comforting bath water, "someone make sure I don't pick my teeth with my blade or use Brekk's arm to wipe my mouth. Maybe I will just eat his arm instead."

Amid the good-natured groans, Assur shoved Kuurus' head under the water and when he was finally allowed to surface, spluttering and cursing, six heavy, soap-laden sponges all found their way into Kuurus' face.

A bath, a shave, and fresh clothes from their saddle packs did wonders and it was pleasant to drop the heavy burden of their swords, but they all felt naked and vulnerable without them. As an extra precaution, each slipped one of their saddle knives into their boot tops.

Assur adjusted the shoulder strap of his body-harness. The garment was an intricate covering that appeared more like a heavy weaving of richly decorated straps worn around the chest and back, and vertically over the shoulders. Sometimes a single wide band was worn diagonally over the right shoulder and if it was cold, they added the long, sleeved, fur cloaks.

He peered at himself in the tall glass, scrutinizing every detail. He fervently wished he had a better collar instead of the plain silver one. The gold one with the black enamel inlays was his favorite. Assur frowned. Perhaps Gorendtian women did not like the collars.

Assur ran his hand over the newly trimmed, narrow beard framing his jaw and the moustache bracketing his mouth. Perhaps they did not like beards either, recalling that the estimable Captain Mar'Kess was clean-shaven as were most all of the Gorendtian men he had seen.

Kuurus had scorned them as "whey-faced puling boys." Assur was not so certain. He had seen steel in Mar'Kess' gaze and had to admit grudging respect.

For Kazan he had none. The general feeling of annoyance he felt for the man who so despised Kitarisa, had congealed into solid contempt. Kazan would have to be dealt with, and soon.

Assur studied the bold markings around his eyes. He had never thought much about them until they arrived in Gorendt and had faced the sheer terror seen on the citizens' faces. He remembered Kitarisa's wide-eyed horror when they had burst into the room in Sherehn Keep, the look later replaced with her frank staring as he explained the markings. Maybe he was as ugly to her as a barnacle-toad was to him.

KITARISA'S ONLY servant made a last adjustment to the modest headdress and the fine net that held her heavy hair in place. She brushed a stray strand from her shoulders and handed her maid the mirror so she could see from the back.

"That will be fine, Jesria."

The maid curtsied slightly. "Do you wish me to leave, Highness?"

"Not yet."

Kitarisa knew instinctively Jesria did not care for her and made little effort to cultivate her friendship. Jesria performed her duties as a lady's maid with just the right amount of deference, together with a studied coolness that forever kept them from developing any kind of friendship. Kitarisa was careful with what she said to the serene-faced Jesria. They would never share cherished conversations, forbidden secrets or private jokes. Her last confidante died when she was ten and Kitarisa learned quickly to keep heartaches and secrets to herself.

"Will you please adjust my hem?"

Jesria knelt down and tugged at the velvet hem, hiding the last hint of petticoat. "I understand your father will be hosting the Talesian barbarians tonight, the ones who returned you and the Princess Alea to safety?"

"Yes, and they are not barbarians." She twisted back and forth before the mirror, scrutinizing herself from every angle.

"I caught a glimpse of them being led to their quarters. Frightening! Nothing but fur and swords and beads. And those dreadful eyes!" She shuddered at the memory.

"Every one of father's soldiers carries a sword," Kitarisa retorted a little sharply. "And, every one of those 'barbarians' as you call them has better manners than some of father's most refined courtiers and probably better educated, too."

Jesria made a noise of disbelief. "They are accursed fiends, blood-drinkers. They ground the Eastern Lands into the dust. Your father should not have allowed them entrance to the city." Jesria said heatedly, almost overstepping her place.

"They saved Alea from being killed by a marglim and returned us home with no harm to either of us. They have changed, Jesria. Time has changed them and they are no longer the savage beasts from the past." Kitarisa's voice dropped almost to a whisper as she recalled the terrible events surrounding Kuurus and the marglim. "I could not let him die, could I? He was in such pain...he would have died."

Jesria sniffed, disbelieving. "Better to have one less of those creatures around to do their filthy killings."

"You will not speak of them in that manner!" Kitarisa snapped. "They are our guests--you will treat them as such."

Jesria bowed her head slightly, knowing she had been rebuked, but Kitarisa did not miss the hurt look in her mild, dark eyes.

She sighed heavily. "I am sorry, Jesria, I did not mean to snap. But, regardless of what you and the others may think, these Talesians are like nothing we have been taught to believe. They are fierce, yes, but very brave and risked much to bring us home alive."

Her maid said nothing for a moment, but moved to gather Kitarisa's shawl. "You will want this tonight, my lady. The air is getting sharp."

"Yes, thank you. You may go now, please."

Jesria curtsied again and retired.

Kitarisa studied herself in the mirror and touched the net that bound her hair. She dreaded the evening's events. All would go well until Kazan had drunk a little too much wine. Then the insults would begin or the occasional slap. Over time, Kitarisa had learned how to avoid as many public appearances as possible, by feigning illness, or attending to the needs of others who were ill or hurt. Kazan was shrewd enough to recognize her excuses and rarely demanded she be present for most of the court functions. Kitarisa had Alea to thank for that--the girl would not tolerate any woman who presented even the vaguest threat to her beauty and status in Kazan's court.

It was also certain Alea would not miss the opportunity to humiliate her over the slap she gave her in the forest. Kitarisa could almost see Alea's satisfied smirk while Kazan would rage at her, forcing her to leave the festivities in shame. And, in front of the Talesians.

Kitarisa writhed inwardly at the thought of Assur and his men watching her being publicly degraded. They were proud men, even the young Courronus. Perhaps their codes would not allow them to stay and be witness to such an embarrassing scene. Kitarisa closed her eyes and saw the tall Assur sweeping out of the great hall in disgust with the others close behind him.

It would be better not to give Kazan any opportunity to humiliate her. Resolved, she stood and tugged the matching velvet shawl over her shoulders. She would eat quickly, observe Kazan's formal show of gratitude to the Talesians, and then slip away when no one was watching. Alea would have her admirers and her father would enjoy the festivities without spoiling his good time by troubling himself with his unwanted daughter.

She smoothed some of the folds of her gown and turned to leave when she noticed her left hand. Her bath had not removed all of Kuurus' blood from her little finger; a small smudge stained the second knuckle. An Oath and his promise. He would do anything she wished. She wished he had the power to make her invisible to her father and to Assur.

THE GREAT HALL was lit with every available torch and lamp. The fire in the enormous hearth roared in cheery warmth, temporarily subduing the usual grimness of the keep. Kitarisa noted that her father had seen to it that the tables were draped in the finest linen and Liestra's silver-plate set out for the feast.

A crackling excitement filled the air. All of Kazan's court were packed into the hall, eager to see the strange and feared Talesians.

She watched Kazan wait impatiently, chafing at the high collar of his long tunic. To Kazan's right, Alor lounged in his chair--his sullen face already slack with boredom. With the rags and travel stains gone, Alea sat to Kazan's left, alert as a bird and fresh in bright blue. The golden silk of her hair had been caught in a fine mesh net, threaded with pearls and tiny sapphires. In her eyes the revelries were not so much for the Talesians, but for her and Alea took advantage of every moment. Having endured captivity, desperate flight and the clutches of a marglim, Kitarisa knew her sister would bask in the extravagant praises of the fawning young men.

From her place further down to Alea's left, Kitarisa observed the proceeding--elegantly attired in wine-red velvet, her own dark tresses caught in a similar net of black and gold filigree, an unconscious tribute to Assur. In spite of the heat of the room, her hands felt like ice. She clutched them in her lap, glad the velvet of her gown was heavy and warming.

Kitarisa glanced at her sister. The girl's shameless flirting with every man in sight disgusted her. Alea blew kisses to men she would have never even given a second glance before her abduction and blushed prettily with practiced sincerity when some adoring young admirer exclaimed how brave she had been in the face of such dangers.

She looked away from Alea's glowing face and recalled another face, white with pain, teeth clenched, fighting the agony in his belly. Kuurus nearly died for Alea and she didn't even thank him.

Abruptly all chatter ceased. Without announcement, Assur led the Talesians into the hall and stopped before Kazan. The heavy, leather jerkins and their swords had been replaced with garments made entirely of intricate webbing that went around the chest and back and over the shoulders. From wrist to elbow, their lower arms were encased in buckled leather guards, studded in gold. Ladies whispered

behind their hands to each other, embarrassed and excited by the barbarians' near bare-chested appearance. They wore plain dark-colored trousers and boots to the knee--and no one missed the saddle knives strapped firmly on the outside of their right boot top. Their long bound-up hair, frightening eye markings and faintly sinister air, all added to the excitement. Talesians in an Eastern court!

All but Assur went down on one knee. He remained standing, right palm to left shoulder, offering only a slight bow of his head. A tiny flicker of annoyance crossed Kazan's face, but quickly vanished, obviously determined not to spoil the good feelings of the occasion.

"You have no knee for a prince, good Assur?" he asked lightly.

"With great respect, Your Highness, I kneel only to Verlian."

Kazan let it pass with a slight wave of his hand.

"Tonight, it is no matter. We wish to honor you for your bravery and skills in bringing back our beloved daughter."

Kitarisa watched as both Assur's and Kuurus' jaws tightened at Kazan's deliberate omission of her name.

Kazan gestured broadly for them to be seated at the long, white-draped table set perpendicular to the prince's.

All through her father's sumptuous feast, Kitarisa kept her head down not wishing to be noticed, but acutely aware of Assur's eyes on her. He seemed little interested in the vast array of food being offered and even less in the entertainments that followed. The others were only mildly amused by the antics of the jugglers balancing and clowning from the backs of their tiny black and white ponies, but readily tossed the odd coin to them.

Assur remained poised, even slightly aloof. He leaned back in his chair, legs outstretched, with one arm folded across his chest. The other arm, bent at the elbow, his fingers idly tugging at the short-cropped beard. Every time Kitarisa happened to look up, he was watching her.

When Kazan had enough of the entertainments, the tables were carried away to make more room for dancing. As the evening progressed, Gorenitian women had overcome most of their fear and a few of them even tried some shy flirting with the fierce-looking guests. One or two had even managed to lure Brekk and the blushing Courronus onto the dance floor.

Kitarisa fervently wished the festivities would end. While Kazan remained in the hall, no one would dare speak to her. She placed herself firmly next to the kindly Lady Falla, the only lady in Kazan's court who seemed to go out of her way to be civil to her. If she was careful and spoke in low tones, Kitarisa would be able to slip away when her father lost interest in her and Lady Falla.

"They are not as fearsome as they look, once you watch them for awhile," Lady Falla observed, nodding in Kuurus' direction.

"No, they are not. In fact they can be quite humorous, when the mood strikes them."

"Are they, indeed?" Lady Falla looked surprised.

"Yes, and not once did I see them drink anyone's blood."

Lady Falla laughed. "Ah, another one of our myths forever shattered."

Kitarisa liked Lady Falla's dry and slightly cynical sense of humor. She was one of the few in Gorenitian who treated her with a warmth close enough to be considered friendship.

Falla leaned close to her, her soft, blue eyes twinkling.

"I suppose they didn't howl at the moon?"

"No, and they didn't chant ancient rituals either," Kitarisa whispered back to her, smiling at their little joke.

She did not see him approach her, as he worked his way through the crowd leaving a wake of wary courtiers in his path. Silence fell around them as Assur stopped in front of her and made a slight bow from the waist.

"Will you dance with me, Princess Kitarisa?" He held out his hand to her.

Kitarisa glanced around nervously, for a moment wondering if he meant Lady Falla or someone else. He did not, but continued to hold out his hand, waiting, insistent.

Almost reluctantly, she placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her into the very center of the

dance floor. Assur was completely indifferent to the stares and silences. The musicians finally had the presence of mind to stop their own staring and began the simple promenade.

"I can see you are not asked to dance very often," he said, turning and placing his right palm to hers.

"I am never asked to dance, my lord."

"Then I am a lucky man. I shall have all your dances to myself."

Kitarisa lowered her head, embarrassed. "Please do not mock me. My father is watching us."

"I meant no offence."

They turned again, left palms together and circled around each other.

"I only meant that I am glad I am the one who gets a chance to dance with you."

Kitarisa could think of nothing to say and only managed a soft 'thank you'.

For the remainder of the dance, they said nothing. She was surprised by the way he danced. Assur was quite graceful in spite of being so tall and completely unmoved by her glaring father or by the excited whispers of the people watching them.

When the dance ended, he bowed to her again and let slip one of his rare, warm smiles.

"Kitarisa!"

She jumped away at the sound of Kazan's bark and sensed Assur's rising anger. The entire assemblage stopped to again stare at her and the seething barbarian at her side.

"I think you have made enough of an exhibition of yourself and embarrassed Alea with your presence. Retire at once."

Assur glowered at the prince, taking full advantage of his height and the unnerving effects of his eye markings.

"I am not finished dancing with her," he said, a hint of a threat creeping into his voice.

"She is quite finished dancing or anything else for that matter. Leave now, Kitarisa."

Kitarisa could smell the souring wine and Kazan's growing rage. She stepped back from Assur, uncertain what to do.

"My...my Lord Assur has been kind enough--"

Kazan grabbed her arm, yanking her away from the towering barbarian.

"I said, leave!"

Shaking, scarlet-faced, Kitarisa dropped a hasty curtsy to Assur and fled the hall, thankful that Kazan had not slapped her in front of him.

ASSUR RARELY LOST control of his temper, but he was perilously close to it. He wanted to smash that self-satisfied, arrogant smirk from Kazan's face and slap Alea for her preening smugness. He'd had enough of Kazan's damnable behavior toward Kitarisa.

Even Kuurus and the others had slipped out almost unnoticed, returning to their rooms, wanting nothing more of the festivities now that Kitarisa was gone and that their own lord so displeased. The Talesians would be missed, but only momentarily. Alea had set the tone to near-giddy excitement and the serious barbarians would only spoil it.

Assur brushed past Kazan, restraining the powerful urge to take his fists to him and strode from the hall determined to find Kitarisa. He passed two wary-eyed guards at a juncture in the corridors.

"Which way did the princess go?" he demanded, glaring at the first guard.

"Thr...through there, lord," the guard stuttered, pointing to an archway leading to an inner courtyard.

"You...you cannot go there," the other one warned him. "That is the ladies' garden."

In a heartbeat, the saddle knife was in his hand, pressed to the guard's quivering throat. "Are you going to stop me?" Assur growled. "How about you?" He glanced at the other guard who clearly had no desire to argue the issue. Assur knew he was being a bully, but did not care. He was so close to telling them....

"No...no lord. I was only trying to warn you." The man gulped, terrified.

"You have warned me. Keep silent, or I will have your liver for breakfast."

If the situation had not been so serious, he would have laughed out loud at his own ridiculous threat. Well, too bad. Let them believe what they have always believed. The two guards stood paralyzed with fear. They would not move until he had found Kitarisa.

At the end of the corridor, a low archway opened into a small courtyard. The gentle patter of trickling water came from a white, marble fountain at its center and around it, the air was filled with the fresh, sweet scent of the late fall flowers planted at its base.

In the dark, he made out the small form of Kitarisa huddled on one of the benches.

"My lady?"

He suddenly remembered the saddle knife in his hand and stooped to replace it in his boot top.

She stood up abruptly and turned from him.

"Go away. I do not need your pity."

"You will not get it. I have no interest in your sister's night of self-indulgence or your father's insulting behavior--neither do the others. I came here to be with you, Kitarisa."

He made a deliberate effort to remove the disgusted edge in his voice. She did not deserve his rage.

"Did it ever occur to you that *I like* your company?"

Kitarisa turned around and looked at him, not out of the corner of her eyes, nor from a shy, side glance, but full in the face. Something caught at his heart. She was so lovely, why did not anyone else see it?

"No. It did not," she said honestly. "I am not allowed to encourage friendships long enough to find out."

"Why does he hate you so much?"

She sighed heavily. "I have already told you, because I am the daughter of his worst enemy."

Kitarisa sat down again on the little bench and motioned for him to sit down too. He eased one leg onto the edge of the fountain, sitting sideways.

"I am becoming perfectly shameless in my confessions to you." She shook her head slowly. "I do not understand why I am revealing everything to a mercenary--a barbarian at that--someone I do not even know."

"I had hoped to be your friend."

"Perhaps you are. Anyway, I find I can trust you." She sighed again. "My father hates me because he suspects I am not really his daughter--I am Liestra's, but not his. He is privately convinced she did not come to their marriage as the innocent bride he was forced to marry. He has no proof, but if he openly denies me, then he has no possible claim to Riehl's throne. However, that has not prevented him from trying to make certain Alor sits on the Falcon Throne. I am almost a pawn and not quite a castoff--just valuable enough to keep for his purposes."

"I cannot tolerate the way he treats you, Kitarisa."

"He can do whatever he wishes. The Riehlions will do nothing. By law I am Gorendtian and they cannot interfere."

"And you cannot simply leave?"

Kitarisa gave a short, bitter laugh. "Leave? There are only two ways I can leave--either some brave, foolish man will attempt to pay my bride price, or the Ter-Rey, the High Prince himself might intervene. *That* is hardly likely. Besides, where would I go?"

"You have no one to convey a message for you?"

She looked away from him, her eyes infinitely sad.

"Even my own maid is a spy for him. But I did, once. Would it surprise you that I did have someone? I loved him very much. He was the first person other than my mother or my nurse, who loved me for who I am--unconditionally. Rhynn was only a guard, a soldier. He used to escort me on little rides in the country. He was the one who really taught me how to ride. I...I would have followed him anywhere, willingly, if he had asked," she said, almost whispering. "Of course, we were found out. It is was a horrible, bitter irony. My father had him killed because Rhynn Palinn had the gall to make love to a princess,*his* daughter. He made a terrible example of my poor Rhynn."

She looked down and pressed silent tears from her eyes. "When the torturers were done with his body, they...they threw him--"

Unable to finish, Kitarisa pressed her face into her hands. "Please go away now. You know my ugly, little secrets."

She rose to leave, but Assur blocked her path. He caught her by the upper arms.

"Kitarisa, let me help you."

Her eyes filled with more tears and it was all Assur could do to keep from pulling her into his arms, to hold her and try to take away some of her pain.

"No. Do you want to end up like him? I will not risk any more lives for my sake. Please go. Take your gold and go back to Talesia and forget this."

"I will not return to Talesia until you are freed from this prison and from that man you call a father."

Very gently he lifted her chin with his fingers and bent to kiss her soft mouth.

"No," she sobbed, pulling out of his grasp. She backed away from him, frantically brushing at her tears. "Not again! Ever!"

Before he could speak, she turned and fled--this time forever beyond his reach.

## Chapter 7

ASSUR'S IMPATIENT pacing in front of his tent made all his men tense and uneasy. As with his temper, he rarely showed the extent of his annoyance, but this time they sensed something very different.

It had been five days since Assur had seen Kitarisa in the garden--he and the others having left Kazan's keep for their own camp on the outskirts of Gorenndt. There had been plenty of Kazan's gold to buy tents and trappings for their own comforts, as nothing could have encouraged them to stay one more night in that dark, depressing keep.

Assur awaited the return of Brekk, Del, and Kuurus, having been sent in his place. And now, they were long overdue.

"My lord," Jarad asked hesitantly, "shall I send out someone to look for them?"

Assur stopped pacing. "No. They will return soon. If they are not back by tomorrow, I will go myself."

"My lord, what if they met up with marglims again?"

He frowned Jarad. "They are Talesians. They will either be killed and Summoned by the Goddess, or they will be successful and return. I should not have to explain this to you, Jarad."

"No, lord. I forget myself."

Assur resumed his pacing. Marglims did not worry him. Kazan did. He chastised himself for not going personally. He and his men were too far from home to make any mistakes. If he lost those three, all would be for nothing.

"My lord, I see them," Jarad announced.

Three exhausted horses stumbled into the camp bearing the three warriors--their faces were gaunt with fatigue. They slid from their saddles, barely able to stand. Assur gestured for Jarad and the others to attend to the trembling horses before they too collapsed.

"Well, Kuurus?" he demanded.

"It is as you suspected, my lord. We found not less than four caches of arms and supplies along the river, all the way to Sherehn's ruin."

Assur pressed his mouth into a line of grim satisfaction. So, Kazan's little secret was true.

"Did anyone see you?"

"None, my lord. However, it was too risky to try and destroy any of the weapons--they are well guarded with at least twenty warriors for each encampment."

"What kind of weapons?"

"Everything, my lord," Del interjected. "And they have Maretstani cross-bows--the double bows. I have never seen the like of it--fodder for the horses, even horseshoes. Salt, dried meat and casks of ale. It is enough for thousands, tens-of-thousands--enough to last nearly a full turn."

"Or for a siege," Assur said grimly.

The three warriors glanced at each other uneasily. If Assur was correct, Riehl did not stand a chance, especially against the combined forces of Gorenndt and Maretstan. Gorenndtian warriors were hardy and disciplined--Maretstanis were utterly fearless and used their famous double cross-bows with ruthless accuracy.

Assur placed a hand on Kuurus' shoulder.

"You have done well, my old friend. Go. Eat and rest."

"There is something else, my lord," Brekk said, stepping forward. He passed a tired hand over his eyes and then began to unbuckle the top two fastenings of his jerkin to find something held inside it.

"On our way back, we took a shorter path and we found this." He removed a long, white silk cord, twisted and braided in an intricate pattern with thick tassels at each end.

Assur took the cord and ran his hands over it. There were flecks of blood in the fine weave and on one of the tasseled ends.

"We found it tied around Reddess' body. It was hanging from a tree, upside down my lord, and headless."

Assur went pale as the cord. He nearly dropped it as if he were handling a poisonous snake. White Sisters! He would rather face a dozen marglims, barehanded, than a White Sister. He looked severely at both Brekk and Kuurus.

"What would the White Sisters want with a worthless thief like Reddess? They are only interested in their dead lady."

Kuurus and Brekk eyed each other nervously.

"We are not sure, my lord. We saw no one and no sign of Reddess' head. Maybe it is their way, my lord, to take the head for their own rites," Kuurus offered.

Brekk hesitated again. "And we found this..." he said softly, indicating the previously unseen bundle he had set on the ground.

"What is it?"

Brekk flipped back the ragged cloth to reveal the face of a boy about twelve. Dirty hair, once the color of summer wheat nearly covered his bruised and bloodied face. His clothes, mostly of break hide, were torn and filthy--one of his knee-high leggings was missing. Even in death, it was impossible not to notice that the boy had died in terror and unbearable pain.

"Is he Qualani?" Brekk asked.

"Yes, I believe so," Assur answered while studying the lifeless body.

"We found him just near Sherehn Keep, south of the Rift Cut. He was still alive, but barely."

"And out of his mind," Kuurus added.

"How so?" Assur asked.

"We found him not far from where we camped. His legs were broken and he was crawling on his hands."

"Did he say anything?"

Brekk shook his head at the memory. "He was terrified of us at first--begging for mercy. Then, he seemed to know we would not harm him--"

"Or, he knew he was already dead to really care," Kuurus interrupted.

"All he would say was, 'I must do what they want! Do what they want!' And then: 'They take everything. You can't fight. She...she,' was the last thing he said," Brekk finished.

Assur stood and turned away from the pitiful body.

"Why would a Qualani boy be this far south?" he asked to no one.

"Maybe he was being punished as an outcast?" Brekk offered.

"The Qualani are crazy, but they do not do this to a boy!" Assur snapped.

He coiled the cord in neat loops. "Hide this," he said handing it back to Brekk. "Keep it until I give the word to burn it. Until then, the three of you get something to eat and rest. I will get Jarad to bury the body."

Both Kuurus and Brekk blanched.

"The Qualani do not send their dead to Verlian by funeral pyre--they bury them. It is an abomination, but we will abide by their custom."

Jarad nodded obediently and moved to pick up the lifeless body of the Qualani boy.

Assur nodded to Kuurus. "Send for Courronus. I have a task for him--and you, Kuurus, will make yourself presentable tomorrow. We will pay a visit to this scheming prince."

ASSUR'S GREAT gray horse, Adzra, had been trained to stand absolutely still until permitted to move, but today, like on the hill above Sherehn Keep, the big animal could not keep from tossing his head and jiggled in nervous little steps. As Assur swung onto his back, the horse felt his master's underlying anger. Adzra shook his head making the heavy black and red tassels on his bridle dance and flutter in the cold morning breeze.

Assur was in no mood for handling difficult horses and curbed him sharply. Adzra responded by settling into a tense, choppy walk, making Assur all the more irritable.

"Adzra feels your temper, my lord," Kuurus observed, riding at his right and having troubles handling his own horse who had picked up Adzra's nervousness.

"The beast will be marglim fodder if he does not quit his foolishness soon."

Assur was not looking forward to a confrontation with Kazan. He knew the Gorendtian prince would not welcome him so warmly on this second meeting. No matter. The purpose of his visit was not meant to be cordial.

He made certain he dressed with care, wearing the gold and black web-like harness as on the night of Kazan's great feast and the heavy fur cloak which Courronus had spent half the night brushing, picking out the slightest bit of debris and dirt. There must be no doubt in Kazan's mind as to the formality of his visit, nor the seriousness of his request.

Even the idiot, fidgeting horse, dancing underneath him had been meticulously groomed and every inch of his saddle, harness, and bridle had been polished till they shone. Kuurus himself had managed to look a bit less menacing.

The two guards at the inner gate to Gorendt Keep halted them with crossed spears and harsh demands as to their purpose within the walls of the keep.

"We have business with Prince Kazan," Assur answered in a voice that clearly would not tolerate any argument from either of them.

The guards moved warily as they struggled with their inbred distrust of Talesians and their fear of Prince Kazan's wrath. Uncertainty flicked over their hardened faces. They eyed the silver-hilted swords sprouting from behind Assur's back and decided to risk Kazan's temper. Both Assur and Kuurus were granted entrance to Gorendt Keep.

Assur strode into Kazan's smaller, private audience chamber and noted the Gorendtian prince was not present, but instead had chosen the tactic of making him wait. The bald attempt to put him on the defensive would not work.

Five chairs, the council members' chairs, stood in a neat row to the left and adjacent to a kind of throne at the head of the room--Kazan's chair, Assur presumed. Braziers, set on high tripods and placed at each corner of the room, glowed and softly hissed their fragrant warmth.

Directly in front of Kazan's chair was a long blackwood table, polished to a high gleam, and on it, a handsome branched candlestick cast soft flickering light into its flawless surface.

There was little else in the room of note. Its spareness and hardness only added to Kazan's image of cold simplicity.

A door opened and the slight form of Mangerin slipped into room carrying a thick bundle of papers under one arm. Hesitantly he approached the table. Assur's very presence made the scribe uneasy as he cast quick glances at the bristling swords and his dark scowl. Mangerin sketched a bow to him.

"My lord...sir. Prince Kazan begs your indulgence. A matter of importance has delayed him."

Assur studied the nervous little man contemptuously. Were all the men in this city so easily cowed? Their unreasonable fears annoyed him. Perhaps Kuurus was right--they were a city of "whey-faced puling boys". Even the Gorendtian warriors' reputation for toughness and discipline was slowly being replaced by intimidation and cowardice, fostered by Kazan's callous indifference to his people. Only one among them, the captain called Mar'Kess, appeared to have any honor.

"I will not leave until I see him," he said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Perhaps my lord would care for some refreshment while you wait?"

"No. I will not wait long, Mangerin. If he does not appear soon, I shall hunt every corner of this keep

myself until I find him. Go get your master."

The little man flustered and fumbled with the armload of papers. He set the papers on the table and turned to face him.

"My lord, Prince Kazan is occupied--"

"Find him! I have no patience for court games, scribe. I will tell you once, I am under direct authority from the Ter-Rey. He will not be pleased when I inform him of your master's distinct lack of manners."

Assur let each word fall upon the trembling Mangerin like a heavy weight. He was not used to having his own orders disobeyed, especially by a spineless worm of a court scribe.

Thoroughly frightened, Mangerin scuttled out of the room. Assur then turned and strode to the farthest corner where he began warming his hands over the brazier. He was not above a little test of wills and decided to stand with his back turned when Kazan entered the room. There was only one way to deal with a man like Kazan--with unyielding directness. He had been prepared to come with polite entreaties. Now he would only make demands.

He heard the door open again.

"My scribe tells me my presence has been ordered by a barbarian. I am unaccustomed to being ordered about by anyone. However, I fear my scribe is nearly overcome with terror. It would seem my presence is needed to prevent his untimely death."

Assur did not turn around, but turned only his head so Kazan would not miss hearing him.

"Your scribe was merely doing his duty, as any good servant should, however, he was clearly hampered by conflicting instructions. You should not confuse servants, Kazan."

Two could play the game of speaking in the slightly stilted manner of court speech.

"Your servant was never in any danger, only constrained by the difficulty of the situation," Assur continued.

"You speak very eloquently, for a barbarian," Kazan said slowly, unable to keep the astonishment from his voice.

Assur smiled to himself--his over-embellished, courtly speech *had* surprised the Gorenitian prince.

"The court at Daeamon Keep is not as primitive as you imagine. Most of us can even read," he added with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"I, of course, meant no offence," Kazan went on smoothly.

Assur finally turned around, his face hardened by his disgust. From his furred sleeve, he pulled out a heavy piece of paper, folded and sealed in black wax and dark red ribbons.

"But you have. When you insult me, you insult our High Prince." He handed the paper to Kazan.

Kazan's chin went up defiantly, meeting his unwavering gaze. All pretense of manners and courteous speech dropped. Assur would no longer play the polite guest. Kazan expected a ruthless savage--he would get one.

"What do you want, Talesian? Who are you?" he demanded.

"I have come with a request--one I am prepared to honor with all oaths and bonds."

"Oaths and bonds, eh? I have no use for Talesian oaths and bonds."

"You may not, but the princess Kitarisa will."

Kazan's eyes narrowed. "The princess? What possible business could you have with my daughter?"

Assur stepped around Kazan and moved across the room to the gleaming blackwood table. "Read the document, Lord Kazan. It is a letter of authority from the Ter-Rey."

Kazan cracked open the brittle wax and scanned the document--a blunt directive, ordering the bearer to give all consideration and obedience to Assur and his men.

"I have come to pay bride-price for Princess Kitarisa," Assur said firmly.

The big man stepped to the other side of the table to face Assur, defiance stamped on his fleshy features. He shook the document at Assur.

"This is an outrage. You cannot simply walk into my keep and demand my daughter, as if she were a sack of meal in a market! What are you? A...a savage cutthroat. A Talesian roadwild!"

Again, Assur reached under the fur cloak and drew out a leather sack, heavy with gold. He tossed it onto the table, some of its contents spilling across the gleaming black surface.

"I am the *Ter-Rey's* `roadwild', my lord prince. There are five thousand in gold crown-talins in that sack, precisely the same as what Reddus demanded as Alea's ransom. Surely that is enough to buy your `sack of meal?'"

Hard dark eyes met unyielding blue. Kazan clenched his jaw in a rigid line, clearly fighting a desire to take a sword and run him through, regardless of the consequences he might have with the *Ter-Rey*.

"I will not consent to it," Kazan said angrily, flinging the paper on the table. "Princess Kitarisa is not to marry until I permit it."

Assur leaned over the table, arms spread, resting his weight on his hands. "It is the *law*, Lord Kazan. It is the High Prince's law. You cannot deny a legitimate offer of bride-price--only the lady can refuse. Or, do you wish to discuss the finer points of the law with the *Ter-Rey* himself?" He straightened and for the third time, reached under the fur to his waistband and pulled out a short, deadly-looking knife.

Kazan blinked. Raw terror filled his eyes as he glanced at the gleaming blade, obviously convinced Assur would strike him. Instead, Assur rested the edge of the blade against his own arm, just above the leather armguard.

"Send for Princess Kitarisa, Mangerin!" Assur called to the terrified scribe who had been huddling in the corner nearest the door.

The little man wasted no time, but dropped his papers and fled the room.

"Now, my Lord Kazan, we will see what the lady wishes."

For long, tense moments Kazan glared at him, but uncertain as to the ultimate meaning of the knife blade against his arm--a gesture similar to what Kuurus had done in front of Kitarisa the day the *Talesians* had returned to *Gorendt*.

There was a sudden sound of hurried footsteps and a feminine voice coming from beyond the door--Mangerin did not even bother to knock or announce their entrance, but simply burst into the audience chamber with a breathless Kitarisa close behind him.

"My Lord Kazan...Highness...uh, my Lord Assur, the Princess Kitarisa!"

KITARISA TOOK IN the strange scene before her--her father standing tense and angry behind the table, and Assur on the other side, magnificent in his long, heavy fur--the gleaming hilts of his swords thrusting up behind the dark flag of his hair. He held one of his saddle knives against his left arm in the same way Kuurus had done--to offer an Oath.

Kitarisa managed to collect her wits and dropped a slight curtsy. "Father...my Lord Assur?"

"Come in, Kitarisa," Kazan said loudly, "and see who has come to bargain for you." Kazan stepped away from the table and moved toward her. Roughly, he took her arm and dragged her back to where Assur stood. "It seems you have a suitor, a savage."

Kazan thrust Kitarisa in front of him, still painfully gripping her arm, a gesture not missed by Assur. Kitarisa looked into those black-patterned eyes and saw the same look she had seen the night he had killed the man who had tried to rape her in *Sherehn Keep*.

"Let her go," he said in a low threatening voice.

Kazan saw the look, too, and wisely let go of her arm only to step back and rub his hands together briskly as if anticipating a handsome bargain for his efforts.

"Well, Kitarisa, your barbarian savior has come again. Only this time with his `oaths and bonds' and gold. Perhaps we should tell him, he gets no blushing maiden in the bargain, but `soiled linen?'"

Assur turned again to Kazan and this time the *Gorendtian* prince turned dead-white with fear. The knife blade flashed from Assur's arm to the proximity of Kazan's throat.

"There will come a day, *Lord Kazan*, you will wish you had never spoken those words, particularly in front of me," he said through clenched teeth.

Kitarisa swallowed, suddenly realizing how close her father had come to his own *Summons*.

The *Ter-Rey's* terse orders were still on the table. Prudently, Kazan held up his hands as a sign of submission to Assur's implied threat and took a step back.

"Perhaps, I was hasty..."

Assur turned to focus his attention on Kitarisa. She clutched her hands together, trembling. She could

barely look at him for fear he would say or do something that would send her fleeing from the room in terror. Never in her life had she known anyone who could inspire such abject fear, not even her father. Kazan's temper was the bellowing heat of a break bull; Assur's was the cold, ruthlessness of an enraged viper--the deadliest kind, that stalked and killed without mercy.

Assur lowered the knife blade and turned away from Kazan as if dismissing a mere insect.

"Kitarisa," he said, quickly altering his manner from warrior to polite guest. "I have come to give my oaths and bonds by offering bride-price."

Kitarisa blinked, not certain she heard him correctly. Bride-price? No man would have ever dared to ask as much, not even her dearest Rhynn. Paying bride-price was older than the empire, only then it was called 'paying slavebond'. It was a custom rarely done anymore. Most couples wishing to marry approached their families for a proper arrangement and the formal consents. The old, elaborate negotiations of bride-price were now reduced to a simple exchange of a few coins from the groom's father to the bride's father as a token of 'buying' the girl into the family.

Kitarisa saw the spilled sack of gold on her father's table and knew at once that Assur's offer was far more serious. She had no knowledge of Talesian customs. For all she knew, he could be buying her as a slave. Or, as ancient custom dictated, he could easily 'sell' her for profit.

Assur had taken her at her word and kept his own promise. He was freeing her from her father's imprisoning hold by doing the only thing he could do legally--pay her bride-price--and only she could refuse him. What he did with her if she accepted his offer was something she could scarcely imagine, but she would be free of Kazan.

"While you will have my oaths and bonds, my lady, by Talesian law, they are not binding. You may accept my offer, for now."

Kitarisa looked up. All of his anger had vanished, Kazan forgotten. His look was gentle, almost tender.

"I accept you, my Lord Assur," she said softly, scarcely hearing or believing her own voice.

Assur took a half step back from her and turned to make good his promise. With a firm stroke, he made a short cut on the inner side of his arm, just above the left armguard. He placed the knife into her left hand and then before Kitarisa could pull away, he took her right hand and touched her fingertips to the wound.

Unlike Kuurus, his grip was not as rough, but infinitely careful as if he feared he would break her hand in the course of his ritual. Kuurus had folded her fingers over the stain of blood in her hand, but Assur took her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a soft kiss into her palm. Long forgotten desire shot through her, so powerful, so alarming, she nearly snatched her hand away from him.

"Kuurus has given you his Oath of Duty. You have my Oath of Devotion." He bent lower so Kazan would not hear him.

"You are not my bride, not yet Kitarisa. While I have bought your hand, your affections I will have to earn."

He reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled something out, something gleaming and beautiful. He took up her other hand and dropped the object into it. Kitarisa gasped. It was a heavy chain of intricately patterned gold, in an endless design of entwining roses and dangling from it, a lustrous pearl, smoky black and gleaming with its own dark fire.

"My Lord Assur, it is unbelievably beautiful! I am honored by your gift. Thank you." Unexpected tears filled her eyes. The chain itself was worth a fortune--the pearl was probably priceless. Kitarisa suddenly realized she had no honor gift to return to him. As if reading her mind, he spoke again.

"There is no need for an honor gift, my lady. Simply wearing it will be enough."

She had no other place to set his knife except on the table and then, looping her thumbs through the chain so she would not get any of the blood still staining her fingers on it or on her gown, she slipped the necklace over her head; the pearl dangled nearly to her waist. Shyly, she glanced up at him. His face was unreadable, but she was certain she detected his obvious pleasure.

"An expensive gift from a mercenary, Daughter. Evidently swords-for-hire make an excellent living," Kazan sneered. "It appears you will do well as a barbarian's woman."

The warrior's look returned to Assur's eyes. He swung on Kazan, his entire posture now rigid with contempt.

"I shall come for the Lady Kitarisa tomorrow, before the mid of the day," he said coldly.

Assur offered no bow to Kazan, but gave Kitarisa a short nod of his head. He turned on his heel and strode out of the audience chamber as if he were leaving to prepare for battle.

## Chapter 8

KITARISA SET the basket on the table and wiped her hands on her wide apron. She loved this room with its low ceiling and stout beams. It smelled of fresh herbs and damp earth, of sweet grains and drying flowers. It was too small a stillroom for such a large keep, but Kitarisa managed to make the best use of the shelves and the cupboards where she kept her precious herbs.

It was quiet and dim in her little apothecary and it was here she escaped her father's torments and Alea's whining voice. It was here old Nans had taught her the rudiments of her craft--the gathering and drying, the crushing and measuring. Nans had been a very exacting teacher for such a young pupil, but Kitarisa learned quickly. She learned how recognize the poisonous rimwort from the precious borgonwort--the multiple uses of the saffa flower and how to properly dry it. Nans had instructed her on simple bandaging and how to stitch a wound, but Kitarisa's lessons abruptly ended when Nans succumbed to the damp of the winter and the keep. Even Kitarisa's faithful ministrations could not help.

Nans died peacefully in her sleep, while the ten-year-old princess knelt by her bed and wept for the loss of her cherished companion and for the last link to her mother. It was Nans who had comforted her from Kazan's cruelties, buffered Alea's tempers, Alor's pranks and made her feel wanted. And it was in this room she had first met Rhynn. Her apothecary had become a haven for those with the minor scrapes and bruises from everyday life.

Rhynn had taken a small sword cut on his cheek during practice and dutifully reported to her to have the wound cleaned. He nearly filled the small, low-ceilinged stillroom, and Kitarisa found herself blushing and fumbling with unaccustomed clumsiness. He had been quietly amused and patient--his dark eyes danced with mischief while he submitted to her trembling fingers and stammering advice. She loved him from that moment.

Kitarisa bit her lip at the memory and forced back a sudden rush of tears. It was no use weeping for him now. He was with Verlian and safe from Kazan's torture.

She took care separating the little bunches of maiden lily from the brittle cat's thorn--the cat's thorn made the best red dye, but she had to use it quickly before it lost all its pungency. Maiden lily was wonderful as a mild sleeping tonic and Lady Falla always asked her for a small packet to help with her insomnia.

Kitarisa had to hurry, there wasn't enough time to take anything with her now that she would be going with Assur. Only some borgonwort and few others of her precious herbs would be packed.

She allowed herself the briefest of moments to wonder what her life would be like with Assur. Any discussion of Talesian history and society had been strictly forbidden by Kazan. Even Nans' whispered information had been sketchy at best. For all Kitarisa knew she could be harnessed to a cart or beaten to death at her lord's slightest whim. Somehow, she knew Assur would not treat her cruelly, but the uncertainty of her future stretched out before her like a dark chasm, unknown and forbidding.

She busied herself with the bunches of flowers and did not at first hear the door open or see Alea slip into the room.

"Always busy with your twigs and things?" Alea commented.

"My `twigs and things' have eased many of your discomforts, Alea."

The girl moved to the opposite side of the table to watch Kitarisa work. Her bright gold hair had been caught in a simple headdress of pink and rose silk that matched the shimmering hues in her gown. Completely restored from her ordeal, Alea had firmly reestablished herself as Kazan's favorite.

"What is it this time, more potions for your barbarians?" she asked. Alea fingered some of the herbs, making a disgusted face as if they were tainted.

"I am making a sleeping tonic for Lady Falla--you know she sleeps poorly. Please give them to me, Alea." She reached across the table and took the herb bundles from Alea's hand.

"I did not mean to upset you, I was only curious. You do so many interesting things Kita--like growing herbs and making little tonics. And you save the lives of ugly barbarians. He's finally rewarded you, hasn't he? Rather handsomely, too." She arched one pale brow at her.

Kitarisa's head snapped up. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I only meant that some men are more willing to show their gratitude than others--and their admiration. A pearl that size can only mean he is completely devoted to you." She paused, as if calculating the weight of her next words. "Or, it means that your bride-price was rather expensive. How much did he pay for you, Kita?"

"That is none of your concern," she said sharply.

Alea shrugged. "Maybe. Really, Kita, I did not think you would fancy a savage mercenary like him. Of course, there is no accounting for taste." She sniffed delicately.

"Taste', has nothing to do with it. Lord Assur has paid honorable bride-price for me and I accepted."

"And you would willingly go with a such bloody-thirsty creature? I am surprised at you."

"What would you have me do, Alea? Stay here and rot in this keep?"

Alea's eyes narrowed to almost reptilian slits. "Father has no intention of letting you go with the Talesian."

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "One way or another, I will be free of this place and from father. If it means going with a 'savage' then I will do it and remember, that *savage* saved your life--rescued you from certain death. It took *four* of them to kill that marglim, or have you forgotten already?"

"It was their duty," Alea said lifting her chin defiantly.

Kitarisa looked down at the table and sighed. Was there no end to her vanity?

"I cannot believe there is anyone more selfish and spoiled than you. Do you really believe they killed that marglim because it was their duty? You are more stupid than I thought."

"How dare you speak to me in that manner...I'll...I'll have you punished!"

"*You* deserve the punishment," Kitarisa snapped back. Alea's bickering was infuriating and it took all her self-control not to slap her again. "I wish I had slapped you harder. Perhaps it would have beaten some sense in you."

It was easier to retaliate now that she knew Alea's game. Complicated plotting was not her strength. The girl had only the wits for petty revenge--a skill she used with pinpoint accuracy. Her advantage was that Kazan believed her and always championed her cruel little schemes.

"You will not slap me again, Kitarisa, or do anything else to me or Alor. You will not be going away with Lord Assur, as you think."

Kitarisa's eyes widened, genuinely surprised. "Father cannot simply ignore Assur's oath and bond--the Ter-Rey ordered him--"

"You will not be so proud when I tell you what father intends to do with you."

"What does he intend? Poison again? I do not think he would be that foolish, besides isn't a bride-price enough to be rid of me?"

Alea smiled cruelly at her, a look both triumphant and smug twisting her pretty features. "Father does not think you are worthy of the barbarian. He intends for you to be sent to the Catacombs to take vows to the Sisters! You will be taught obedience and manners. I understand they are quite strict, but then devotion to the Divine Medruth is a lifetime commitment. I am sure you will make an excellent Sister with your knowledge of weeds and tonics."

Kitarisa felt more than just weak and ill. She sank down on the bench by the table, pale and genuinely afraid. She felt her blood race through her--her heart hammered painfully in her chest.

By Verlian's sacred blood, this cannot be true. It would have been better if she were poisoned than to face a life in the Catacombs. And what of Assur's bride-price? Was Kazan foolish enough to anger the Talesian by not honoring their agreement?

"At last we will be free of you, Kitarisa," Alea went on. "Alor will take his rightful place on the Falcon

Throne in Riehl and I will marry into a great house from Maretstan--and when father dies, we will inherit Gorendt."

"He cannot do this. He cannot," she managed to whisper. "I have accepted Lord Assur. Father cannot simply ignore the agreement."

Alea smiled cruelly. "He will! You had better find someone to take over your apothecary, because there will be no one to help poor Lady Falla or ugly barbarians!"

Alea whirled on her heel, her heavy skirt flying around her legs as she stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

The bundle of maiden lily crumbled in Kitarisa's hand. To be sent to the White Sisters was worse than death--a lifetime spent in the dark Catacombs worshiping their dead goddess and learning how to drain the life from the living and use it for their own vile purposes. It was a place of madness and unspeakable horrors.

She remembered Rhynn telling her of the day when his little sister had been taken from them before their very eyes and he and his father had been left helpless to do anything. The Wrathmen were not only skilled swordsmen, but had used their *liet'fa*, to keep them immobilized on their knees.

"We could not move for hours, and the pain was unendurable" Rhynn said grimly, recalling the incident. "And we never saw her again. Never. Have you ever seen them, Kitarisa? A White Sister? When they are finally accepted to the order, their hair turns white and their eyes lose all their color. It is enough to turn your stomach."

Kitarisa stood and straightened her apron. She would rather die than submit to such a punishment. Alea would certainly go to her father and fill him with her lies. He would certainly believe them, too. It did not matter anyway. Kazan was determined to be rid of her even if it meant banishment, regardless of the dishonor to Assur. Her father's resentment and Alea's vanity were bottomless.

She wished she did not feel so helpless, there was no one with whom she could confide. Her father's soldiers, as cowed and servile as they had become, were completely useless. She had no friends and she certainly did not trust Jesria.

Tentatively, she touched the packet of sleeping herbs for Lady Falla. Maybe there was one. And quite suddenly, Kitarisa remembered the saddle knife on her dressing table.

BY DUSK KITARISA found herself again standing in Kazan's smaller audience chamber. Kazan sat impassively, staring at her as she stood before him, gaze lowered, but her back was straight and her shoulders unbowed. He had always resented her subdued defiance. Kitarisa had long-ago lost any respect she may have held for him, but she had not lost her fear. It was to his advantage and he would not hesitate in using it.

He shifted his bulk in the chair and cleared his throat.

"So, you are to be a barbarian's bride," he began without preamble. "I am disappointed in you, Kitarisa."

"His request was honorable," she retorted. "And you were well-paid."

Kazan bridled at her quick tongue. "Honorable or not, his request is impossible."

Kitarisa looked up and saw only a smug complacency stamped on her father's heavy features.

"What do you mean, `impossible?'" she asked as Kazan stood up and moved over to her. He plucked the dangling pearl from her gown, clenching it in one meaty fist.

"You will have no need for pearls or other trinkets in the Catacombs, Kitarisa. I am afraid you will have to disappoint your eager bridegroom."

"You cannot dismiss Lord Assur's request that simply. He is not Rhynn, Father. He is close to the Ter-Rey and whatever happens here will surely be reported to him!"

Kazan let go of the pearl and whirled away from her.

"The Ter-Rey is none of your concern. You will do as you are told, Daughter. I have decided you will renounce Gorendt and Riehl and take holy vows to the Sisters. I have always felt that the Catacombs was the best place for you."

He turned around again to see the shock on her face. Kitarisa stumbled back a step, staring at him in

horror. Alea had been right after all. He had no intention of letting her go to Assur or anyone else. The gold talins would be spent on more weapons and she would live out her days in a labyrinth of madness.

"No," she managed to whisper, still looking at him and fitting the last piece of his malicious scheme into place. "You have always wanted me to go to the Catacombs, haven't you? The abduction to Sherehn Keep was only an excuse to get me out of the way. Only Alea was to have been saved and I was to have been taken to the Sisters. Only it failed, didn't it? You hadn't counted on *Talesians* rescuing us did you?"

Kazan looked as close to embarrassment as a man of his nature could manage. He met her gaze steadily, his hard, black eyes never leaving her face.

"You will better serve the interests of Gorenndt as a White Sister," he said coldly. "And yes, I *will* be rid of you Kitarisa. You've been nothing but a festering sore to me--you and your wretched mother!"

He turned from her and strode to the long table and picked up a large document, already sealed with his wax insignia and the fluttering green and black ribbons.

"You will torment me no longer, Kitarisa. The last of your arrogant, self-seeking line will die with you--I will make sure of it. This," he said, holding up the document, "is your formal and public Letter of Renunciation to the thrones of Gorenndt and Riehl. You will sign it now, Kitarisa. You will make full confession--that you wish the contemplative life of a holy sister and retreat to the Catacombs."

"You cannot do this! I refuse!"

Kazan dropped the document on the table and in one movement, grabbed her upper arm, his large fingers biting painfully into her flesh. He jerked her toward him, nearly lifting her off her feet.

"You will do as you're told, girl. You will sign and you will leave for the Catacombs at dawn."

"And if I do not?" she stormed back at him. "What will you do, torture me to death like you did Rhynn? The eyes of the Ter-Rey are upon us, Father. Each one of those "barbarians" is acting on behalf of the High Prince and you know it. If anything happens to me, he would know it, too. I do not think you would be so stupid as to bring down *his* wrath upon your head. Perhaps it would be simpler if you just poisoned me!"

Kazan's backhanded blow came swiftly, striking Kitarisa on her right cheek and sending her reeling into the table. Blood oozed from the corner of her mouth where her lip had been crushed into her teeth. She dabbed at it with the back of her hand, trying not to show him the pain or her tears.

Kazan glared at her, clenching and unclenching his hands as if using all his self-control not to beat her to death. He jerked his long tunic into place and ran his hands through his thinning hair.

"If you do not sign," he said grimly, "I will have you tried for treason and publicly executed."

This time, Kitarisa did not answer him, but could only stand silently, rigid like a block of wood, as she took in Kazan's final cruelty.

"You are mad," she whispered to him.

"No, Kitarisa, I am not mad, only determined. Sign it and be done with it," he said firmly, holding out the quill to her.

Seeing her hesitate, he set the quill down on the table and folded his arms across his chest. "I *will* do it and there will be nothing your precious *Talesians* can do for you. It will be too late for the Ter-Rey to interfere. Besides, His Highness will understand. He, of all people, should know about traitors and how to treat them."

Kitarisa was tempted to tell him about the weapons she had seen in the dark cavern of Sherehn, but held it back. If she confessed to that, he would certainly have her put to death.

She glanced at the document on the table and saw her life end with a stroke of the quill. After a lifetime of isolation and torment she would be finishing it with cruelty and madness.

There was no escape from the Catacombs--at least she had never heard of anyone escaping. Your life was devoted to Medruth and learning the Ways of the Affliction. And there were whispers, rumors, that if you were not obedient, or if you did not learn quickly enough, you were given to the Wrathmen.

Kitarisa shuddered.

Kazan held up the quill for her to take it and again, she hesitated. She caught the gleaming pearl in her fingers. Assur's honor gift. Its shining smoothness felt comforting in her hand.

Kazan again gestured for her to accept the quill. Irritation still etched his coarse features and she knew if she did not do something soon, he would either strike her again or have her dragged off to one of the dank cells in the bowels of the keep.

She reached out and took the quill from his hand and briefly wished it was a knife like the one Assur had used to cut his arm and bind him to an oath--the knife that lay on her dressing table, gleaming like cold death.

A knife and an oath--a promise.

Kitarisa took up the document in her other hand and before she could sign, Kazan bellowed for Mangerin. The frail little man entered the room, his hands folded primly against his chest. Trailing behind him were the five High Council members. Stripped of any real power, they fidgeted in their chairs, knowing there was nothing they could do to help her either. The rightful heir to both Gorendt and Riehl was being forced to abdicate before their very eyes and they could do nothing except sit as uncomfortable witnesses to Kitarisa's final humiliation.

Kitarisa read the Renunciation in a clear quiet voice and when she finished, she strode to the long table and signed it. She avoided Mangerin's eager hands to take the paper, but instead turned to her father and shoved it into his.

"There, you have what you wanted. You are free of me father. I hope this paper brings you much happiness," she said bitterly.

Kazan took the paper and studied her over the top edge of it.

"Leave us," he said to the others, who eagerly scurried from the room. "There will be an escort at first light. See that you are ready. You will need very little. And," he added pointing to the pearl around her neck, "you will not need that either. See that you leave it behind. It will be your wedding present for Alor's bride."

She drew herself up, gathering the remaining fragments of her pride. "You will not take from me what is rightfully mine, even if I have renounced Riehl. This was given to me in all honor--I will not disgrace him." She leveled her gaze at Kazan, jaw set. "You will have to kill me for it."

Kazan ground his teeth, his anger rising again.

"Get out, Kitarisa, while I am still in possession of my temper. Take your baubles with you. They will be taken from you anyway. You will have no use for pearls in the Catacombs. They will see to that. Perhaps the Reverend `Fa can beat some obedience into you. Get out!"

Kitarisa gathered up the shreds of her dignity and her skirts and strode out of the chamber, past the startled council members, embarrassed at having been caught eavesdropping.

She had no more tears to shed, but only felt a desperate kind of emptiness. Once in her rooms, she sat before the hearth watching the flames slowly die out and felt her heart die with it, too.

In a way, she almost wished Kazan had ordered her execution, at least she would be truly free of him and his torments.

She even wondered if she had enough of the deadly rimwort in her apothecary. It meant a painful, slow death, but her misery would be over. Or perhaps a heavy dose of a sleeping tonic. Just go to sleep....

Quite suddenly she thought of Lady Falla and the sleeping tonic she had promised her.

Perhaps there was a way to escape the Catacombs.

## Chapter 9

IT WAS FORTUNATE Kitarisa remained confined in her own quarters to take her meals and that Jesria did not linger too long with her supper tray. Kitarisa made it all too clear that the maid was not welcome.

"Shall I brush your hair, my lady?" Jesria offered politely.

Kitarisa's back stiffened. She did not even want her to help her undress and get ready for bed.

"No, that won't be necessary." She took the brush from Jesria's hand and deliberately turned back to the dressing mirror. "You may leave now, Jesria."

The maid curtsied and backed out of the room, carrying the tray. At the door, she stopped and looked at Kitarisa's reflection in the dressing mirror. Kitarisa met Jesria's prim, slightly reproachful expression and waved her hand in dismissal. She trusted her even less than she did Alea. Jesria was too secretive and Kitarisa had the uneasy feeling she was always watching her.

The woman made another polite curtsy and left the room.

At last Kitarisa was alone and could think. She turned back to the mirror and sighed. Unless there were amusements in the hall, Alea retired to her own rooms to play hare and stags with her tiring women, or to enjoy the melodies from a dalcet. Alor would not be seen till the next morning--sometimes not at all. The pleasures of the silk rooms where the prostitutes plied their trade kept Alor from his duties as well as from his father's temper.

Kazan was never seen.

Idly, she fingered Assur's saddle knife resting on the table next to her brushes--a beautiful, deadly thing. The warm light from the candles caught the burnished gleam of the mottled break horn and the silver hammered into its grip. How many times had he used this to kill, or to make an oath, she wondered, as she ran a fingertip down its spine. And he had five of them. All of the Talesians had knives such as this, and they were kept deadly-sharp. She picked it up and studied the blade.

Only the Siarsi tribe knew the secret of purifying steel. There were many warriors in her father's keep who had willingly traded valuable horses, armor, and other weapons for one Siarsi sword. One could always tell a Siarsi blade by the sign of the double break horns stamped deeply into the steel. She found the mark and frowned.

There was something familiar about the mark. It was obviously Assur's clan symbol, or the sign of his house--a rose and a sword encircled by a crown. The mark itself was something important. Something she *ought* to know, the memory of it just slipping from her grasp. But Assur would recognize his own blade.

She dressed inconspicuously in one of her mother's old gowns of brown brocade, re-cut in the more simple, current style and then slipped the knife into her satchel. No one would question her visiting Lady Falla as long as she stayed in the west wing of the keep. Attending to some of the minor complaints of the ladies was something she often did and she was always welcome.

Kitarisa did not dare write anything down. If her good opinion of Lady Falla was as she hoped, then there would be no need of it.

Skimming down the dark hallway, she tried to look concerned as if on an important errand. If any of the guards stopped her, she would appear greatly inconvenienced. At Lady Falla's door she stopped and rapped lightly.

The door was opened, almost too quickly by the lady's tiring woman--a smooth-faced girl with sharp, gray eyes, who nodded to her and curtsied when she recognized Kitarisa.

"Ah, you have come with the tonic. Do come in, Your Highness."

Lady Falla rested contentedly before her fire, absorbed in a book. "Kitarisa! How good of you to come. I did not expect you till tomorrow. I thought the tonic took longer to prepare."

"I knew you needed it, so I made myself hurry."

"You are a dear child. Thank you and do sit down." She gestured to the chair near her and Kitarisa slipped into it, still tense with worry.

Lady Falla smiled warmly at her. Kitarisa always liked being in her presence. For some reason she reminded her of her own mother. They both were small women with masses of chestnut-colored hair and soft blue eyes like summer skies and the little bluecrowns that hopped and pecked about her garden.

"You know, I am happy to say, I may not need it now. I am finding I have been sleeping much better lately, but I will keep it just the same."

"I am so glad to hear it Lady Falla. Perhaps your digestion is improving?" she suggested delicately.

"No. Oh no. My digestion is fine. It is the exercise I am taking. Daily, I walk about the large garden and on occasion, take the air in the woods nearby. I do love a brisk horseback ride. You must try it, dear Kitarisa."

Lady Falla was the only one who referred to her by her given name without the prefix of 'my lady'

unless for formal occasions, and Kitarisa privately enjoyed it.

Readjusting one of the pillows, Falla settled herself more comfortably in her chair. "I have even seen our barbarians' camp, just north of the city, near the river." She grinned a bit mischievously. "You were right. I did not hear anyone howling or chanting."

Falla studied Kitarisa intently, noticing she did not respond to their little joke. "My dear, are you quite all right?"

"No, Lady Falla, not so well."

"Are you ill? Shall I send for a physick?"

"No. I...I am only worried about something--something I can hardly say."

Lady Falla frowned, suddenly concerned. "Is it your father? Has he been abusive again?"

"Yes...no, I mean, yes. Oh, Lady Falla, I do not know what to do. You are the only one I can dare trust."

At once practical, Lady Falla made a quick gesture to her maid. "Please leave us, Meri. And keep a sharp watch at the door."

The girl hesitated.

"Are you certain, my lady? What if...?" Meri reluctantly backed to the door, her shrewd eyes darted from Lady Falla to Kitarisa.

"Yes. Can't you see the princess wishes to speak to me alone? Please go now, Merisella."

"Yes, mistress." The girl frowned, but obediently curtsied and slipped out of the room.

Once the door had clicked shut, Lady Falla adjusted her chair so she was facing Kitarisa and took her hands in her own.

"Now, what is it child?"

Stumbling, haltingly, Kitarisa began to tell her everything: Assur's offer, his gift of the pearl and then she told her about the renunciation and her banishment to the Catacombs.

"Monster," Lady Falla exclaimed. "He is contemptible! How can he do such a thing?" She stood and began pacing the room.

"Kazan's plans must be moving along faster than he expected. It is no secret he wants Riehl and he knows he risks the prince's peace in getting it."

"You mean war, don't you?" Kitarisa asked.

"My dear Kitarisa, if he cannot have Riehl by the marriage bed, then swords will do just as well." Lady Falla sat down again to face her. "Alea's maids talk, Kitarisa. Only yesterday, I learned that in a few days, a delegation from Maretstan will arrive with their youngest princess, Dahsmahl. She has been intended for Alor for a long time and if all goes well, they will have Riehl as a wedding present. If not, then Maretstan will no doubt join forces with Kazan and attack Riehl."

"But what of the Council Circle? Will the Riehlans have no say in this? Who will rule them?"

"My dear, Riehl is no match for Gorendt and with you in the Catacombs, they will have little choice."

Kitarisa's eyes widened as she suddenly recalled the deep chambers in Sherehn Keep and the rows upon rows of weapons--weapons to be used against Riehl.

"Lady Falla, Kazan must not get to the old ruin at Sherehn! It is full of weapons. They will be used to crush the Riehlans."

Quickly she told her of her rescue and how they had stumbled upon the enormous cache of weapons stored deep in Sherehn's hidden chambers.

Lady Falla rose, alarmed.

"Then we must see the Talesians, tonight. Maybe they can get to the Ter-Rey in time." She took Kitarisa's hands again. "I am glad you came to me, my dear. I know it must have been hard for you to trust anyone, but *I am* with you. Alor has no right to Riehl and Kazan must be stopped. I pray Verlian we are in time!"

LADY FALLA HAD deliberately cultivated an image of the eccentric widow; it helped her acquire an array of valuable information and access to more places she normally would have never seen. It also afforded her enormous tolerance for her little whims. People gave her wide berth and bemused

deference.

It surprised no one when Lady Falla decided to go for an evening ride. She swept purposefully into the stable yard demanding her horse be saddled. The head groom, scratching and stupid from too much ale, grumbled, but readily obeyed her.

She played the role well, imperious and aloof, making a great show of checking the bridle to see that everything had been buckled properly and that the bit was not too tight. She rebuffed the head groom's half-hearted warnings about marglims and roadwils and stepped onto the mounting block to wait for her plain, little gelding to be brought alongside.

With her skirts arranged just so and with a crisp snap of the long feathers on her hat, she trotted the horse out of the courtyard and through the massive gates of the keep, heading north.

But Lady Falla's elegant act could not conceal the tremors in her hands or her heart once she left the last gate of the city. It was terrifyingly dark and for a short time she became afraid she would get lost, but her faithful Nika seemed to know the way.

At the edge of the wood, near the river she spotted the black shapes of the Talesian tents and their fires still burning brightly even at this late hour.

She too, knew all the stories about Talesians and in spite of Kitarisa's reassurances, she found herself wanting to turn back to the safety of the keep.

Long before she got close to their camp, they knew someone was approaching. Three of the tallest men she had ever seen stood warily in front of the first tent. She immediately recognized the one with the black scars.

"It is very late for a lady such as yourself to be out riding," Kuurus said softly. He did not touch his sword, but rested his hand on the hilt of his dagger, lightly tapping the pommel.

"I know, but I am here on most urgent business. I am here to see your leader. The one they call Assur. I have a message for him, from Princess Kitarisa."

At her words, Kuurus started. He ducked into the tent and almost immediately returned with Assur.

Lady Falla had just barely approached her middle years and was not too old to notice a fine build on a man. She almost sucked in her breath at the sight of him and chastised herself for not remembering him at Kazan's festivities. In the dancing light of the fire she saw the shoulders, the flat belly--those eyes.

"You have come from the Lady Kitarisa?" Assur asked bluntly.

"Yes." She began to unwind herself from the horn on her sidesaddle and was surprised to see Kuurus instantly at her side, hands on her waist to ease her to the ground.

"I am Lady Falla, a friend of hers." She noticed the skepticism flit across Assur's handsome features. "I truly am her friend, my lord. You must believe me."

She turned and fumbled for the straps on the small saddle pack. From its depths she pulled out something long and gleaming and handed it to him.

"Kitarisa is in grave danger and she sent me to ask for your help. She said you would recognize this and would know I am telling the truth."

Assur turned the object over in his hands. It was his own saddle knife, a part of his honor gift.

As she explained Kazan's new plans for Kitarisa, Assur's black look almost sent her clambering into the saddle.

"When does this occur?" he demanded.

"At dawn and I presume she will be escorted by Wrathmen. Wrathmen are the only men permitted into the Catacombs, although to be honest my lord, I have not seen any Wrathmen near Gorendt."

"We met with some while returning to Gorendt. Perhaps they are the same," Kuurus suggested.

"It is possible," Assur agreed. The Talesian leader did not wait for any further discussion. He slipped off the heavy fur and tossed it to Courronus. "Break camp and bring my swords. Kuurus will ride with us, my lady, and you will help us locate Princess Kitarisa's rooms."

In what seemed only moments, Assur had clad himself in his customary leathers and swords and swung onto the gray horse's back. He nodded to Lady Falla.

"We are in your hands, my lady. Lead on."

KITARISA HAD LONG given up praying to Verlian or to any of the other gods and deities Master Jemethet had told her about. She gave up when Nans died. The Goddess did not listen then and she was almost certain She was not listening now.

The keep was quiet, its inhabitants silent and asleep. She had little to do but pace the confines of her rooms, wait for Lady Falla, and worry. If Lady Falla did not come back, or could not find Assur and his men, then Kitarisa would surely be sent to the Catacombs. The same sick feeling she had in her stillroom gripped at her belly. She ate none of the supper Jesria left for her, complaining she was too upset with the day's events to eat. Jesria only smiled and dipped a sly curtsy before removing her tray.

Kitarisa wasn't sure what to do; try to sleep, or remain dressed and ready to leave. She decided on the latter, changing into her deep blue riding dress and dark cloak. She hadn't been sure what to take with her either. Along with a few of her precious herbs and personal items, she wrapped the only thing she had left from her mother--Princess Liestra's crown--more of a chaplet than a crown. There were no stones in it, no flashing diamonds or radiant rubies, but it was a masterpiece of Riehlman craftsmanship. It always reminded Kitarisa of lace--an intricate design in gold, delicately wrought and patterned in the ancient Riehlman trademark of the falcon. She remembered how her mother's long dark hair had been held in place with it. Even though she was a princess in her own right, Liestra was rarely permitted to wear it. When she died, Kazan would not allow the crown to be placed on her head and burned with her funeral pyre.

Kitarisa wrapped the precious remnant of her mother's family in her nightdress and thrust it deep into her satchel. She would probably never have a chance wear it, but it was hers. Even Assur could not take it from her.

As the night dragged on she began to wonder if Falla had even been able to find them. Once beyond the city walls, the forest became a dark and forbidding place even for the seasoned traveler. While no one had seen them for a long time, there was always the threat of marglins in those woods, or rough roadwolds. Or even worse, the Wrathmen.

Just when she thought she would go mad with not knowing, she caught the faint sound of someone scratching at her door. She touched the handle hesitantly. It might be Jesria come to check up on her.

The scratch came again, this time louder and more insistent.

"Who is there?" she whispered.

"It is Falla, open the door."

Kitarisa opened the door a crack and saw Falla's sweet face peering anxiously at her. Falla quickly slipped into her room.

"Dearest Lady Falla, you came back!"

"Hush, girl," Lady Falla whispered. "You will wake the entire keep. Are you ready?"

"Yes. How are we to get out?"

"Your Talesian friends are just outside, so do not make any noise. They are as wary as cats. My, they are fierce! Do you have your things, your gloves and cloak? It is cold outside."

"Yes." Kitarisa nodded, while grabbing her satchel and riding gloves.

"Then come. It will be dawn soon."

Silently the two slipped out of her room and eased down the shadowy, dark corridors, past the kitchens, the storerooms, her own stillroom, until they reached the stables and the courtyard. Lady Falla touched her finger to her lips and then tugged Kitarisa's elbow to make her look into the deep shadows of the courtyard walls. Like phantoms, Assur and Kuurus seemed to materialize from thin air.

Lady Falla hugged her closed and pressed her mouth directly to her ear. "You must go now, take my horse, my little Nika. He is with the others."

"Lady Falla, how can I thank you? Please, can't you come with us?" Kitarisa caught herself almost sobbing. How could she leave this dear lady?

"No child. Go now. I will be all right."

Kitarisa looked up into Lady Falla's smiling face.

"Go Kitarisa. Go and start your life anew." She pressed her lips to her hair again, so that Assur and Kuurus would not hear her. "He will take care of you, Kita. I know it. He is brave and good. You must

let him win your heart. Go now." She gave her a little shove toward the two Talesians.

"Falla," she whispered. Tears ran down Kitarisa's face, unheeded. Dearest Falla--her very last link to a time when people were genuinely kind to her.

Lady Falla did not linger. She turned abruptly and disappeared back into the keep, forever severing Kitarisa from the past. She felt Assur's hand on her elbow.

"Come, Kita," he said softly, his voice heavy with compassion.

She nodded and gathered the folds of her cloak more tightly about her. Gorendt Keep, for all its grimness and bitter memories, it had been her only home. It was here she had been born and had spent her early years with her mother and then her dear Nans. She had met and loved Rhynn within these walls and now she was saying goodbye to Lady Falla, a woman she hardly knew, but loved all the more for her loyalty and caring.

Assur gently tugged at her again. She turned and allowed herself to be led into the night and to her new life with a barbarian.

CAPTAIN MAR'KESS strode down the darkened corridor heading for his own rooms. He was tired and saddened by the events of the day. Like with most of Kazan's unaccountable decrees, he had heard of Princess Kitarisa's renunciation and had taken it without emotion but privately deplored it. He had never approved of the way Kazan had treated her, but then he had been sickened by that whole business with Rhynn Palinn.

Rhynn had been a good soldier, trustworthy and honorable. Perhaps a little foolhardy when it came to Kitarisa, but the man had been in love. It had taken all Mar'Kess' training to remain detached and unfeeling when he had given the orders for Rhynn to be dragged to the prison below and then to watch while they tortured the life out of him.

And the Princess Kitarisa? What Kazan had done to her was unspeakable. Mar'Kess almost resigned his rank and oaths to Kazan's house for it.

It was becoming harder and harder to find a good reason to remain as First Captain of Kazan's House Guard. He had seen enough of the intimidation and deceit. A responsible and hard-working Council was now stripped of any real power, leaving most all of the decisions to Kazan. There were more and more demands to punish citizens for no apparent reason other than to make sure they remained obedient and submissive.

Enormous stock holds of weapons and supplies were being built up--swords and spears, shields and armor, and the new crossbows from east of Maretstan.

Kazan's relentless drive to have Riehl had become an obsession and the people suffered for it, especially the princess

Mar'Kess passed a tired hand through his bright hair. It had been so much easier being a lowly house guard. He followed orders, kept his equipment and weapons in good condition, took care of his horses, and drew his pay. Simple. Now, it was not so easy. The responsibilities of his rank were made hard and increasingly cynical. It bothered him that he could watch a man being tortured to death with no more emotion than watching a horse being shod.

For a moment, Mar'Kess lost his way in the corridor. Not lost exactly, but absent-mindedly taking a wrong turn. He found himself in the west wing of the keep, the wing where most of the women lived.

Annoyed with himself, he doubled back and became even more exasperated when he turned down another hall to his left instead of the right. He was about to curse Verlian and anyone else within earshot, when he spotted something in the dim hallway.

Something or someone lay on the floor at the end of the hallway and began to move. Immediately wary, he approached the pale form ready to draw his sword if necessary. As he drew closer, he could hear soft moaning as the figure attempted to drag itself along the floor. To his astonishment, he realized the figure on the floor was a woman, trying to crawl on her hands. Perhaps it was one of the maids who had become ill.

He knelt down and touched her shoulder. The woman moaned again. "My lady?" he asked.

The woman collapsed as if having reached the last of her strength. Alarmed, Mar'Kess gently took the

woman by her shoulders and turned her over.

Whatever had happened to her, it was clear she was dying. Blood ran freely from her nose and mouth as if she had taken a direct blow to the face. She shuddered as unbearable pain coursed through her body. Her breath came in short, rattling gasps--a dreaded sound he had heard too often in the battlefield--a sure sign the end was near.

He brushed back the chestnut-colored hair and touched her cheek. Her eyes fluttered open--soft blue and glazed with pain.

"Lady Falla! My lady, can you hear me?"

"Mar'Kess?" she whispered. She struggled to pull herself upright, but another spasm wracked through her. She coughed and again Mar'Kess heard the tortured gurgling in her lungs. He caught her up and gently rested her against his knee.

"Mar'Kess, you must stop them?"

"Who? Who did this to you?"

She tried to rally and clutched feebly at his surcoat.

"White Sisters. There are White Sisters here. Their mistress, Malgora, their Reverend `Fa made me..."

Lady Falla arched in agony. Mar'Kess felt helpless as he watched her struggle to stay alive long enough to reveal her terrible secret. A newly-formed ember of hate began to flair within him. It brightened and crackled with each of Lady Falla's desperate words.

"You must get out of here and find him and warn him."

"Who? Who do you mean, dear lady?"

"Mar'Kess, listen to me!" Somehow the lady found enough strength to look at him with clear eyes and speak in a firmer voice. "The Princess Kitarisa was to have been taken to the Catacombs at first light by Wrathmen. Earlier this night, Kitarisa came to me for help. I then rode to their campsite to tell them."

"Whose campsite?"

"The barbarians, the Talesians. Their leader, Assur, promised he would get Kitarisa out of the keep, but it is almost too late. My own maid had been listening to us and went to her mistress. When I returned to the keep, Malgora took me...and she--" Lady Falla coughed again. "She made me tell her everything. Mar'Kess, she is evil! I do not know what she plans, but you must get to Assur and tell him. Somehow this involves the Ter-Rey himself. I do not know how... They rode north...Riehl. Hurry."

"Lady Falla, I must get you some help."

"No! I am near my Summons. I know it. All of my ribs are broken, my legs too. You must stop her."

"Where is she, where is this Malgora?"

"The north tower. Kazan hides her there. My maid Meri is one of them and maybe Jesria, too. I do not know..."

Lady Falla's strength began to wane as she fought to remain conscious. Her breath came in short, jerking spasms. She tried to reach up and touch his face. "You are a good man, Raldan Mar'Kess. Stop this witch. Find them."

Her last breath came out in one long rattling sigh. Her eyes blinked once and then closed forever.

Mar'Kess clutched Lady Falla's frail body to him, fighting to choke back his grief. He had always liked Lady Falla, with her laughing eyes and merry humor. Although several years his senior, he always thought her beautiful and infinitely kind.

He lifted her up, still pressing her tightly to him. He glanced down the hallway. No one had seen him--the west wing guard was too far away to have heard them either. Lady Falla's door was only a few paces away, she having managed to drag herself a few feet.

"Dear lady," he muttered softly, seeing what her efforts had cost her.

Mar'Kess slipped into her room and laid her gently on the bed. The bedclothes were strewn everywhere indicating a terrible struggle. There was blood, much blood on the carpet. Merciful Verlian, what had they done to her? He found a scrap of clean linen and tried to wipe away the blood from her face. He could do little else but cross her hands over her breast and then plant a light kiss on her brow.

"Verlian has you now, sweet lady. You will be blessed for this, I am sure."

As he turned to leave, he stumbled over something on the floor. Entangled in the strewn bedclothes, he

found a long white cord. He dropped it like he had been scalded. *Ajirs'kial*, silken death. Rhynn had told him about them. After `calling for the affliction!`--when the Sisters were through with you, the *jirs'kial* ended your suffering. Even the Wrathmen were permitted to use them.

Mar'Kess kicked the cord into the farthest corner of the room. He wished he had the time to burn it, or at least show it to Kazan, but there would be no opportunity for that.

He eased back into the hall. At this late hour, most everyone would be asleep. He had to move quickly as he had no idea how early Lady Falla's maid rose to attend to her and then discover the body.

Explaining Lady Falla's death to Kazan would be immensely interesting, but he would not be around long enough to tell him.

Mar'Kess strode down the hall, back toward the main entrance to the central part of the keep. He passed the startled guard who immediately snapped to attention.

"There are reports of mealmice in the west wing. You will take two men and search this area in the morning, soldier," he ordered crisply.

"As you command, sir!"

"Lower your voice, soldier. It is late. Would you have His Highness disturbed?"

"No sir. Sorry sir."

Mar'Kess left the bewildered guard to mull over the dilemma of imaginary mealmice and headed straight for his own quarters.

Once the door was firmly shut, he stripped off the green and black surcoat, the one he had once so proudly worn, and replaced it with a plain black one. He packed his saddlebags, taking only the barest necessities. He gave his spare room one last look--fifteen turns of unquestioning loyalty and duty were finished with the last beat of Lady Falla's heart. He shut the door and hurried to the stable.

Old Nedds snored loudly from his bed in the nearest stall that had been converted to a rough room for him. Mar'Kess did not even have to sneak by him, but headed down the long rows of stalls as if it were mid day.

He saddled his bay and led him out to the stable yard, tying the horse in the deep shadows near the outer gate.

The moon gleamed silver, still only crescent-wide but bright enough for him to see the top of the north tower. It was well past the mid of the night and yet a light glowed from the high mullioned windows.

Mar'Kess gave the horse a quick pat and then drew his sword.

## Chapter 10

THE CAPTAIN knew every inch of Gorendt Keep, particularly the west wing. At eighteen and desperately smitten with a Council member's granddaughter, Mar'Kess had climbed the steep outer wall to her room. At first, the girl had been shocked, but later, most receptive to him--something he soon discovered that most of the youngest guards in the garrison knew, too. She eventually married a wealthy merchant and produced several of children, but clambering that wall had given Mar'Kess the confidence to discover all kinds of lovely secrets in the west wing. As he matured, he stopped his adolescent visits, but the layout of the west wing remained firmly planted in his memory.

The back way, the way used only by servants led him directly to the access corridor to the north tower. It smelled of aging, damp stone and decay. Rats, the size of cats, scuttled out of his way into the black corners. He eased down the long, ancient corridor until he saw the steps coiling upward to the tower.

He had no fear of Malgora but was wise enough to know not to corner her in her own lair. Mar'Kess pulled up the mail coif to conceal his pale hair. His bright-colored hair had gotten him into more trouble than he cared to remember--he was too easy a target.

From above he suddenly heard the heavy thunk of a door being closed and the patter of light footsteps descending the steps. He shrank under the stairs and waited.

"The Reverend `Fa is pleased with us," a young feminine voice said.

"Yes, but her work is not done yet, Sister Merisella."

The second voice sounded older and superior. Jesria.

"There is much to do. Now that Kitarisa is gone, we must prepare for Alor's new bride. I have made the arrangements to be sure that either one of us will be appointed as her tiring woman. She will have her own ladies, of course, but it will be important for our illustrious guest to have someone to make her feel comfortable in her new surroundings."

"How long before she will be with us?" Meri asked.

"We must wait until she and Alor are married and when they are safely settled in Riehl. In the meantime we can begin in small ways..."

Mar'Kess pressed himself deeper into the shadows. Both women stopped at the base of the stairs, their backs to him.

"Hopefully, she will be easier than Lady Falla. The Holy Sister called for the Affliction several times before she submitted," Meri said.

"All must yield to the Will of Medruth," Jesria stated flatly. "It is fortunate Alor is weak and has no will of his own--he will conform quickly."

"He will, my lady."

"Our mistress needs the strong ones, Meri."

"Like the Ter-Rey?" the girl asked, almost eagerly.

"The Ter-Rey is our mistress' concern, not ours. But, come, you must see to Falla and then rest. The Princess Dahsmahl is expected in less than a week and we have much to do."

The two started down the dim hallway, still unaware of Mar'Kess' eavesdropping. If he were to do anything, he must act before they reached the end of the corridor and moved on into the main part of the keep. His left spur chinked noisily against the stones, sparing him from having to speak out loud.

The women whirled on him, completely astonished.

"Captain Mar'Kess!" Jesria exclaimed. "Whatever are you doing here?"

"Discovering for myself what poor Lady Falla tried to tell me before she died," he said coldly.

"Lady Falla is dead?" Meri asked, surprised.

"She died in my arms, broken and bleeding, thanks to you and your witch," he spat angrily, jerking his head upward to indicate the tower room.

Meri's little round face went hard, her jaw set. "It was necessary, Captain. She did not yield easily. What she knew was vital to our Holy Sister's plans."

"And who else, *holy sister*?" he sneered. "Who else will she torture to death for her `plans'? Princess Kitarisa? Or Dahsmahl?"

Jesria and Meri eyed each other nervously.

"The Holy Sister's plans are her own. We are but instruments of her Will and that of the Divine Medruth," Jesria said firmly.

"How do you intend to explain Lady Falla's death to Kazan? It is well known he is extremely fond of her."

Mar'Kess glanced over his shoulder at the direction of the tower. "Perhaps your mistress could be persuaded uponâ€"?" He began backing away from them, toward the stairs.

"No!"

Jesria leaped at him, foolishly trying to wrest the sword out of his hand. She was a tall woman herself, but no match for a seasoned soldier. Taking her by the upper arm he flung Jesria off like an unwanted garment. He heard a sickening thud as her head hit the stone wall and she slowly sank to the floor.

"Captain! What have you done?"

He turned to face the girl and began moving toward her, sword poised. It occurred to him that he was turning against every honorable oath he had taken about not harming the defenseless, only this girl was not defenseless.

Meri lifted her chin defiantly--her eyes were ageless, full of corruption and ancient evil. "You will die horribly, Captain Mar'Kess. The Holy Sister will not take this offence lightly."

"I will take that risk," he answered grimly, still moving toward her.

"You *will* yield, Captain. All must conform. It is inevitable."

"I will when Verlian Summons me."

Holding the sword in two hands, Mar'Kess drew it back over his right shoulder. A mere girl stood defiantly before him with her back against the dank wall, not ten inches from the point of the blade. Her once pretty gray eyes were now pale and consumed with the rot that had set within her.

"For Lady Falla," he said quietly and drove the blade into her throat.

MAR'KESS FLED down the darkened, grim corridors of Gorendt Keep past Kitarisa's rooms. Dawn was not far and he prayed he would be in time.

With every footstep he was certain he could be heard. His chain mail clanked noisily and his own heavy breathing sounded like a roar in his ears.

Across the wide expanse of the cobbled yard, Mar'Kess' horse waited patiently near the gate. From the dark safety behind his horse, he glanced upward at the north tower. There was no light in the window, giving evidence that the occupant still did not know about the two dead women.

White Sisters in Gorendt? Was it possible? Was this the real reason Kazan had wanted Princess Kitarisa to go to the Catacombs? And Lady Falla?

Mar'Kess wasted no time swinging into the saddle and heeling the bay around and out of the courtyard. He was fortunate the smaller yard was not guarded, not like the great yard at the front of the Keep. The smaller one was only used as a service entrance for the soldiers, tradesmen, or merchants and at this late hour, there were no guards on duty.

Captain Mar'Kess rode through the silent city, hurrying past the darkened shops and homes. The horse's hooves clattered loudly on the cobbled streets and he marveled at how the Talesians had gotten out of the city unheard and unseen.

At the last gate, the north gate, he saw the fluttering torches where the last guards waited to question anyone who might be traveling in and out of the city, particularly someone on a strange late-night ride. It was then Mar'Kess realized he was not wearing his green and black surcoat or any other marking to display his rank.

"Halt!" the young guard barked. There was only one man on duty. He looked neither bored nor sleepy, but fresh and alert--a textbook soldier attentive to his duties.

"Where is the other guard?" Mar'Kess snapped, immediately resuming his authority over the man.

The guard thrust his torch up and peered into Mar'Kess' face. "First Captain! Sir! He...He is resting--it is my turn at the watch."

Mar'Kess nodded. "Had you not been informed I would be leaving through this gate? I had sent specific orders to be relayed to all the gates."

The guard blinked, confused. "I received no such orders, sir."

"Then there has been a breakdown in communication from the duty officer. I will speak to him when I return. Until I do, you are not to record my leaving through this gate in your log. Is that clear? To do so would be in direct defiance of the Prince Kazan's own orders. Are you taking my meaning, soldier?" Mar'Kess warned ominously.

The guard snapped to attention, the torch trembling in his left fist. "Understood, sir!"

"Good. You will not mention this to the other guard. The prince's life depends on your silence."

Mar'Kess did not wait for a reply, but spurred the bay through the gate and northward to find a band of Talesians.

THE BRIGHT HALF-LIGHT of the moon was enough to guide them deep into the northern woods above Gorendt, toward the Talesian encampment. Kitarisa's brown gelding struggled bravely to keep up with the two other horses, but once they were in the deepest part of the forest, Assur slowed them to a cautious walk.

She should not have been surprised but the sound of approaching horses moving through the forest startled her. It was Brekk and the others who had been waiting for them.

"Which way, my lord?" Brekk asked.

"It is said a Wrathman can track a fish in water. We may not be able to outrun them, but maybe we

can make them *think* we have. The Catacombs are east, Riehl is north. If I were a Wrathman, I would expect you to take the princess north to Riehl. We ride west for a time and then north until we reach Nattuck."

Glad for the order in which the horses fell, Kitarisa planted herself firmly behind Assur and Brekk with Del and Jarad behind her. Kuurus and Sherlin took the lead, while the young Courronus brought up the rear. She was convinced that they were either cats or owls. With an unfailing sense of direction, Kuurus headed west through the blackest of Gorendt's woods as easily as if they were on an afternoon ride to a picnic.

Kitarisa overheard Assur discussing the recent events to Brekk in low tones and every once in awhile, when the moon shone through the trees, she could see him nodding in agreement.

It wasn't long before Assur reined back to ride alongside her.

"I am sorry you had to leave your friend so quickly. She seemed a kind lady and loyal to you. I pray Verlian she will be blessed."

"Lady Falla was the only friend I had, the last reminder of my mother. I shall miss her."

"Perhaps one day you will return and see her again."

Kitarisa shook her head. "No, my lord. Gorendt will always be a place of unhappy memories. Most of my life has been full of bitterness and hatred. I am sorry to leave Falla, but I will never return."

She could not see him nod, but knew by his silence he was agreed with her.

"I have not taken the opportunity to thank you for helping me...again. It seems you are always saving me from something. I hope I can repay you in some way. You have been more than generous. I want you to know I will not hold you to your oath. I will release you and return the pearl. It is not necessary to...I mean, you do not have to..." she finished lamely, embarrassed.

"Kitarisa, I have no intention of renouncing my oath to you. A Talesian does not take a blood oath lightly. Only if *you* wish it will I do so. As I said, I have paid your bride-price. I will have to earn your affections."

She did not know what to say to him. Lady Falla had whispered the very same thing--to let him win her heart. Curious that Falla did not say *for her* to win *his* heart. Kitarisa did not even know if she really wanted anyone's affections, particularly Assur's. He was so...disturbing.

Assur turned his attention from her to Kuurus, calling for him to pick up the pace.

Kuurus acknowledged the call and put spurs to his horse's flanks. They surged forward, due west, toward the great wall of the Adrex while the faint, milky threads of dawn touched the eastern sky.

THREE MEN KNELT before the pacing, white-haired figure--her white robes lashed about her with each abrupt turn and the incredible cascade of ice-white hair trailed down her back nearly to the floor like a shimmering veil, following the angry movements of her skirts.

Kazan shifted uncomfortably from one knee to the other. He disliked this groveling business, particularly in his own private chamber, but he had no choice. To arouse Malgora's anger by something as trivial as disrespect, especially at this moment, could be painful, even fatal.

He did not understand Malgora's wrath. Kitarisa was gone--not to the Catacombs as he had hoped, but to the barbarians. What if they told the Ter-Rey that she had abdicated? The document was signed, sealed, and witnessed. Even the High Prince would be unable to remand that document.

Kazan's plans would proceed as he had arranged. The Maretstani girl arrived in a few days and the betrothment announced. He would make sure Alor and Dahsmahl were joined as soon as legally possible. Then Riehl would be his. All the splendor and power of that great city in his hands--the great trade vessels loaded with the treasures of their finest artisans, sent down the Sherehn to Maretstan and beyond to the southern tribes, only to return with gold and silk, wine, and rich carpets--and more importantly, the swords "â€" swords that were said to be finer than any Siarsi blade.

Trade ships would also bring the great crossbows from farther east than the Barren, beyond the Oduns, from a land Kazan himself could only imagine in his dreams.

And if Riehl refused Alor and Dahsmahl? There were fifteen thousand Maretstani warriors determined to see their princess properly placed on a throne worthy of her status.

Kazan glanced across to his right, beyond the man kneeling next to him--to the Wrathman, pious and smug in his long gray robe and surcoat, his hands folded demurely over his belly. He was neither intimidated nor ill at ease kneeling before the enraged Reverend `Fa. His small, deep-set eyes shone in a kind of ecstasy--the man fairly trembled with it.

Kazan fought the temptation to sneer, careful to avoid Malgora's sharp eyes. He bitterly resented being treated like some schoolboy caught in a prank and now forced to endure her pitiless humiliation. Or punishments. Malgora could inflict pain, a pain so horrible, you begged to die.

The young guard between him and the insufferable Captain Syunn, could have been no more than twenty--young and eager, ready to fight and die in the glory of battle. He would assuredly die, but not in glory.

Malgora stopped her pacing and faced the three of them.

"It is fortunate for you that the Divine Medruth has infinite patience. I am but her handmaiden, her `fa, but I will try and demonstrate her patience in this matter. However, I *will* have my answers." She glared at the three of them. "Two of my faithful have been wrongfully slain, butchered like sheep. Kitarisa has fled along with their slayer to the barbarians, who will in turn relay the news of her abdication and of our presence to the Ter-Rey."

She turned on Kazan. "How long do you think you can hold back the deluge of Talesians that will sweep out of the Adrex?"

"With all due respect, Holy Sister, the barbarians will not have enough time to journey to the west, raise an army, and return in time to stop us. Alor will sit on the Falcon Throne and fifteen thousand Maretstani will be garrisoned in Riehl Keep. Winter is fast upon us, Holy Sister. They will not get through."

"His Highness is quite correct, Holy One," Syunn interjected. "And, if my men are permitted to capture these barbarians, then who will be left to tell the Ter-Rey? Who will miss seven barbarians? If the Ter-Rey inquires...well?" Syunn shrugged. "Winter is upon us and the marglims are hungry."

Malgora smiled at her favored captain. "The Divine Lady has once again shown her wisdom through you, dear Captain. It is a pity you were not born to rule, however, your talents are best put to use as our champion. Very well. You shall take the faithful and track down these animals; do with them as you will, but their leader, Assur, is not to be killed. You will not force him to submit. Bring him to me, as with the one called Mar'Kess. That one, I shall deal with personally!"

"And the princess?" Syunn asked, casting a sly glance at Kazan.

"You have served long and well, Captain. Even the faithful deserve a reprieve. And, you are a man. You may have the princess since she has outlived her usefulness to me."

"Holy Sister..." Kazan started to protest.

Malgora turned on him, her clear eyes hard as ice. "You have no voice in this matter, Kazan. It was you who cast her off and I seem to recall it was your idea to have the girl killed at Sherehn Keep. Your concerns should be with your army and your precious weapons."

Kazan bit his tongue and kept silent. Unfortunately, the detestable woman was correct. So be it.

Malgora smoothed the folds of her gown, mastering her anger. She then focused on the young guard kneeling between Kazan and Syunn. She smiled at the warrior's defiant gaze and rigid bearing.

Kazan felt a brief stab of remorse for the luckless young guard. They were all the same at first--angry, resistant and willful. Such strength, but Malgora used them up so quickly.

"And now, soldier," she said, lifting his chin with cold white fingers.

The warrior jerked his face away from her touch, revolted. His hands had been tied behind his back to prevent any possible chance of him striking her, but the loathing in his eyes could not be contained.

"Your Captain Mar'Kess passed through your gate last night, is this true?"

Silence.

"Your loyalty to the captain is commendable, but it is misguided. I will warn you once. Tell me what I wish to know, or I shall call for the Affliction."

"I do not disobey orders, especially to a witch!"

Both Kazan and Syunn sucked in their breath at the young man's words. Angering this woman was

worse than foolishness, it was fatal.

"Perhaps if I were to persuade him?" Syunn offered cautiously.

Kazan flinched and looked away. The guard was as good as dead.

"No, Syunn. This one must learn his obedience to Medruth, firsthand. I will ask you again, soldier. Did Mar'Kess pass through your gate?"

Boldly the young warrior met Malgora's malevolent gaze. "No."

Her lightened eyes closed as she raised one pale fist over her head. The air became static, dancing around her shimmering hair. From her lips came words, unknown and evil. Her voice rose, crackling, sharp and cruel. Only one word was intelligible: Medruth.

Her hand swooped down on the kneeling guard, grasping his temples between her fingers. Kazan swallowed hard as he watched the tell-tale signs of the excruciating pain shooting through the young soldier's skull and down the column of his spine. He was not allowed to collapse but held upright, firmly within Malgora's grasp.

Kazan knew the guard would not last long. He could not escape the fire in his lungs, or the white-hot needles in his brain. The warrior looked up into Malgora's face and gagged on a scream. Her eyes had turned from icy-gray to black, glittering obsidian orbs with no white, no pupil or cornea. The blackness of those eyes sucked at the guard's soul, pulled at him, emptying him of any desire to resist or defy her. Her voice had become a hideous, devouring shriek from which there was no escape.

"WHERE DID HE GO?"

The young soldier struggled to stay upright on his knees, but Kazan knew he longed to collapse, to die. Blood ran from his nose into his mouth--he choked on it. He did not have the strength to look away from those horrible eyes.

"Tell me!"

Kazan felt his stomach contract. The soldier would not last much longer.

"Obedience! You will be obedient!"

"North," he gasped, almost sobbing.

The response did not bring the blessed relief Kazan knew the warrior craved. His agony was not over. Pain rattled at his torn lungs, throbbed in his head.

*Do anything, boy! Say anything!*

Malgora released her grip on his head.

"Who are you obedient to, young man?"

The guard wavered on his knees, his head lolled back. Even the effort to open his eyes was an obvious agony.

"Medruth," he whispered through bloodied lips.

Malgora stepped back, triumphant. The cord would not be necessary. The guard lay dead at her feet, soaked in his own blood.

She glanced at the sickened Kazan.

"Get rid of this," she snapped. "Then leave me and attend to your armies and your worthless children."

Kazan hastily scrambled to comply. He wondered how he was going to keep this soldier's violent death a secret. He would have to think of something. Maybe marglims, as Syunn had suggested.

It never occurred to him that he was performing a task only a servant or another soldier would have done. He dragged the guard's ruined body out of the chamber, eager to get away from Malgora and the groveling Syunn.

WITH HER NORMAL eye color restored, Malgora again turned her attention to Syunn. It pleased her that he had remained to share in her triumph, however modest.

"There was little strength in him, Syunn. He broke like a twig in the wind. I discovered only a fragment of information. Mar'Kess did indeed pass through his gate and headed north. It was just before dawn. He will go to the barbarians, of course."

She paused to compose herself.

"Take the faithful, find the Talesians and do as you have been told. But stay sharp. This Assur is strong

and resourceful. He will not be easy to find or capture."

"You need not worry, Holy Sister. They cannot hide for long. The wisdom of Medruth is with us, leading us to wherever they may go."

The captain rose and shook out the folds of his cloak. He bowed to Malgora, placing his right palm over the white serpent on his left breast.

"You shall have your barbarian and the murderer in three days, Reverend `Fa."

"Medruth blessings be with you," she intoned, holding one white-taloned hand over his bowed head.

Syunn departed, leaving Malgora to mull over the events at hand. She turned to the blackwood table and picked up the deadly sharp saddle knife. It lay across her left palm as she ran her fingers over the gleaming flat of the blade. Such a beautiful weapon--but then all weapons, particularly those of such exquisite power must be used with care and great skill. In the hands of an amateur, the knife was only the instrument of a butcher.

Malgora had been surprised at the strength of Lady Falla's resistance. The Affliction had to be called several times before Falla revealed everything about the brave little mission on Kitarisa's behalf. The lady's will had been strong, almost unbreakable. But, breaking a Talesian warrior would be even more difficult. Malgora smiled at the thought. They were magnificent, and so much power in them. Using that power correctly would be the challenge.

Malgora touched the mark stamped deeply into the bright steel. Siarsi steel. She had to admire it--a beautiful mark struck into the steel to proclaim a bold prince, a fierce warrior, and a proud house--the rose and sword, encircled by a crown.

She clutched the knife triumphantly.

"Soon, my brave lion, you shall wear my collar."

## Chapter 11

WHEN THE SUN reached its highest point, Assur allowed them to stop and eat a light meal. It gave Kitarisa time to worry over Lady Falla's gelding. He was a lady's horse, much shorter than the Talesians' towering war animals and his struggle to keep up with them was beginning to show. She stayed close to Nika, allowing him to munch on the last of the summer grasses. She rested a fond hand on his neck while he nibbled around her toes. A simple, quiet creature, much like Lady Falla herself, with a brave, loyal heart.

Kitarisa glanced back at the knot of men clustered around Assur, studying the map he held in his hands along with the reins to his own horse, Adzra. The great horse had taken a sudden interest in Assur's long fluttering hair and began nuzzling him, taking tentative bites of it as if he might find the black strands a tasty diversion from grass. A few hairs became caught in the bit ring and when the horse stepped back, they pulled sharply, causing Assur to yelp in pain. He flung his arm up to try and dislodge himself from further damage.

"Get off of me youâ€"-" he bellowed.

Kitarisa covered her mouth, trying to smother a laugh. It was the first time she had seen this stern barbarian in such a disheveled, undignified state.

Assur shoved the map at Brekk and turned on the horse.

"Make a meal of me, you worthless--" He didn't finish, but flung the reins at Kuurus. He pointed a warning finger at the unperturbed animal. "You are meat for the dogs, horse. When we return to Daeamon, I will walk on your flea-bitten hide!"

Kitarisa could not contain herself. She laughed out loud a bright, happy laugh. Even Assur's men looked down to cover their own smiles. The incongruous picture of their lord shouting at his horse was too funny even for them. Young Couronus spun away, hand over mouth and hurried off from the group.

Assur nodded at all of them, looking severe. "I am glad I amuse you--perhaps I should juggle my knives and dance on one foot."

Kitarisa doubled over grasping at Nika's neck. Her infectious laughter soon had the rest of them laughing, too. It felt wonderful to laugh again after all the terror and endless days of uncertainty. She

looked up at Assur through tears of unfeigned happiness. He too, finally gave in to the moment and smiled, and then laughed. The stern lines fell away revealing a generous, beautiful smile and a new warmth in his eyes.

Kitarisa gulped and brushed at her damp face. Perhaps everything *would* be all right and perhaps life with him would not be so frightful after all. He did not look quite so fearsome now, in fact, for an instant she thought she saw Rhynn laughing and full of love for her. Maybe there was more to Assur than stern resolve and a warrior's ruthlessness. Maybe there was a gentle man behind the glittering swords.

Abruptly all humor ceased as Brekk raised his hand for silence.

"My lord, someone comes."

Kuurus jumped to his saddle pack and pulled out a long, glass eye and dropped to one knee, looking in the direction to where Brekk was pointing.

"A rider comes."

Assur dropped next to him behind a low rise in the ground overlooking the vast valley below. Far into the distance they could see the form of a lone rider heading their way. Kuurus handed him the glace.

"Can you see any others?" Assur asked.

"None, lord," Brekk answered, squinting in the distance.

As the horse and rider came closer, Kitarisa saw that the animal was being ridden hard. In the stillness of the late morning, they heard the horse's heavy panting as the rider drove him toward the hill where they were standing.

Assur lifted the glass again.

"It is Captain Mar'Kess," he said, surprised. "He is without a patrol or a single man."

"Marglims, my lord?" Kuurus asked, drawing the hand sword from his back and taking a protective stance in front of Kitarisa.

"No. It is too open here for marglims. Something else--"

The blood-bay horse struggled up the hill and slid to a stop on trembling hind legs. The animal was drenched in sweat, his sides heaved with exhaustion.

Mar'Kess slid from the saddle, collapsing to his knees in front of Assur. "My Lord Assur, I beg your protection. I have just come from Gorendt...something too terrible..." he panted.

"How do we know he has not been sent as a spy?" Kuurus growled.

"I am no spy, Kuurus. I am here because my own life is in grave danger. I have killed one of them, maybe two."

Assur scowled at the new information and at the exhausted man. "Who?"

"Sisters, White Sisters, my lord. They are in the Keep, with their Reverend `Fa Malgora. They are with Kazan in some great scheme. I am--" Mar'Kess panted. He leaned over his knees, palms flat on the ground.

"Get the cord, Brekk."

Brekk hastened to comply and returned momentarily with the stained white cord he and Kuurus had found on Reddess' body.

"If you are not a spy and not sent by the `Fa, you will have no difficulty cutting this cord in half. It is sacred to the witches--a Wrathman would rather die before betraying them. If you are, I will cut you down before you take your next breath."

He tossed the cord on the ground in front of Mar'Kess. In one smooth motion he drew the long sword from his back and leveled it in front of the Captain's throat.

From his belt, Mar'Kess drew out his own knife. Without hesitating, he picked up the loathsome cord, cut it, and flung the two pieces in the dirt.

"May Verlian burn them!" he spat.

The Captain looked up and saw Kitarisa. He offered her a respectful nod.

"I have renounced all oaths and bonds to Kazan and would offer them again to you, my Lord Assur, and to our High Prince."

Assur nodded and re-sheathed the sword, satisfied. "Get up, Mar'Kess. And someone get him and this poor beast some water."

The hardy captain recovered quickly and once restored, he relayed the terrible events of the previous night. Assur listened, his face becoming more and more grim with each word.

"You killed the girl?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord. It was she who informed on the princess and Lady Falla. I have no remorse in doing it. She was as evil as her mistress."

"Done like a true Siarsi," Kuurus rumbled approvingly.

"And Prince Kazan? Does he know?"

"About you and the princess? I am certain he does. He must know about Lady Falla and the others. There will be a price on my head and the witch will no doubt *want* my head for her own use."

"What does the witch want?" Assur studied Mar'Kess' face as if hoping to find any other shred of information from his features.

"I do not know, but what I did hear, I did not like. She wants power of some kind and you are part of it."

Kitarisa listened to Mar'Kess' story and turned away, tears smarting at her eyes. Lady Falla dead! Holy Goddess! It was her fault, she knew it. If she had not gone to her that night, she would be alive now.

She found Nika and pressed her forehead against his neck. She must not cry. Assur and the others had seen enough of her tears, but it was hard--so hard.

Beautiful, sweet Lady Falla, tortured to death.

Too many dead on her account--her mother, and Rhynn, and now Lady Falla. Who would be next?

Kitarisa buried her face in Nika's mane and cried silent tears of grief, where only moments before, her tears had been of joy.

TOWARD THE END of the day, they crossed a fast-rushing stream at a place far north of Gorendt. The stream was shallow enough for the horses to cross without having to swim, but Kitarisa tugged up her skirts as high as was considered decent. She had no desire to get anything wet particularly since there was a thin coating of ice near the shoreline where the water remained shaded long into the day.

The icy water swirled around the gelding's knees and twice he slipped on the slick stones under his hooves.

On the far side, Assur allowed them to stop and rest in a thick grove of tall birches long since stripped bare of their summer foliage.

"May I stretch my legs, my lord?" she asked when he helped her down from the horse. "It seems safe enough."

He nodded and took the reins from her.

The stream took an abrupt bend and in the wide curve, a birch grove grew on the banks, forming a gentle canopy where she could rest.

Kitarisa strolled through the thick carpet of newly fallen leaves, kicking them along with each step. It seemed an eternity since she had left Gorendt not the few days that had past--and she did not miss it.

Now free of any responsibilities she found herself wondering what would happen to her. What if Riehl did not want her to rule, particularly now that she had publicly renounced both Riehl and Gorendt?

Perhaps she could appeal to the Ter-Rey. Would a man like that, a barbarian, even listen to her?

Kitarisa glanced back at Assur and the others. Did they know the Ter-Rey? Maybe they would take her to him? She frowned to herself. She doubted it. They had no reason to take her to Daeamon Keep. She had no means to repay them, but Assur had kept his promise and helped her escape from Gorendt. And, she could not forget Mar'Kess' bravery.

A chill breeze blew up from the river and she clutched her cloak more tightly about her shoulders. In a few weeks the snow would come turning this valley into a land of soft whites and brittle trees. The river would freeze over and all the wildlife she had seen in such abundance, would be gone.

Kitarisa suddenly realized she had walked much farther than she had intended. At a thick clustering of bushes growing near the river she turned to go back, when she nearly tripped over something.

At first she thought she had caught a root of a fallen log with the toe of her boot until she examined it

more closely. Kitarisa felt herself go weak with horror.

It was an arm and near it, a bloated face, ghastly white--the eyes were still open, staring up through the fallen leaves. Bitter bile rose in the back of her throat as she stared down at the dead face looking up grotesquely into her own. She looked again and saw the others--a contorted pile of arms and legs, dragged into the thicket in a hasty attempt to hide them.

Kitarisa's scream came from the base of her belly, shattering the cold stillness of the place. She did not stop until she felt Assur's hands turn her away and pull her into his arms, shielding her from the grisly sight.

There were twenty of them, after Jarad and Del and Mar'Kess had untangled the sickening pile of bodies from the thicket. Twenty men of various shapes and ages--and tribes.

Assur squatted down next to Mar'Kess and the others to examine them more closely.

"They were all running from something, my lord," Kuurus observed. "All the bolts struck them in the back, here and here." He touched the shoulder of the nearest man to show the numerous wounds riddling his back and legs. "Some were struck down with long-bows but all of the arrows and bolts have been removed and retrieved. There are none to be found. All these men have the mark of the liet'fa on their necks."

"They are all from different tribes," Assur muttered as if confirming Kuurus' observation.

"Six Qualani, four Riehlilian farmers, five Huons, and three I would guess to be Oduns--one I do not know, and one Siarsi," Jarad said solemnly. The big man glanced at Assur, looking for his reaction at the mention of the Siarsian.

"Do you recognize him, Kuurus?" Assur asked, as he turned the body over.

"No, lord. He is an old one, an elder and his scars are of the old style. I have not seen scars like this since I was a boy."

Assur tugged at the edge of his jaw, perplexed.

"Why were all of them together? The Qualani will have nothing to do with a Riehlilian. The Huons have been known to kill Qualani for sport, and why is a Siarsi--an old one that--this far east? This does not make sense."

"My lord, look at this," Brekk called from the thicket. From the underbrush, Brekk pulled something out. It was dirty and blood-stained, but there was no mistaking what it was: an intricately braided white cord.

"A jirs'kial," Mar'Kess whispered. "I found one near Lady Falla."

Even the deeply-tanned Kuurus went pale. "Just like what we found on Reddesh at the old keep and on that boy, that Qualani boy."

Assur turned back to the bodies stretched out before him.

"What do they want?" he growled at no one.

"Their dogs did this, my lord," Kuurus answered him. "The Wrathmen. There is a fragment of an arrow in one of the Huons--the fletchings are white."

Assur turned back on Kuurus, his marked eyes glittering with rage. "What do they want?" he asked again.

"Perhaps the Wrathmen are searching for someone, or something?" Mar'Kess suggested. "Perhaps these few were to be used in some way and then they decided to escape. I remember what that woman said in the tower passageway, '...it is the strong ones' she needs."

Kitarisa, who had been listening to the entire discussion from a safe distance approached Assur.

"Captain Mar'Kess is right, my lord. All of you have strong wills and much power. Somehow she needs or wants this power."

Assur scowled. "And kneel to that abomination she worships? When Verlian Herself summons me," he said heatedly.

"Precisely what I said." Mar'Kess grinned wryly. "But that is what Lady Falla tried to do and failed, my lord. She died like these, in agony and utterly broken. I found a cord in her room, just like that one," he said, gesturing to the one on the ground.

Kitarisa nodded. "My old nurse told me once that the Sisters use another's will for their own

purposes."

"But not for this kind of butchery. They have been a nuisance on this land for generations, but they have never resorted to this kind of torture." Assur folded his arms across his chest, pondering the situation. "There is something connected with Kazan's plans to take Riehl and that witch. It is clear he intends to use the weapons stored at Sherehn to arm his men and the Maretstanis. The Riehlisians will not stand a chance."

Mar'Kess' brows shot up in surprise. "Weapons in Sherehn? When did you find these?"

"The night we rescued Alea and Kitarisa, we discovered them hidden in the cavern stables."

Mar'Kess shook his head in disbelief. "I did not want to believe it, but now it is true. The Maretstanis will be arriving soon with the Princess Dahsmahl. It will be a great show of diplomacy and mutual peace, but those weapons will arm them, when the time is ready."

Kuurus looked up at the sky noting the position of the sun.

"We do not have much of the day left. There is a village not far from here, to the north. We must hurry, my lord, if we are to reach the village by dark. So many funeral pyres will take time."

"No."

"My lord," Kuurus gasped at him. "It would be indecent to leave them like this."

"Verlian takes Her own, Kuurus, and She will forgive us. The smoke from a pyre will only reveal our presence. We cannot risk that."

"At least let me attend to the Siarsi. I will take him into the woods and then catch up to you later."

Young Courronus stepped forward next to his uncle, his face as red as his hair. "Please, lord, allow me to assist him."

Assur nodded curtly. He motioned for the others to mount up.

Kitarisa did not like leaving the dead men without attending to them properly, but she had no desire to wait for the Wrathmen to reappear...or maybe marglims. She hastened to obey and clambered onto the gelding's back without any help.

There was a new grimness reflected in the Talesians' faces as they continued to ride north. As they drew closer to the little village Kuurus had mentioned, they began to notice more things that did not seem right. Field after field of grain stood unharvested--there was no one in the orchards to pick the ripening fruit and no wagons laden with crops to be taken to the markets. There appeared to be no one in sight. They heard nothing, except the sound of their own animals.

A chill wind passed through the village, riffling Kitarisa's cloak and scattering the leaves in the street. A tense, eerie feeling ran through all of them--the streets were completely deserted as if the inhabitants had seen them coming not five minutes before they entered and had fled for their lives.

They passed cottages with doors left wide open, revealing kettles bubbling on fires, wet laundry left in baskets waiting to be hung out to dry, and even mounds of fresh dough still on the breadboards collecting flies and other hungry insects.

A shutter banged suddenly causing Kitarisa's gelding to jump. Slinking from behind a watering trough, a terrified dog scuttled across the street in front of them only to find another refuge behind a dense cluster of bushes.

"Where is everybody?" Kitarisa whispered.

"It appears they have run away," Captain Mar'Kess answered softly.

"Yes, but to where?" Assur added.

"They cannot have gotten far," Mar'Kess said pointing to the open doors of the nearby smithy. "I believe I saw a horse inside and the fire is still hot."

Assur halted them in front of the smithy and dismounted. Handing the reins to Jarad, he approached the doors, sword drawn. He stepped into the gloom of the forge and disappeared.

"My lord," Brekk called out, "let one of us search!"

Assur re-emerged from the dark interior of the smithy.

"There is no one in there, but the coals are still hot. Someone did not finish shoeing the horse."

Jarad jumped down and disappeared into the forge. He too returned into the bright sunlight, a frown on his broad features. Apparently, Jarad knew all about horse shoeing and appeared not to like what he

had just seen in the forge.

"The poorest shoeing I have ever seen. Whoever is trying to shoe that horse knows nothing. Forgive the comparison, my lady, but the princess here could do a better job herself."

The others dismounted and found convenient places to tie their own horses.

Cautiously, they all fanned out, swords drawn. A low chill shot up Kitarisa's back. Nothing felt right--it was as if they were being watched.

At the very edge of the village, standing under the near leafless skeleton of an enormous oak tree, was a large communal barn. Jarad stepped forward and pulled open the heavy door. Like the smithy, it was dark and stifling--a startled pigeon fluttered over their heads, making all of them duck in surprise.

Kitarisa thought she heard a faint sob and soft scrabbling noises against the wood like mice rustling in the walls.

All of them, Mar'Kess included, crouched low, swords drawn and wary.

Kitarisa saw them first just as her eyes adjusted to the dimness inside the barn. She touched Assur's arm.

"My lord, look."

Huddled in terror at the back of the barn, a cluster of women clung to each other and to an array of small children. Little faces pressed into voluminous skirts while their mother's trembling hands tried to comfort them.

In front of them stood a boy, about twelve. Trying to appear brave, his face could not conceal the horrors he had seen--things too terrible for any child to bear. He clutched a kitchen knife in his hands. His large, solemn eyes observed Assur and the others.

Without warning, the boy raised his knife and made a lunge at Assur. "You leave us alone!" he cried.

Assur easily, almost gently, blocked the boy's blow, knocking the knife from his hands, forcing him to stop within a hair's breadth of the sword's edge. Kitarisa heard one of the women gasp.

Slowly, Assur went down on one knee, stretched his sword arm out far to his right and planted the tip, point down, deep into the loamy flooring of the barn.

The boy took a nervous step back, realizing his nearly fatal mistake. Assur's frightened gaze was too much. The boy tried to swallow back tears.

"Never have I seen such bravery in the face of such odds. You will certainly sit at Verlian's side," he said quietly. "Do you not agree, Jarad?"

"He will be twice blessed, my lord," Jarad agreed.

"Now. The first lesson of Swordmaster Rame, is you must never strike a blow while there is a fire within you. Only kill when your heart is cold and without feeling. Then you will not be reckless or afraid. Do you understand?"

The boy gulped and nodded.

"Take up your blade." Assur nodded for him to get the knife. The boy did so and stood before the Talesian.

"Then, are you the only warrior to defend these women?" he asked in all seriousness.

"I be the only boy left that's old enough. I mean, I didn't get caught."

Assur frowned, not understanding.

"Haven't you taken enough already?" A frightened voice asked from the group of huddled women.

"We have given all we can. What do you want now?"

Assur stood up. "We want nothing. We are not here, woman, to take anything, least of all brave lads like this."

The barn door creaked open wider, allowing more of the late afternoon sun to shaft into the gloom of the barn. The warm light caught the tall Talesian and one of the women gasped out loud.

"They're not Wrathmen, they be Talesians!"

"Hush Gran! You do not know what you are saying!" Someone shushed her.

"By Verlian's blood and blade, I know what I see. They be of the tribes from the west!"

One of the women broke from the group and hesitantly stepped into the light.

"This be true?" She was a large woman, tall and angular, her face as plain and simple as good bread.

"It is true," Assur said seriously. "We are not here to harm you, but we would have some answers." Before anyone else could speak, Kitarisa stepped forward and touched the boy's shoulder.

"What is your name, lad?" she asked kindly.

"It is Aerik."

Kitarisa smiled reassuringly at him. "I am Kitarisa. You must not be afraid. We are here because we are on our way to Riehl and we stopped only to rest."

"It were the Wrathmen, lady," the rangy women said. "They come and started it all--the killin' and the hurtin'."

"Are you the only ones left?" Assur asked.

The old one called "Gran" came forward, clutching a gnarled stick in her frail hands.

"It were the Leashed Ones, as Cama said. Came upon us like a plague of marglms, killin' and takin' the menfolks. And now you be here--a scourge on the land, like in the afore times, only you'll find nothing here to take. *They* took it all. Aye, they did."

"When was this, Grandmother?" Assur asked courteously.

"It were five days ago, it were." The old lady nodded, bobbing the lace of her cap.

"And they killed our menfolks if they didn't abide by their orders," another woman called from the back of the barn, her voice breaking with anger and grief.

"They took them away, the ones they didn't kill and all the lads too. It were Aerik here, who were clever enough and hid away," Cama added.

Assur turned from them, frowning. "Where were your men taken?"

"To their place, their mountain," she said.

"What was the reason for this?"

The old woman tottered closer and peered up at Assur, scrutinizing his face.

"They need `em for their strength." She took a bold poke at his arm. "Not the strength of the flesh, mind you, but of the heart--them that has the greatest will. They took our strongest menfolks first, but then changed their minds and took `em all, even the young ones, like Aerik here."

"Didn't they fight back?" Brekk asked. Satisfied there was no further threat to them, he resettled the sword on his back.

"Who are we but poor farmers to fight against the Wrathmen? A sunturn ago, they took my little girl," Cama said bitterly. "What are you here for barbarians? Why can't you leave us in peace. By the Goddess' blood, we haven't even finished taking care of our dead."

Assur re-sheathed his own sword and then faced them all.

"We are not here to harm anyone. What you remember about us and our past has changed. There will be no more killing today." He nodded to the tall woman. "Show us your dead, Mistress Cama."

TALESIAN BARBARIANS filled Mistress Cama's great room as she ladled up plates of steaming brook stew and thick slices of fresh bread. There was only enough room for six at her rough-hewn table and Kitarisa noted Assur made certain he was placed next to her.

Mar'Kess and Kuurus sat across from them and the last two places were set for Mistress Cama and the frail one they called Gran. The others either squatted by the great hearth or leaned against the walls, plates in hand and eating like they did in Lekk's Bend, hurriedly and in silence.

At the back of the warm room stood young Aerik, his eyes wide with wonder as he watched them eat.

The boy had watched with the same wonder as Assur and the others attended to the village dead. The funeral pyre had been a serious matter and the boy stayed clear of their swift handling of the bodies.

The Wrathmen had taken the village's Chanter and Wordkeeper-- now there was no one to say the holy words as the hot flames roared into the night, sending their kinsmen to Verlian. The village women and the somber-faced barbarians watched the fire until it was little more than glowing ashes before they returned to Mistress Cama's to eat.

Kitarisa, like the boy, kept her silence and her distance. The sorrow she felt for the women of this village welled within her, threatening fresh tears. The senseless deaths of the village men as well as the tribesmen they found by the river, poignantly reminded her of Falla and ultimately of her mother. She bit

her lip and kept her face down, hiding her grief. Assur and the others needed no more tears and hysterics.

It was old Gran who once more had the nerve to speak to their leader.

"You be a long way from the plains of the Tamis. What brings you here?"

"We were sent on orders, Grandmother," Assur said politely, "By order of the Ter-Rey."

The woman, Cama, sucked in her breath. "You were sent by the Ter-Rey? What would *he* want with us? The Ter-Rey has ignored his lands on this side of the Adrex for generations."

"Not anymore. Talesians have changed, mistress. We have learned, under the harshest terms, that we can no longer seize the world by the throat like a tiger taking its prey. There is more to life than horses and knives, although some of us still think differently." Assur cast a meaningful look at Kuurus.

Kitarisa glanced at an astonished Mar'Kess. Assur had revealed more information in those few words than either of them had heard since he had arrived in Gorendt.

"My lord, what were your orders, if I may ask?" Mar'Kess pushed back his empty plate and waved off Cama's offer for another helping.

"To investigate what was going on at Sherehn Keep and to find out what Prince Kazan has been doing." Assur turned his hard blue gaze on Cama. "And the Sisters seem to have no interest in young girls any longer, but now have their hounds set to taking your men to the Catacombs."

"Aye, they did, and they've taken others." Old Gran nodded. "They've come to all the villages between Riehl and the mountains, takin' and killin', just as I said. They take the young and the strong ones and leave the old. Except this time, we fought `em and then they took every one of the menfolks, or killed `em." Gran rubbed at her tears, fumbling for her handkerchief. "Every last one."

The snap of the fire in the hearth was the only sound in the room as Assur and the others absorbed Gran's words.

"They didn't get me," Aerik said quietly, from his corner.

Assur turned toward boy and motioned for him to come closer.

"Why didn't they get you, young Aerik?"

"Because I hid where they couldn't find me--in the well. There be a stone, my lord, down in the side and it sticks out this far." Aerik spread his hands to show the width of the hidden stone. "I stayed there till they were gone."

Assur gave him a tight smile of approval. "Good lad."

"Only a Siarsi would have been so clever," Kuurus said, beaming at him.

"Mistress Cama, how many are there of you left in the village?" Kitarisa asked.

"Only about twenty, not including the little ones. There be only eight of them."

Assur nodded. "And your provisions? What is left?"

"Some grain; we've butchered nearly all the livestock, but there are still several chickens. The Wrathmen took almost all the horses. Not much be left, my lord."

Kitarisa watched as Assur placed his palms flat on the table, having come to his decision. The barbarian lord studied Cama's face. "How far is the next village?"

"A good day's ride, to Broken Oak," Cama answered, casting her own worried look at the old woman seated near her.

Assur eyed the expectant Talesians. "Tomorrow, we will take them there. They will be safe with the others until we can return their men."

Mar'Kess' brows shot up in surprise. "Those were also your orders?"

"No," Assur answered grimly, "it is my wish."

THE OLD RUTTED trail to Broken Oak wound through the thin scattering of trees that followed the fringes of the Adrex Mountains. The swift pace they kept after leaving Gorendt had slowed to a steady, plodding walk, while all of them remained alert for the Wrathmen. By midday, they were allowed to rest, particularly for the delicate Gran. It surprised and pleased Kitarisa to watch Assur pay such special attention to the old woman.

He had personally led his horse bearing the old woman and would permit no one else but himself to lift

her gently from Adzra's back. Kitarisa followed close at his heels, making sure the frail Gran was seated comfortably on a nearby log.

Gran patted his leather-covered arm, unafraid. "You be a good man, barbarian, but you worry about this old woman too much. I be fine."

"It will be best when you are safely in the village, Grandmother."

"Such fussing over these old bones! `Twil be the same in Broken Oak, all the menfolks gone or dead."

"You are certain of this, Grandmother?" Kitarisa asked.

"Oh, aye. `Tis been goin' on for some time now. Each season, a few more, and a few more taken. We sent our Wordkeeper to Riehl to ask for help, to stop `em. But since our good Prince Murliff died, Verlian keep him, the Council be afraid to do anything. They are afeared, lord."

"Kazan," Assur muttered under his breath. He glanced at Kitarisa, frowning.

"Afraid of Prince Kazan?" The old woman made a noise of disbelief.

"He is more of a threat than you know, Grandmother. That is why you must find safety with the others in the village."

She peered up at him and nodded knowingly. "You be a clever one, barbarian. And reckless." She tugged at his arm to make him bend down to her. "It is not safe to travel here with the princess." She nodded at Kitarisa. "You must hurry now and not bother with us."

Assur smiled wryly at her. "Why would you think the lady is a princess, Grandmother?"

"I am old, but not blind. She is her own grandmother again--Prince Murliff's wife, Pelia."

Kitarisa blushed, avoiding Assur's curiously bemused stare.

"Now it is you who is being clever."

"Aye, but your secret is safe with me," she said, patting the leather over his inner arm, the place covering his firemark. "It is quite safe, my lord."

## Chapter 12

AT DUSK, THE caravan of barbarians and village women stopped just above the bluff overlooking the narrow trail leading down to Broken Oak--its ancient symbol, a massive oak tree split by lightning, stood twisted and majestic at the outskirts of the village.

Assur motioned the boy Aerik to come to his side.

"It would not be well if we were to go into the village, young Aerik. You must escort them yourself. We will watch from here until you are safely within the village. Can you do this?"

The boy trembled with pride and lifted his chin.

"Aye, my lord. I can."

"Good. Go now, and remember to `Sleep by your blade, but let her stay awake'. The warrior who lives the longest is the one who stays as sharp and alert as his sword."

Assur nodded and then turned to Cama and Gran.

"You will be reasonably safe here until your men can be returned to you."

"Are you so certain of this, Talesian?" Cama asked skeptically. "What if the Wrathmen return and take us and the boy--our remaining children?"

"The Wrathmen's days are numbered, Mistress Cama, as are the Sisters'. Soon they will pray to Verlian and beg for Her mercy, because I will give them none."

"You speak like you lead an army, Talesian? When does this great thing happen?"

"Quiet, Cama," Gran said, shaking the woman's arm. "*This* one will stop them. Aye, he will. The land will be soaked in Wrathmen blood, as in the afore times when Talesians first came to the East. Enough blood to turn the Sherehn red."

Assur said nothing, but kneeed Adzra back to allow them to pass and bowed his head respectfully to the old woman.

Now unhampered by the women and children, they resumed their trek, riding on into the night at their former faster pace.

Kitarisa looked ahead past the column of horses until she was forced to look upward at the great

escarpment of the Rift Cut. Kuurus was heading north, taking them up the hard steep trail just west of the Cut.

She patted Nika's neck and clucked to him encouragingly. She did not like the sound of his labored breathing and knew if they did not stop soon, the horse would be too exhausted to go on.

She looked up again at the brilliant light of the moon, now in half-phase. It would be another seven days before it was full and then its light would make the night nearly as bright as day. Verlian's light--Verlian's guiding eye, the ancients said. It was there She lived, with Her three daughters by Her side--the three small moonlets gleaming in a precise vertical line next to their great mother. The Warrior-Goddess who kept the Balance and the Measure.

Kitarisa studied the moons while pondering Assur and his men. It must be a great comfort for him and his kind to pray to Her. They had no doubts as to their purpose and their worthiness, she thought sadly. They suffered no anxious thoughts about their final resting place, safe in their Goddess' Hall, dining on lamb and drinking honeyed wine. She wished she could feel the same, but as they struggled up the narrow path toward the top of the escarpment, she could only feel an oppressing sense of foreboding. The lighthearted moments she had shared earlier were being smothered by a newer, stronger sense of dread.

At the top, they stopped and rested. Kitarisa dismounted and led Nika to the very edge of the great Rift Cut and stared down at the splendor of the Sherehn River as it flowed southward toward Gorendt. Like a shining silver ribbon, it wound its way through the sweeping valley and on into the darkness of the forest.

"It is a wondrous sight, isn't it?" she heard Assur murmur from behind her.

"Yes, it is. I have never been to the very top of the Cut before. It makes you feel like you could just fly off, like a great bird."

"Where would you fly, Kitarisa?"

She looked down, embarrassed. "I do not know. Some place far away I guess. Some place safe."

"You will be safe in Riehl." Assur stepped closer to her to place his hands on her shoulders. "And safe from Kazan."

She backed out of his gentle grasp and folded her arms across her chest, hugging herself against the cold.

"There will be no safe place until these events are over and my father is stopped. I am afraid, my lord. Afraid I will never stop running from something or someone." She looked up at him. "You paid a handsome price for a woman with nothing to offer you. Five thousand talins is a great deal of gold. I have no name and no home."

"You will have mine, if you wish. As I told you, under Talesian law, you are not bound to me."

Kitarisa turned away from him to gaze back over the breathtaking valley below. She had no idea how to talk to him and except for some intriguing clues, she knew nothing about him either. In one instant he was a ruthless killer, in the next, a thoughtful suitor, almost charming. Assur terrified and fascinated her. And, he was the only man she had ever known who could make her father afraid for his own life.

"What is it like in your land?"

"You mean Talesia?" he asked clearly surprised by her question.

"Yes."

"It is a land of sweeping plains, forests, and the sea. My home is next to the sea. A strange place for a people who once followed the break and lived only in tents on the plains. Once, all we knew were horses and the land. Now we have cities, like Gorendt."

"And, do you have a family?"

She heard a soft laugh, knowing he was recalling the Wrathman's sneering insult.

"Yes. I have a sister and a father. Kitarisa, we are not animals--we have families and homes."

She felt his hands again close around her upper arms, felt his warmth and his unyielding sense of protection.

"Our families are our strength. We do not use them like pieces on a game board."

Kitarisa felt her throat thicken with threatening tears. She swallowed several times before speaking

again.

"If I release you from your oath and bond, what will happen to me?"

Assur stepped around her so she would look directly at him. The dark patterns around his eyes only added to the intensity in them. His firm mouth was set and determined.

"Whatever you wish. You are not my slave and you certainly are not Kazan's pawn."

She nodded, satisfied.

"You must promise me this, my lady, that you will not release my bond until after I am finished with Kazan and this witch. Will you promise?"

Again, she nodded. "Yes, I promise."

Kitarisa barely got the words out of her mouth, when they both heard Kuurus' warning shout. Assur spun away from her and in the time it took for her to blink, his sword was in his hand. There were more shouts, unfamiliar voices mixed with those of Brekk and Mar'Kess.

From the deep shadows of the trees, they saw several dark shapes emerge into Verlian's silver light. Wrathmen.

There were twelve of them and they carried swords instead of the *liet'fa*, the *handmaiden's touch*--and it was apparent they knew how to use them.

These were not drunken roadwilderds or stupid marglims. The Wrathmen had deliberately cut the two of them off from the others, with the edge of the escarpment and its enormous drop just behind them. Mar'Kess and the others had been keeping a discreet distance and Kitarisa now regretted it.

The Wrathmen fanned out, some facing Assur and Kitarisa, the rest turned toward the others. Assur shoved Kitarisa behind him and slowly drew out the other sword from the scabbard on his back.

"Well, well, we meet again," the tallest of them said, taking a step forward. "It seems you have been playing little tricks on us, barbarian. I was unaware that animals like you had any interest in escorting princesses around the countryside. However, as reluctant as I am to say it, there is a need for you, Talesian dog. And, the rest of your pack." He gestured to the others. "There is a particular need for the brave Mar'Kess. The Holy Sister has a score to settle with you, First Captain, concerning two of her most devout followers and their untimely ends."

"I make no apologies for their deaths Leashed One. They were responsible for the torture and murder of an innocen--!"

"Resistant heretic!" Captain Syunn snapped. The Wrathman stepped forward and raised a warning hand. "To resist the Reverend `Fa is futile--all must yield to the will of the Divine Lady and her handmaiden, as you will soon learn, Captain."

"I am a slow learner," Mar'Kess said deliberately, never taking his eyes off Syunn's arrogant face.

There would be no more taunting words. The Talesians and Mar'Kess flung themselves at the hated Wrathmen. This was no noisy fight against lumbering marglims, but a cold, silent battle between two forces that knew exactly what they were doing--how to kill with no wasted motion.

Kitarisa recalled Assur's words spoken to the terrified Aerik: kill only when your heart is cold. She now understood why the ancient Talesian tribes had been so feared. The blood of their violent ancestors raged in their black-marked eyes--a near-mindless savagery that would not be quelled until the last Wrathman lay dead at their feet.

Assur took the first Wrathman at Syunn's right. In two strokes the man was a bleeding heap in the dust. He turned to face Syunn, the Wrathman captain. Swords arced and clashed, the ring of steel on steel shattered the stillness of the forest.

Syunn's skills nearly equaled Assur's, but only by his size. Heavier and more muscled, Syunn's blows fell hard on Assur, but the Talesian was taller and used his height and agility to counter attack with almost disdainful ease.

Seeing his opening, Assur's right arm whipped back and struck at Syunn's sword arm, cutting through the fine black mail, finding flesh and tendons. Syunn howled in pain, but managed to switch his sword to the other hand in time to block Assur's next strike.

Helpless, Kitarisa stood in the melee, unable to move. The sound of swords and labored breathing surrounded her as Talesian and Wrathman fought each other to the death.

Jarad took on two at once and bore several cuts to his arms and chest. Blood ran from Brekk's left ear and to her horror, Del, shy, quiet Del, was fighting with the use of only one arm--the other was covered in gore from shoulder to his fingers--the useless sword held only by sheer willpower.

For several tense moments it appeared the Wrathmen would win, but suddenly, Jarad saw a lucky opening and struck down the two he had been fighting. The others rallied and in quick succession, more Wrathmen fell. From nowhere, Kitarisa heard the sound of hooves and looked up to see Kuurus galloping toward them both swords over his head, his lips peeled back in a ghastly snarl. His great horse easily trampled down the two Wrathmen about to finish Del, pummeling their bodies to a pulp.

Right behind him came Courronus, flushed with excitement. It was his first real battle and to prove it, in one savage stroke, killed the first Wrathman in his path. Courronus would earn his scars.

Assur backed away from the stumbling, bleeding Syunn. The Wrathman dropped his sword, clutching the wound in his right hand--the blood poured through his fingers and down the fine cloth of his gray surcoat.

"I am letting you live, Wrathman, so you can crawl back to your mistress and tell her of your defeat."

"You are a dead man, barbarian! You have been cursed by the Divine Medruth herself. She knows you are hers," Syunn shouted at him. "There is no place, no corner where you can hide that I will not find you!"

He looked back at the carnage. Nine of his men lay dead. The other two were weakened and staggering with pain.

"More are close by, Talesian, and you will be hunted down like animals."

The tall Talesian ignored the captain's threats, but looked up at the mounted Kuurus and Courronus, and in short, hurried phrases, uttered orders in their ancient language. The scarred Siarsi only nodded his head, wheeled around sharply and galloped away with Courronus hot on his heels.

Assur called to the others who also ran to find their own horses. Still eyeing the wounded Captain Syunn, he backed slowly toward Kitarisa.

"Go. Get on your horse," he ordered over his shoulder.

Kitarisa scrambled onto the little brown horse, her heart pounding in terror. In an instant Assur was on the gray, slamming the left-hand sword into the scabbard on his back. With the flat of the other sword, he slapped the gelding's rump. Startled, the horse jumped forward, nearly unseating her.

"What about the others?" she asked.

"They will head for our encampment and we will meet with them later. For now, we split up. Those lapdogs will have a hard time chasing so many rabbits!"

For a time it looked as if they had shaken the pursuing Wrathmen. Syunn had not been boasting, as more Wrathmen appeared to take up the chase, splintering off to find Mar'Kess and the others, while a small band chased after Kitarisa and Assur.

They rode into the blackened night through the deep part of the north woods. When they cleared the trees, the ground suddenly turned hard leaving no hoof prints for the Wrathmen to follow, but Assur took no chances. In a bewildering pattern of double-backs and circling, he left no trail for their pursuers to find them.

Kitarisa had never ridden so hard in her life and it was clear her gelding was beginning to falter. The short-legged horse was no match for Assur's great stallion and began to fall behind forcing him to slow the pace.

"We will never get away at this rate," Kitarisa gasped, nudging her horse next to Assur's gray.

"We will if we can reach the first ridges." He nodded toward the looming mountain ahead of them.

The horses' hooves clattered on the rocky pathway as they wound through the narrow cliffs of the mountains. Both animals struggled up the steep incline, heads down, panting in exhaustion. Just when she thought her horse would collapse, Assur stopped them between an enormous fissure in the rock.

"Rest here, but do not get down," he warned.

Taking the glance from his saddle pack, he eased onto the nearby ridge overlooking the valley floor below and the path they had just climbed. The brilliant white light from the moon was enough for him to use the glass as he searched for approaching Wrathmen.

"What do you see?" she called softly from the black fissure.

"Nothing...yet. But they will be coming. Wrathmen do not give up easily."

"My lord, what do they want with us? Seeking Mar'Kess I can understand, but why me? I am useless to them. I have renounced Riehl and Gorendt. Having me sent to the Catacombs was only one way to be rid of me. I am sure my father could have thought of many ways to be rid of me."

Assur slid down the rock and slipped into the fissure next to her. He looked up into her perplexed face.

"I do not know, Kita. Unless--" He stopped, hands in mid air as he replaced the glass to his pack.

"Unless, it's us."

"You? You mean, Del and Kuurus and the others?"

She could see him slowly nod his head.

"Why?"

"My lady, listen. What did Mar'Kess say about those witches he killed in the Keep--what he overheard them saying? The grandmother in the village said it, too."

"Something about, `needing them for their strength.'"

"Yes, but strength for what?" Suddenly, Assur touched one of his eyes. "Medruth's curse." He glanced up at Kitarisa. "We must get to Riehl as fast as possible."

Swiftly, he mounted Adzra and headed back down the same trail they had just taken.

"Lord Assur, we must rest. We will kill these horses!" Kitarisa protested.

"Soon, my lady. As soon as it is safe. We will rest where the witches' pets will not find us."

The tired horses were hurried down the trail, veering off toward the west. In spite of the brilliance from the half-phased light of the moon, it was still so dark she could not understand how he was able to find any kind of trail.

Fatigue made her numb to the stiff-legged, jarring steps of her exhausted horse. Kitarisa looked ahead. Even Assur's powerful Adzra was stumbling.

They skirted along the low foothills of the mountains, pressing on toward the north. Ahead, Kitarisa saw another thrusting, an outcropping of rocks indicating the most easterly mountains of the Adrex where one could stand at its tip and look across the valley and the Sherehn River to the east and see the western edge of the Kor Breach, the narrowest point where the Adrex nearly met the Soldrat Mountains.

Assur stopped them again just within the fringe of the trees. It was the first time Kitarisa had actually seen him show any sign of fatigue and as the bright light of Verlian passed over them, she saw a dark stain oozing from a cut in his sleeve, the blood running down his arm.

"You should have that tended to." She nodded at the wound.

"It will keep, my lady. When we stop you can practice your healing skills on me."

"If you do not bleed to death before then. Are you controlling your pain as you have been taught?"

"Who told you that?"

"Courronus."

Assur made a disgusted noise in his throat. "Courronus! What did he tell you? That Talesians do not feel pain? Courronus has been with Kuurus too long. There is no boast too great for a Siarsi, especially in front of a woman. Believe me, Kitarisa, the wound hurts. However, there are times when we must think of other things besides our pain."

Kitarisa lowered her gaze, a gesture Assur did not miss. She adjusted the cloak over her knee. She was glad he could not clearly see her face in the deep shadows of the trees.

"I know," she whispered.

"Are you injured?" he asked, suddenly worried.

"No, just weary. I am sorry to be a burden, but I must rest, my lord."

He nodded, gathering up the gray's reins. "Not much farther..."

They both heard the soft whoosh of an arrow near their heads. It slammed into a tree behind Assur, the white fletchings quivering from the impact.

"Go," he shouted.

There wasn't much left in either horse, but they obediently responded to the heels in their sides. Adzra

pounded ahead of Kitarisa's faithful little brown horse. Terror danced down her spine like tiny white-hot fiends as she leaned over Nika's neck, urging him on.

From behind her, she heard the staccato beats of the Wrathman's horse as he galloped closer and closer to them. He was so near she was certain she could hear its panting breath and the soft rattle of bit and spurs, chain mail, and straining leather.

She slapped the gelding's neck and he gamely shot forward, but it was not enough. Again, she heard the whir of an arrow.

Little Nika didn't even stumble, but simply collapsed to his knees and then flipped forward, somersaulting, throwing Kitarisa over his neck. She landed hard on her side, the air painfully forced out of her lungs.

Panic screamed through every nerve. Without thinking, she rolled on her belly and crawled to the nearest underbrush. The Wrathman's black horse skidded to within inches of Kitarisa's hiding place and from her vantage point, she saw black boots step to the ground and the sweep of a cloak and surcoat. The boots crunched on the thick bed of pine needles, moving closer and closer to her hiding place. Kitarisa was certain he could hear the pounding of her heart--it felt like a huge beating drum--much too large for her chest.

A sob escaped her throat as she felt his knee bump her shoulder and heard his growl of surprise.

"Get up," he bellowed. Rough hands tore at her cloak and found the flesh of her shoulders and upper arms. The Wrathman dragged her from the underbrush, forcing to her feet and then pushed her up against the side of his horse.

"Where's the barbarian dog?" he demanded.

"I...I do not know," she screamed at him.

"He cannot be far, Princess. No man would be stupid enough to leave behind such a prize like you."

"I am worth nothing to him, Wrathman," she managed to gasp.

His hands were on her throat, pinning her against the solid wall of the horse's side--the well-trained animal did not move, but seemed to lean into her back giving more support to the Wrathman's assault.

"We will see." He yanked her away from the horse, pinning her arms behind her back. "Get on your knees!"

Kitarisa was forced down with one arm painfully wrenched behind her back. The Wrathman pulled out his own sword and placed the razor-sharp edge next to her throat.

"Come out Talesian! I have your princess. I'll carve her to pieces before your eyes!"

Silence. Only the faint rustle of the wind sighed through the great trees.

The Wrathman pressed the sword deeper just short of cutting her skin. "She will die barbarian. She is worthless to us."

More silence, eerie and unsettling. Kitarisa shook in the Wrathman's grasp. She felt the raw edge of the blade against her throat biting into the soft flesh. Where was Assur? Surely he would not leave her here to die? Even as she knelt, helpless in front of the Wrathman, she now knew what they wanted. They had always wanted Assur. Abducting her and Alea had only been an elaborate cover for a greater, more sinister scheme. Why? Why would the Reverend `Fa want this particular Talesian?

"I'm waiting, you groveling, spineless animal. Excrement of dogs!"

His words were meaningless--loud baiting words to try and force Assur to her aid by outraged pride. She knew he would not rise to it.

*Hurry, my lord.*

Like the arrows, there was a soft rushing sound of something passing through the air. It stopped with a thick-sounding `thunk' and a howl of pain from the Wrathman. Kitarisa fell out of his grasp. His blade slid from useless fingers. The pale, white light of the moon broke through the trees and glinted off the silver hilt of the saddle knife embedded deep in the Wrathman's side. Horrified, Kitarisa backed away from the dying man, almost into Assur himself.

"Get his horse," she heard him order.

She barely had the wits to stumble to the great black horse and take up its reins. It was then Kitarisa remembered her small saddle pouch still strapped to the dead gelding.

Tears of terror and fatigue ran down her face as she groped over the dead body of brave, little Nika trying to locate the precious satchel. The Wrathman's arrow had struck cleanly through his neck, causing instant death. With trembling fingers she touched the white fletchings of the arrow thrusting up from the horse's neck. Poor, gallant beast. Another death for her sake, like Falla and Rhynn.

"Kita!" she heard Assur call.

She found the satchel and hurried to the Wrathman's great black warhorse. He was as tall as Assur's gray and danced with nervous energy. His eyes rolled, revealing the whites. The soft black nostrils flared as it caught another scent--not blood, but something foul and deadly.

Assur pulled his knife from the Wrathman still writhing on the ground and then ran for Adzra. The gray smelled them too and whinnied. Fear had revitalized Assur's tired horse. He danced like the black, half-rearing and fidgeting under the barbarian warrior.

Assur spurred the stallion into a gallop and Kitarisa's mount lunged after him. Even over the clatter of hooves, Kitarisa could hear them--gibbering and howling as they descended on the dying Wrathman. She could not cover her ears to block his screams. The marglims were hungry and they did not wait to kill their prey.

## Chapter 13

THE TALESIAN camp was so well hidden in the woods Kitarisa did not realize they were upon it until she saw a tall man step from the dark protection of the trees and salute Assur with one raised fist.

He was a Siarsi, clad like the others in a leather jerkin and boots to the knee. His auburn hair was tightly bound at the crown with the traditional silver ring, but his scars were distinctly different from Kuurus. Instead of the slash marks that reminded Kitarisa of arrows, his were cut like bolts of lightning very much like the marks worn on Mar'Kess's left sleeve designating his rank and the number of sunturns he had served. Unlike Kuurus, this man had a refined, proud look to him.

He stood at the center of the camp awaiting them and the moment Assur's foot touched the ground, he was down on one knee, right palm to left shoulder. His eyes could not hide the same intense loyalty she had seen in Kuurus and the others.

"My lord, we are relieved. Another day and I would have set out to find you."

Assur handed Adzra's reins to the eager hands of another warrior who bowed low at the waist. Curious behavior for a servant of a mercenary, Kitarisa thought, but then as she had decided long ago, Assur was no mere mercenary. He was undoubtedly some favored lord of the Ter-Rey, sent to the Eastern Lands to observe and report on all the incidents he encountered.

"We were confronted by Wrathmen, Nattuck, and they will send more to trail us. We cannot stay here much longer."

Assur turned and lifted his hands to help Kitarisa down from the saddle.

"Then we shall fight them," the tall Siarsi answered vigorously. "Witch-hounds do not frighten us--they are carrion for the marglims."

"That may be true, but they greatly outnumber us at present. Remember Nattuck, marglims are not particular about the differences in the carrion they eat--Wrathmen or Siarsi."

Assur gestured to Kitarisa. "Nattuck, this is Princess Kitarisa, lately of Gorendt. We must see to it that she safely reaches Riehl."

Again, the Siarsi barbarian went down on one knee, offering her the same salute as he gave Assur.

"My lady, we welcome you. I am Nattuck Evneth, my Lord Assur's First Commander."

Kitarisa glanced at Assur. He appeared completely unconcerned with Nattuck's fanatic display of loyalty as if it were to be expected. Her father's own warriors would never have shown such intense devotion, not even the faithful Mar'Kess.

"Please rise, warrior," she said softly. His obeisance to her was disturbing--far more than any warrior should pay to her, even as a princess of the Dominion. Or when she was... Kazan would have considered Nattuck's courtesies too close to groveling for any warrior, but to Assur, it seemed altogether correct.

"Kuurus and the others arrived only a short time ago. I have taken the liberty of allowing them complete rest. I have also met with your Captain Mar'Kess. A worthy warrior, my lady," Nattuck said courteously.

Assur nodded in agreement. "Let them get as much rest as they can--the horses need it, too. Have Jarad look at this Wrathman-beast. See if the horse can stand the rest of the journey to Riehl."

Nattuck bowed again.

"The lady is exhausted. You will see to it she is made comfortable."

Nattuck nodded and motioned for her to follow him. He led her to one of the smaller tents flanking the greater one set in the middle of the camp--Assur's, she presumed. Upon entering the smaller tent, she was surprised by its simple but richly appointed interior. A low brass brazier set in the center of the tent on a intricately patterned carpet, sent its welcoming warmth to every corner of the tent. There were two small trunks for storage, both made from a wood she did not recognize and each inlaid with red corals and gleaming onyx.

To her right was a low bed covered with thick black fur, cut and sewn in an intricate pattern.

Kitarisa was so tired she barely had the strength to remove her riding dress and brush out her hair. Someone had brought a basin of hot water and a towel and she gratefully sponged off the dirt and grime from her hard riding. She slipped on her nightdress and touched one of the ribbons at her shoulder. It was a garment meant for an eager and expectant bridegroom. Kitarisa bit her lip and fought back the sudden tears. Perhaps it was exhaustion, or maybe the strain of uncertainty, but for whatever reason, knowing she was within the barbarian's grasp and his rights to have her was more disturbing than she realized.

She heard a polite cough--Nattuck's cough--just outside her tent. It had come sooner than she thought. Assur's summons. Not unlike being Summoned by Verlian, she thought wearily.

Kitarisa pulled on the silk overrobe and stepped outside, allowing Nattuck to escort her to Assur's tent.

His tent was sumptuously appointed. Assur fared well as a mercenary. Under her feet spread a thick carpet, intricately patterned in reds, black, and gold--the kind of carpet her grandfather would have brought to Sherehn Keep, having come from far-off Maretstan.

Unlike the smaller tent, low tables were placed strategically near a brass brazier that glowed and smelled of fine incense. There was no furniture except for a generous scattering of cushions and pillows designed to recline against, and a bed, draped and covered in silk and thick furs.

Kitarisa shuddered. A place arranged for seduction. Hopefully he would be quick about the whole sorry business, she thought miserably. Once he saw....

"Please, be comfortable," his deep voice came from behind, startling her. She whirled to face Assur.

The heavy leather jerkin was gone as were his swords and the other equipment of his trade. He had been washed and the trim beard and moustache were clipped and neat. She caught the scent of cedar or sandalwood emanating from his skin which Kitarisa found strangely disturbing. Assur was a tall man and filled the tent with his presence--a presence enhanced by his wearing the magnificent fox robe that hung in deep folds from his wide shoulders to the carpet.

Kitarisa felt her face turn pink as she stared at him. The open robe revealed no shirt or tunic under it. Fine, black wool trousers hugged his trim waist and were tucked into high boots made from black, brook calfskin. In the shadowed light of the tent, the markings around his eyes appeared both frightening and uncomfortably sensual, like being watched by a tiger.

"I trust you found everything to your liking?" he asked with one of his slight, wry smiles.

"Yes," she managed to murmur.

"Then, please sit down." He gestured to the cushions.

Kitarisa sank stiffly onto the nearest cushion, clutching her hands together so he would not see them shaking. He sat down so very near her, Kitarisa felt somehow surrounded. Unlike the casual familiarity of their traveling, with his men all about and with Alea to watch over, Assur was now dangerously close and close enough to touch her. The sleeve of his robe brushed lightly against her arm sending faint shivers under her skin. She fervently wished she could get up and leave or that he would find her tedious and

send her back to the other tent.

Assur leaned back into the cushions. "Would you care for some wine?" he asked pleasantly.

"No."

"No?" A black-winged brow swept up. "Very well, I know just the thing--some shen tea. It is soothing and warming on such a chill night."

He clapped his hands once and a young Siarsi entered from the side of the tent. Kitarisa looked down, too ashamed to look at him.

"Shen tea, Lostic."

The boy bowed and disappeared only to return quickly with a tray bearing black enamel cups and a matching teapot set over a tiny flame. Assur dismissed the boy and poured the tea. He handed her the cup and poured some of the steaming liquid for himself.

Kitarisa sipped the tea tentatively. It was delicious and did help ease her hammering heart and trembling hands.

"It is good," she admitted, setting the cup back on the tray.

"More?" He did not wait for her to answer, but again poured her another cup. "My mother used to ladle this down me when I was a boy, when my stomach was bothering me."

"Oh?" Kitarisa could scarcely imagine Assur as a boy much less with a doting mother administering tea to him.

He handed her the cup and his fingers brushed against her knuckles causing her to start so suddenly, she nearly spilled the tea.

Leaning forward, his midnight-blue eyes seemed to bore through her. "Kitarisa, I am not going to hurt you."

She looked down into the cup, formulating her next words.

"Will you just be quick about this?" she asked, forcing herself to glance up at him.

Assur frowned, confused. "Quick about what?"

When she did not answer, he nodded, finally realizing what she meant.

"My lady, as much as I may appear like one, I am not a barbarian...a merciless savage. You are not here as some...pleasure slave."

Bitter tears pooled in her eyes and she brushed them away angrily. "Then tell me why *I am* here? Like my father said, I shall be a disappointing prize, my lord."

"Is that what you think?"

She looked away from him. "What else am I expected to think? Surely, I am not here merely to enjoy tea with you? Or maybe I flatter myself too much?"

Assur took the cup from her hand and forcibly turned her by the shoulders to face him. "You are here because I wish it, and because you asked for my help. I told you, I would not leave until I found a way to free you." Very gently he touched her cheek.

Kitarisa blinked back threatening tears. "So, you have freed me. What am I to expect now? Am I some kind of Talesian booty? Where am I to go?"

"Your rightful place is in Riehl. Surely you know that? I have already told you, you are not bound to me."

"My father has made sure I will *not* rule Riehl. I cannot imagine Riehl accepting me as their ruler after having renounced my rights to the Falcon Throne. They are not fools, my lord." she said, lifting her chin a little.

"The Council Circle of Riehl would be fools if they did not accept you. The document you signed will not be honored."

Kitarisa saw the hard light in his eyes and suddenly felt uncomfortable. Again, she had the odd sensation that Assur was more than what he appeared to be. His words were too decisive for a roaming soldier of fortune--there was too much authority in his voice.

"I do not understand the depth of his cruelty to you," he continued, visibly suppressing his fury.

"I have told you before, I am the daughter of his enemy. There is nothing, nothing I, nor anyone else can do to change that, not even your kindness. You asked me once why I turned away from kindness

when it was offered to me. I will tell you why--because it *is always* used against me."

Tears began to run down her face, unheeded. She no longer cared what he thought, but suddenly felt a lifetime of anguish and disappointed hopes break through her cool resolve.

"You remember when I told you about the guard Rhynn Palinn, the one person I dared to love? The man my father had butchered? Kazan's anger did not stop with him. Oh, no. He made very sure I would never again give myself to anyone and every man in his court would know it."

Trembling and sobbing, Kitarisa turned on her knees until she faced away from Assur and shrugged off the brocade robe revealing the delicate silk of her nightgown. She pulled down the ribbons at her shoulders and let the gown slip to reveal her entire back to him.

"You did not get any prize, my lord, and Riehl will get no blushing maiden for a ruler. As you can see, you get `used linen.'"

She felt his eyes, staring at her back--sensed that he was sickened and appalled by what he saw.

Her shoulders, down to the deep V at the middle of her back had been spared, but the rest had been marred by a networking of scars revealing where she had been brutally flogged.

"Every man in the garrison watched, my Lord Assur," she said through her angry tears. "Now. You *take* me barbarian. It just does not matter. You cannot add anything to my shame. Just use me and leave me alone."

Kitarisa buried her face in her hands, too ashamed to continue. She released the pent-up, carefully controlled pain and cried out her bitterness in deep, aching sobs.

"Kita'lara." In an instant, he was around her and pulling her into his arms. She did not fight him, but buried her face into his chest. Tenderly he stroked her hair and then pulled the edge of his fur around her back, enveloping her in his embrace and covering her shame.

Kitarisa was not sure how long he held her, but she did not care, and he would not let her go until she had cried out the last of her tears. Sometimes she moaned, sometimes she cried out and tried to push away from him, but he would not release her.

Finally she stopped, resting quietly against him, warm and safe. So safe. She sighed. For a moment she was at peace.

It had been a long time since she had felt so secure and protected, not since she was little and permitted the short stays with her grandfather. She pressed her cheek against Assur feeling his heart, strong and steady, as if by its very beating he could keep away the nightmares and the pain. She did not want to leave his embrace, but stay in his arms forever.

Assur muttered something in a strange, dark tongue that sounded like an oath or a vow.

"Kitarisa," he said quietly, "Kazan *will* be punished for this vile crime, I promise you."

"What can you do? You are only--"

"You must know by now I am more than a mere mercenary. You have told me all your secrets, I will give you mine."

He pushed up the left sleeve of his robe and turned the wrist over to reveal a black mark embedded deeply in the skin on the inside of his lower arm--a firemark. Assur turned over his right arm and matched it against the left, showing the twin brand. It was the same mark, the crest she had seen on the saddle knife he had given her: a rose and a sword, encircled by a crown.

"Only two people have these marks. Myself and my father. I am D'Assuriel, Kitarisa. The Ter-Rey."

She pulled away, staring at him, clutching her gown to her breasts at once frightened and mortified.

"*You* are the High Prince?" she whispered. "I cannot...I do not understand."

She felt tears come again as she realized the full import of his confession and what she herself had just said and done. Kitarisa collapsed before him, forehead pressed to the carpet.

"Mercy, Great Lord. I beg your forgiveness. I was foolish and--"

"There is nothing to forgive. Please rise, Kitarisa. Look at me."

She obeyed, but lifted herself slowly. She knew her face was aflame with embarrassment. How could she have done such a thing? Baring herself to him like a silkroom whore and assuming he would--

"I am sorry, Great Lord. I did not realize who you were."

"It is I who should do the apologizing. I should have told you earlier, but it seemed best to keep my

identity a secret."

"Do the others know? Captain Mar'Kess?"

"Yes."

"Then, my father must know. If he finds me he will kill me."

"No." Assur took her shoulders again and shook her lightly. "Kazan will do nothing to you. Nothing. Now he must answer to me and with his very life if necessary," he said grimly.

"I still do not understand. How did you come to be here and at Sherehn Keep?"

"The Riehlilian Council sent a secret communication to me, telling me about Alea's abduction and the ransom. They also told me of their suspicions concerning Kazan and his determination to put Alor on their throne. I do not often rescue princesses from common roadwyls, but for such a high ransom, that is something else. I have had my own suspicions for some time and it is a good thing I came to see for myself."

Assur paused a moment to shrug off the heavy fur and drape it around her shoulders. He sat back from her. "Kazan has never seen me--he has seen my father, D'Achad, but not me. It has been too long since a Ter-Rey has looked into the affairs of the Eastern Lands and I can see I was nearly too late. Kitarisa, I know your father intends to have Riehl, if not by an arranged marriage, then by force."

Kitarisa's tears left her as she realized the seriousness of his words. She sniffed and touched her hands to her wet face, trying to blot away the last of the tears.

"You think our abduction was part of his plan?"

"Yes, but why he had *both* of you abducted is a mystery to me. What purpose does it serve other than to get my attention?"

Kitarisa pondered his words for a moment. "It has something to do with that witch, the White Sister. And, it would have been a convenient way to be rid of me. He undoubtedly had arranged for my 'accidental' death, or for me to be sold into slavery...or else I was to go the Catacombs."

Assur's brows knitted together. "Perhaps."

"If I were dead, it would clear the way for Alor."

"And serve as an excuse to attack Riehl," he added.

He stood and began pacing the confines of the tent.

"Will they truly attack Riehl?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Yes, I am sure of it, only now he has something else to contend with: me."

"How would he know you are here?"

Assur stopped his pacing and looked down at her, hands on his hips. "Kitarisa, what has happened to the saddle knife I returned to Lady Falla? Did she give it to you?"

Kitarisa shook her head, confused for a moment, trying to recall the knife. "No, my lord. I guess there was no time--she must have forgotten it."

"Then the witch knows I am here. She knows and so will Kazan."

Kitarisa glanced at his arms and suddenly realized what he meant. The firemarks burned into Assur's arms were the same as the mark stamped into the knife--the mark of his house and his clan.

Kitarisa looked up at him again, her eyes huge. "If he goes to war, then they will be breaking your peace and the treaty. Surely he will not be that foolish."

"He will, because he will think I do not have enough time to re-cross the Adrex and send for help. The snows will come soon, Kitarisa, and no one, not even an army of Talesians can cross the Adrex in the dead of winter. Riehl will be Kazan's by spring. However, I have taken some precautions. There is a large mountain valley two day's ride from here, where my legions await."

"The Riehlilians will fight, I know it. Surely they are not helpless."

"They are brave warriors, but will be no match against Gorendt, especially with all the new arms and horses Kazan has been gathering. If Riehl falls, then he will control all of the east."

"That is treason," Kitarisa whispered.

"Yes, it is and Kazan must be stopped."

She had nothing more to say, but remained kneeling before him acutely conscious of his eyes upon her. She tugged at the fur about her shoulders trying to recover herself with as little embarrassment as

possible.

"I have much to do and you should rest. For now, you must keep my secret Kitarisa. I will send spies into Gorendt to find out if Kazan knows I am here. You will be safe from him. One of us will always be at your side and I know if that old Siarsi had his way, Kuurus would probably wish to stay *in here* ." He smiled.

With the greatest care Assur assisted her pulling up the ribbons of her gown and resettled the silk of her robe. His hands were warm and gentle and lingered only for a moment on her shoulders.

"Some day, my lady, I will hear you say to me the kind of words you said to that guard in Sherehn Keep."

Kitarisa looked down. "He was one of Reddess' men and it was necessary. Besides, all my words of love were taken away from me when Rhynn was killed." She was again the distant princess, iron-willed and cold. "You will wait a long time to hear them, my Lord Assur."

"Then, I will wait."

Abruptly he stood up, helping her to her feet. He motioned to the bed. "Sleep well, Kita'lara." Assur shrugged on the heavy fur and with a slight bow, brushed past her and slipped out the side opening of the tent into the chill night.

Kitarisa stood in the middle of Assur's tent unsure of herself. It was now certain she would not be returning to the other tent and she felt reasonably certain he would not visit her again.

Lord Assur. High Prince D'Assuriel, the Ter-Rey, she corrected herself. It was easy now to reconcile the keen deference his men paid him. Fierce Talesians all and fanatically loyal to their lord. Her old Nans had been right. Assur was a strange blend of regal civility and terrifying ferocity. And she had been here, in his tent, held in his arms like a lover. She reluctantly admitted to herself that it had been most pleasant and so safe. For a few moments her dark terrors had been smothered. Assur's warm, strong arms had separated her from her fears and the desperate misery of her life.

What he had told her, could it be true? Her father a traitor? And what he had said about that guard in Sherehn? Kitarisa could scarcely recall what she said to that unfortunate guard. But she did remember Assur's fingers on her shoulders, gently adjusting the ribbons. His scent. And those eyes, hypnotic, fierce, magnificent--but not a trace of cruelty or mockery in them when he looked at her.

Kitarisa eased under the soft pelts of the bed and looked up at the silk hangings above her. A bed designed for passion. She found herself slipping quickly into exhausted sleep, but not before she looked at the empty expanse of bed at her side and wondered what it would be like with him being there, close enough to touch and to love.

ASSUR STRODE FROM the tent and almost ran into Jarad who had been keeping a discreet watch by the tent.

"Find Kuurus and Nattuck," he snapped, a little too sharply.

Jarad sketched a brisk nod of his head before he spun on his heel and hurried off into the camp to find the two Siarsi warriors.

Assur paced like a trapped animal. His rigorously-ingrained discipline to remain calm under stress began to fray with his fury. He could not even begin to think of a punishment too hideous for Kazan. The blood of his savage ancestors beat through him, making him nearly blind to anything else but his unutterable rage.

Assur leaned over the small folding camp table, resting his weight on his clenched fists and tried to take deep, calming breaths. For one irrational instant he felt like smashing the table and anything else within reach.

A royal heir of his Dominion lay in his tent, beaten like a cur. He would never forget the humiliation in her eyes, nor the depth of her terror. The outrage to her was damning enough, but that Kazan had dared to defy him, flaunting treason, was more than Assur could tolerate. His original willingness to deal evenhandedly with Kazan had evaporated like smoke. Kazan would beg to die.

The sound of running feet broke him free of his mental ranting as he glanced up to see a worried-looking Kuurus and at least four others close behind him.

"Great Lord?" Kuurus began a little breathlessly. Among his own kind now he was free to pay proper respect. Kuurus dropped to one knee and beat his right palm against his left breast.

"Get up, Kuurus," Assur ordered, at once impatient with unnecessary formalities.

The Siarsi sprang to his feet, immediately battle-ready. Behind him, the others had shifted from worry to keen attentiveness. They too, were ready to do battle at the first word from their lord.

"Take Courronus and ride south. Find Kazan's camp. Learn all you can and then return to Riehl. It is time we pray to Verlian to be Summoned. I am sending message birds to D'Achad to have the tribes made ready. Go, old friend."

Kuurus sketched a hasty salute and fled into the darkness, seeking out his nephew and their horses.

Assur turned to the others. Nattuck fairly trembled with eagerness. "Do we fight, Great Lord?"

"Soon, Nattuck. At dawn we break camp and ride west to find D'Achad's encampment. We will meet with the legions there. We must move as quickly as possible--we have that witch on our trail and her dogs have been sent to do her tracking."

A sneer formed on Nattuck's lean face. "Allow me to remain, my lord, and skin them. I will bring you their bloody hides for tanning."

A faint smile touched Assur's firm mouth. Was there no end to Siarsi boasting? "No, Nattuck. You will have your opportunity to dull your blades on Gorendtian bones as well as on Wrathmen. For now, I have need of you for other duties."

He shifted his attention to the map spread out before him on the camp table. "The princess and Captain Mar'Kess have both confirmed that Prince Kazan will join forces with Maretstan and that their warriors are on their way to meet with Kazan's army. If this is so, then we must be ready to fight with Riehl much sooner than expected. Mar'Kess also told me Kazan has allied himself with a White Sister, Malgora. What her purpose is in this game, I cannot be sure, but it is certain that both of them are seeking complete control of the Eastern Lands."

"Great Lord," Brekk interjected softly, "perhaps she wishes to rule one of the provinces?"

"A White Sister will want more than a mere throne, Brekk. No. There is much more to this than a war over Riehl."

"Can we reason with them? Perhaps Kazan will reconsider and withdraw," Brekk continued.

"I do not reason with traitors," Assur retorted. He tapped the map where the long thread of the River Sherehn stretched from the far north, all the way to the Sea of the Volt. "The shortest and most efficient route for an army the size of Kazan's, is straight up the river to the Kor Breach. That is why he set up stores in the old Keep, as a stop over for supplies and weapons, as well as a base to fall back upon should the battle drag on too long. Only now, his stores are gone. They must hurry and take Riehl, secure the Kor Breach, and hold it through winter. We must beat him to Riehl and hold the Breach ourselves so they cannot get through."

The Talesians looked grim as Assur finished. As fearless as they were, they were not fools. An army the size of Kazan's, plus the forces of Maretstan were nothing to sneer about, particularly facing an oncoming winter.

Assur snapped the map into a tight roll. "Nattuck, we ride at first light. See that all is in readiness."

The tall Siarsi beamed at Assur as he dropped to his knee to show his obedience as well as his willingness. "It shall be done, Great Lord!"

Like Kuurus, Nattuck slipped away from the knot of warriors, eager to be off.

Some of the heat from his rage had cooled. Assur passed tired a hand over his forehead.

"Where is Mar'Kess?" he asked wearily.

"He is at rest, by your command, lord," Brekk answered.

"Wake him and bring him to me...and bring me two messenger birds."

Assur dropped into the nearest campstool and tugged the heavy fur more tightly across his shoulders. He fervently wished he had not removed his tunic and jerkin earlier. Foolishly, he had thought he would still be in the tent with Kitarisa, not out in the cold night. The faintest thread of vanity had goaded him into believing she would have encouraged him, even invited him to stay with her for the remainder of the night. That was the man in him talking, not the Ter-Rey.

He ran his hand over the smooth surface of his hair until he touched the silver ring. Besides, in her eyes, he was only a coarse barbarian, regardless of the fact that he was indeed her sovereign lord. She was obliged to obey and respect him, but he could never force her to love him. Alea's ill-concealed revulsion had told him a wealth of information-- whereas Alea did not hide her distaste of them and their appearance, Kitarisa was too well-bred to show it.

Still, the memory of her in his arms, pressing her wet cheek against his chest was all too vivid. In that moment, he had the distinct feeling she was not clinging to him as a poor substitute for Rhynn Palinn, but because she needed him--Assur.

He glanced down at his arms and the firemarks just showing from the edge of his sleeves. Like every Ter-Rey before him, and every man who had ever held a position of great responsibility, he wished he were just an ordinary man, like Jarad or Brekk. If he was to have her, then he would have to make her see beyond the terrible burn marks in his arms and the frightening patterns around his eyes--and that he was not merely a barbarian.

The blackened marks reminded him of her back and her own terrible scars. There was no question about Kazan's punishment. For every welt on Kitarisa's back, Assur would multiply ten times the pain Kazan would suffer.

Boots crunched on the ground causing him to look up and see Mar'Kess approaching him. The Gorendtian captain had not taken the time to dress completely, but had merely thrown his cloak over tunic and breeches.

"Highness? Great Lord?" Mar'Kess fumbled with the Talesian address for him. Unlike Kitarisa, the discovery of Assur's true identity evidently had not surprised the captain. Without question, he had accepted Assur as the High Prince.

"Mar'Kess, I would know something about the princess, about her punishments from Kazan," Assur said in a low voice. He waved the captain to sit on the adjacent campstool.

"It is no secret Kazan hated her. I have known the princess for many years and during all that time, I have never seen Kazan fail to take an opportunity to insult her or misuse her."

"Why does he do this? She will only tell me that she is the daughter of his enemy."

"The provinces of Riehl and Gorendt have always quarreled bitterly over the division of lands between them, their boundaries and the rights to the waters of the Sherehn. They have always been at odds with each other and on occasion, there have been accidental deaths, some minor thefts, and petty blackmail. Finally, it was the people themselves who demanded a truce. Through arbitration between both councils, a plan was drawn to have the two houses marry, however, it was not well received by Gorendt. The old prince, Kazan's father, had great plans for his son. He wanted Kazan to marry into the Maretstan house and hold all the southern regions. In his eyes, Kazan's marriage to Princess Liestra was an insult and a lowering of their chances for glory. Kazan hated Liestra from the beginning, which was a great shame. Princess Liestra was a beautiful, gracious lady and more than willing to do her part for their two provinces. Unfortunately, she died much too soon."

Mar'Kess paused and furrowed his fingers through his fair hair.

"Then there was the rumor that Kitarisa was not Kazan's child. It is a lie, of course. All of this added to his resentment. After Liestra died, Kazan married his whore--that dancing girl--and she promptly produced Alor and Alea. At once, Kazan saw his chance to claim glory through both these children and Kitarisa was forgotten. When Prince Murliff died, it became imperative that she not succeed him."

"Do you believe that is why Kitarisa and Alea were abducted?"

"Knowing what I know now, yes. When I first received the news that Alea had been abducted, I ordered a detachment to begin the search, but was stopped by Prince Kazan. He ordered us to wait. My men fretted and chafed, eager to break a few skulls. That is why your arrival in Gorendt was such a surprise. No one knew he had sent for Talesians."

"He did not send for us, Mar'Kess. The High Council from Riehl sent me a message stating that Alea had been abducted. Her ransom was five thousand crown talins and that she would be killed if the ransom was not paid. Riehl was blamed for the entire scheme and on that flimsy excuse, Gorendt would declare war on them."

"Obviously a lie to force Riehl into war, my lord. The plan would have worked, except no one counted on *you* looking into the matter."

Assur stood and began pacing around the fire. "I am sure Kazan now knows who I am. That in itself should worry him. What troubles me is this business with the witches. Why would Kazan ally himself with them?"

"I do not know, my lord, but it must have something to do with their Reverend `Fa. They spoke of using Alor and how weak he was."

Assur stroked the slim beard thoughtfully. "The Sisters' power has been merely an annoyance, until now. Their allegiance to that traitorous woman, Medruth, has made them vicious and now their lapdogs have grown arrogant. It is time they were punished."

"The Wrathmen have caused much mischief in Gorendt, my lord. I have nearly come to blows with a few of them myself."

"There is another mystery, Mar'Kess. During our return to Gorendt, we were forced to stop in a village to rest. We were surprised by a band of Wrathmen claiming they had been asked by Kazan to help look for the Princess Alea."

Mar'Kess frowned and shook his head, bewildered. "If there had been Wrathmen in Gorendt Keep, I would have known about it. I had my own informers and they would have told me if they were in contact with Kazan."

"Another trick?"

"They were informed by someone and I imagine it was their mistress."

Assur nodded and then motioned for Mar'Kess to get up.

"We will have no answers tonight. Get some rest. Tomorrow you will take the princess into Riehl. I will send Brekk, Del, and Jarad with you. And, I will send along papers for the Council. They must prepare for the worst--they must hold the Keep until the legions arrive from the west."

"The legions, lord?"

"Tomorrow I will ride west to bring back six Talesian legions to fight against Kazan."

The captain stood and bowed his head.

"Mar'Kess?"

"My lord?"

"One other question...were you present the day Princess Kitarisa was--"

"Flogged?" Mar'Kess finished for him, his voice full of anger at the memory. "Yes. I had the regrettable duty of ordering Rhynn Palinn to his death and then was forced to watch Kitarisa's punishment. Kazan beat her himself, my lord. He tore her gown from her back and tied her to the courtyard wall. He whipped her with a redreed."

Assur's jaw tightened. He, himself, had taken a few strokes on his backside from his own swordmaster who had used the fearsome redreed. The pain had been excruciating.

"Princess Kitarisa did not make a sound, my lord. Not so much as a whimper. She nearly bit her lip clean through. I saw it myself."

Assur cursed softly in his ancient tongue and clenched his jaw in hard line of rage. "Did she love him, this Rhynn Palinn?"

Mar'Kess shifted uncomfortably, at once recognizing Assur's true meaning. "Very much, my lord."

Assur nodded and then lifted his hand to dismiss him.

"Do not speak of this to her or anyone else," he said sharply.

Again, Mar'Kess bowed his head respectfully. "Your Will, Great Lord."

## Chapter 14

THE KEEP Of Riehl had been built on raised ground with the city and streets laid around it in ever expanding concentric circles, spreading out like a gigantic wheel.

The first defensive wall had been built at the outermost limits of the city and high enough to keep sheep and cattle from straying. Between the first wall and the second inner wall, were the enormous meadows

kept for grazing.

The second inner wall had been designed for defense and at the four compass points were four high towers, each with a heavy gate that could be shut and barred from invaders.

Inside the second wall was Riehl itself set in its orderly circular pattern, each street encircling closer to the Keep. A final wall separated the main part of the city from the Keep, it having enough stabling for a thousand horses and accommodated in its barracks at least two thousand men.

As they rode through the final gate to the inner yard, Mar'Kess found himself gazing upward to admire the sweeping lines and soaring arches--a Keep and city designed for both protection as well as to delight the eye.

The news of their arrival had long preceded them. There were only polite stares, an occasional curtsy or a doff of a cap, but no terrified children ran to hide from them and none of the women scurried to reach safety behind closed doors. Unlike Gorendt, there was an easier air about the city--no roaming, bullying patrols sent out to intimidate the citizens; no threat of punishment to spoil the bustling activity of the markets or shops.

However, Mar'Kess sensed a feeling of unease and uncertainty. Their prince was dead and that lack of leadership was painfully apparent.

Once inside the innermost wall, a row of somber-faced gentlemen stood respectfully before them and bowed low the moment they set foot to the courtyard stones. One of them, their leader, stepped forward--a handsome man in his late fifties, with dark compassionate eyes and clothed in a deep blue tunic that came nearly to his ankles.

"My lords, welcome. We are delighted and relieved you have arrived so safely. I am Councilor De'Tai" He looked at each one of them expectantly, brows raised in anticipation. "His Highness is not here?"

Mar'Kess bowed to the councilor. "Captain Raldan Mar'Kess, your grace, lately of Gorendt. Lest you worry about an enemy in your midst, I have since renounced my oaths and bonds to Kazan and left his service. If you doubt my word, then I defer you to these Talesians, who will vouch for my truthfulness."

The councilor glanced at Brekk and the others, who nodded solemnly at Mar'Kess' words.

Brekk stepped forward. "You have no reason to doubt the Captain. If you like, I shall take an Oath upon my knife."

The councilor waved his hand, dismissing the idea. "I accept your word, good Captain, as I would Prince Assur's."

Mar'Kess helped Kitarisa down from the Wrathman's horse and made a slight bow to her.

"May I introduce to you the Princess Kitarisa. Our Ter-Rey has helped her escape from Kazan."

De'Tai and the others made short, polite bows to her, however, the man to De'Tai's right, clearly was not pleased by Kitarisa's presence.

"I see you are unharmed from your captivity in Sherehn Keep, but I am somewhat surprised, my lady. We were told that your sister, Princess Alea, had been abducted." Councilor De'Tai said smoothly.

Kitarisa almost bowed to the councilman, but stopped just as she began to tug at her skirts.

"Both of us were abducted, your grace. It was my father who led you to believe it was only Alea who had been taken. My Lord Assur and his men rescued us and brought us back to Gorendt. His Highness has sent along papers explaining everything to you and the council."

Kitarisa gestured to Mar'Kess, who handed the sealed documents to the astonished council member. "I am sorry to come to you in this manner, but circumstances prevented our Ter-Rey from bringing me here himself. I hope I shall not be too great a burden to Riehl."

De'Tai took the papers from Mar'Kess. He touched the black wax seals with one tentative finger. He glanced at the scowling Councilman Sur'Mai.

"You will be most welcome, my lady. And may I say, that not only do you resemble your grandmother in looks, but you have her gracious manner as well. Riehl shall be honored to have you within its walls. We also look forward to hosting our sovereign prince, when he arrives."

"Regretfully, I must inform you that my Lord Assur has ridden west to call for reinforcements,"

Mar'Kess said firmly.

Councilor De'Tai expression changed from polite anticipation to worry. "Reinforcements?"

"Yes, your grace," Mar'Kess continued. "We have good reason to believe Prince Kazan will soon attack Riehl."

The thin, fastidious-looking man next to De'Tai touched the councilor's arm.

"Then the rumors were true--Kazan will force us to accept his son, Alor, as prince. Our army cannot stand against Gorendtian warriors!"

"Calm yourself, Sur'Mai. You have accepted defeat before anything has happened. Now then, Captain, how much time do we have before the reinforcements come from the west?"

Mar'Kess turned to Brekk. Only a Talesian could know how long it would take for Assur make it to their encampment and back again with enough men to support the Riehlans.

"If they are not delayed, another three days, maybe four for them to reach Prince D'Achad's camp, and then four days to return. Eight, maybe ten days, Captain, at least."

Dismay rippled among the Riehlans council members.

"Ten days!" the Councilor Sur'Mai interjected. "We will be dust and bones by then."

Mar'Kess had been studying the heavy, reinforced walls, the high towers of the Keep and the ideal manner in which the Keep and the city had been situated. The Keep itself stood on the highest ground, affording perfect observation of anyone or anything that might approach the city walls.

"Your grace, how many men does Riehl have at the ready?"

The councilor shrugged. "Two, maybe three hundred. Our armies have stood down for many turns now, since the treaty with Gorendt. There has been no need...we have kept the Ter-Rey's peace as he has wished."

"And the stored provisions?"

Again the councilor shrugged. "I am not certain...we would have to take an account."

"Can this be done?" Mar'Kess interrupted.

"Of course."

Mar'Kess again looked at Riehl's high walls and stout towers. The Keep could hold against Verlian's Chosen.

"Your grace, we have nearly two weeks to fortify and make ready for the Talesians. The Keep is excellently situated and if I am correct, we may be able to not only hold out until the Talesian tribesmen come, but even defeat Kazan!"

It seemed quite natural for Mar'Kess to take command of the situation--the Riehlans readily deferring to his skills and knowledge as a trained warrior. Councilor De'Tai ordered an accounting of the Keep's stores and granaries--weapons and supplies, the number of horses that could be utilized for battle and their upkeep, the availability of water and how many of the livestock that could be kept inside the city walls or within the Keep for ready slaughter.

When the tallies had been completed, Mar'Kess beamed at the reports.

"We are more prepared than I had hoped. May Verlian bless the resourcefulness of all Riehlans."

"How long can we hope to last, with these provisions?" De'Tai asked.

"With care, two to three moonturns. Your biggest asset, your grace, is the underground canals running from the Sherehn. However, it is also the weakest. We may have to send out sorties to protect this source from possible poisoning."

Councilor Sur'Mai looked severely at De'Tai and Mar'Kess.

"Poison our water? Kazan would not dare!"

Mar'Kess rolled the reports into a tidy cylinder, bound them with a fine black ribbon and set them on the table.

"Your grace, you do not understand Kazan. He would do that and anything else to conquer Riehl. This is war, sir, and there are no rules."

The councilor adjusted the collar of his long tunic.

"I cannot believe Kazan would actually *poison* us."

"He would. He is that determined."

Councilor De'Tai appeared grave, fine lines creased his brow as he pondered Mar'Kess' warning. He appeared to like Mar'Kess and appreciated his ability to clearly assess the situation and make sensible decisions. From the highest ranking council member to the most lowly stable boy, Mar'Kess commanded not only their respect, but a growing, unswerving loyalty.

"Would it be wise to send our children elsewhere, perhaps into some kind of sanctuary?" De'Tai asked cautiously.

"No." Mar'Kess' firm response made the councilor acknowledge his error. "They would only be more vulnerable, not only to Kazan, but to marglims and the oncoming winter. The best we can do is to store and conserve until the Talesians come. By then, we should be able to stand against Kazan and defeat him."

"Are you certain they will come?" Sur'Mai asked skeptically.

Mar'Kess nodded. It was clear Councilor Sur'Mai disapproved of Talesian intervention from the moment Mar'Kess and the others had set foot on Riehlion soil and unwilling to believe Assur's armies would come to their assistance in spite of numerous reassurances.

"Your grace, I have witnessed Talesian loyalty and there is none greater than to Prince Assur. They would rather die before failing his orders. They will come. Besides," he added with a slight twist of a smile, "Talesians love a good fight."

De'Tai's responded with a short nod and then turned to Sur'Mai. But Sur'Mai remained unconvinced and showed his displeasure by gathering the many scrolls from the table and prepared to leave with them.

"This whole business would not have occurred if His Highness had been watching Kazan in the first place. We have done our part. We have kept his peace and now we are paying for that obedience in a meaningless war."

Sur'Mai stopped his noisy paper shuffling to look at both De'Tai and Mar'Kess with ill-concealed annoyance. "We have been accused of inciting this war on the flimsiest of excuses. Now our land will be overrun with savage barbarians, Gorendtian warriors, and Maretstanis. This entire incident could have been avoided, as I have stated many times."

The councilor re-creased the edge of his collar so that it lay in perfect alignment to the rest of his tunic. He pressed his mouth in a neat line of determined resistance. Sur'Mai would not be swayed--the responsibility lay entirely with the Ter-Rey.

"I suggest you cool your temper, Sur'Mai," De'Tai warned sternly. "His Highness will soon be here. Do you wish to arouse his anger with your ranting?"

Sur'Mai raised an indignant eyebrow. "I will do nothing of the kind, De'Tai. However, I will point out to His Highness of the *extreme* difficulties he has placed us under. Of course, there is the other matter of the princess..."

"Princess Kitarisa?"

"Exactly so," Sur'Mai went on in his meticulous voice. "When this debacle is over, will he expect us to be ruled by Kazan's ill-begotten offspring or a princess of whom we know nothing? I, for one, will have my reservations."

"The Princess Kitarisa is our lawful sovereign," De'Tai snapped, his temper beginning to rise with Sur'Mai's fussy reasoning.

While Sur'Mai appeared to be an excellent Council member, it was apparent De-Tai had little patience for his habit of scrutinizing the best of ideas down to minute fragments.

"Need I remind you, De'Tai," Sur'Mai went on in his unperturbed manner, "the Princess Kitarisa is Kazan's daughter, too. We have no idea as to how he has corrupted her or influenced her. She may well be our ruler by right, but *what kind* of ruler?"

"To that, I can answer you," Mar'Kess interjected. "The Princess Kitarisa is truly a daughter of Riehl. I have known her for many years and she despises Kazan. He has treated her shamefully, cruelly. You need have no fear as to her loyalties. Remember, your grace, it was the princess herself who asked for Lord Assur's help to escape Gorendt."

"Indeed," Sur'Mai murmured, still unmoved. With crisp, short movements, he gathered up the remaining documents and performed the slightest of bows to each of them. "We shall see," he said,

turning on his heel and striding out of the room.

"I am afraid my colleague will remain unhappy and unconvinced of Princess Kitarisa's worth until he has spoken to her and seen the end of this trouble," De'Tai apologized quietly. "He was devoted to Prince Murliff and is now reluctant to see change, of any kind."

"It is understandable, but you need not fear the princess or her loyalties."

De'Tai surveyed him coolly. "You remind me a great deal of Prince Murliff. The fair hair and gray eyes, too. You have the same dignity and command unquestioned authority. You are an excellent leader, Mar'Kess."

The councilor stroked his jaw thoughtfully for a moment.

"Mar'Kess...that is a Riehl name, I believe."

Mar'Kess nodded. "My grandfather was Riehl, but left Riehl as a young man and came to Gorendt to seek his fortune."

De'Tai placed a hand on Mar'Kess shoulder and nodded.

"I am grateful we have you, and I believe you, my friend, in spite of Sur'Mai's worries. However, we must wait and see how things occur when we finally meet this disowned princess."

He passed a hand through his silver hair and sighed. "I wish the Ter-Rey were here. I am weary of decisions--decisions only a prince has the right to make."

"I am sure he will be here as soon as possible. Their horses are swift and the desperate situation will urge them on even faster."

"I hope you are right, my friend."

THE APARTMENTS given to Kitarisa were by far the most sumptuous she had ever seen, but the most pleasant surprise were the ladies presented as her tiring women. The three of them spread the bright silk of their gowns and sank into deep curtsies. They were all about Kitarisa's age and cheery as little birds. The moment she arrived they immediately took her cloak and gloves, clucked over the condition of her riding dress, and prattled on about foolish things. She had never been around such animated, happy women. They arranged and fussed over her, until finally overwhelmed by their attention, Kitarisa had to sit down.

"My lady, you have such beautiful hair. Allow me to brush it, while Tiasma draws your bath. Are you hungry? Leti, fetch Her Highness a tray."

*Her Highness.* It sounded so strange now as if they were making some kind of mistake or speaking of someone else.

The oldest one, Lady Davieta, the senior tiring woman, brushed her hair, making it snap and shine.

"You have hair like the Princess Pelia, may Verlian keep her."

"You knew my grandmother?" Kitarisa asked, genuinely surprised.

"Oh yes. Of course, she was an older lady when I attended to her. But I remember her when I was little. So lovely and kind. You resemble her a great deal, if I may say so, Your Highness."

"I never knew her, but I remember my grandfather Murliff--when I was allowed to see him at Sherehn Keep."

"I recall Her Highness wanting to go along, but she was so frail toward the end. It caused her much sorrow that she could never see her granddaughter."

"Perhaps there is a portrait of her, somewhere in the keep that I might see?"

"Of course--in the gallery. Whenever you wish, I will be glad to take you," Davieta said happily, delighted at having pleased her new mistress so well.

It took Kitarisa a day or two to accustom herself to the deferential treatment, not only from her maids, but from every individual in the Keep. At first she thought it was because of her affiliation with Assur, but she soon discovered, by accident, their courtesy was quite genuine. Unintentionally, she came upon two young girls hurrying to their duties with their arms full of linens.

"Have you seen the princess?"

"I have. They say she is like the old princess, only prettier and kinder, too. I saw Tiasma in the kitchens fetching her tray. She said Princess Kitarisa is the sweetest lady to attend to and never scolds."

"Maybe Verlian will smile on us and she will stay and rule."

Kitarisa never heard the rest of their conversation, as the two hurried off to finish their tasks.

She had plenty of time to explore Riehl and her tiring women were only too happy to show her around. In the long picture gallery, she finally saw the portrait of her grandmother, painted when she was still fairly young. Her dark hair, so much like Kitarisa's was pulled back in the old-fashioned style with heavy curls falling over her shoulders.

"I remember Lady Terjett, the princess's companion, telling me how many hours it took to curl her hair with the tongs," Lady Davieta explained, looking up at the portrait.

Kitarisa's grandmother did look remarkably like her, only her eyes were brilliant blue and full of mischief.

"Was she happy?" Kitarisa asked a little wistfully.

"Oh yes, if you mean was she happy with His Highness. They loved each other dearly. It was only later she became rather sorrowful. When their daughter was forced to marry your father, she became withdrawn. She worried constantly about her. Of course, when Princess Liestra died, she was very upset and heartbroken."

"It was good then that she never knew about my mother."

"How is that, Your Highness, if I may ask?" Davieta asked politely.

"My mother was never happy and yearned to come home to Riehl. Except for me, she was loved by no one."

"Then I am sorry, my lady, but they are together now in Verlian's Hall and I am sure they are happy."

Kitarisa smiled at Davieta's kind thought.

"Yes, I guess they are. Thank you, Davieta."

THEY WERE HEARD before they were seen--thousands of horses pounding over the Northern Pass making the ground tremble. From the outermost reaches of Riehl to the very gates of the Keep an endless column of proud Chalisets, swathed in their long furs, the scarred Siarsi eager for a fight and the Ponos from the far north--the outer corners of their eyes stained in red instead of black, giving them the terrifying appearance of being marked in blood--all streamed into the city.

The horde descended from the Adrex as their ancestors had done three hundred turns ago, sending a chill of terror throughout all of Riehl.

Banners representing each tribe and bright pennons for the sub-clans, fluttered from spears. Heavy saddle cloths held the deadly knives and the tasseled bridles, adorned with red and gold ornaments, bedecked their horses' heads. They flooded into Riehl, sweeping over the low outer wall turning the great meadows into a colorful, restless war camp.

In a matter of hours, the Talesians had settled into a routine of disciplined patrols sent out to guard the defensive walls and sentries were posted at the four heavy gates.

Stepping from the mass of bustling Talesians were two men, both clearly in command of the seething army. Splendid in furs and gleaming swords, the two strode across the inner courtyard toward the knot of people waiting to receive them.

Wary Riehlans bowed low to the Ter-Rey and to the other man they did not immediately recognize. He was as tall as Assur, his dark hair liberally shot with gray. His resemblance to Assur was startling, only instead of dark blue, his eyes were black as his eye-markings, full of mischief and reckless humor.

Kitarisa stood back and a little to one side, still wary of the barbaric invaders. Even within the few days she had not seen him, Assur had changed. She now saw him as he truly was--not the trained mercenary, but as a prince. He still wore the leather jerkin, dark trousers and fur, but there were now marked indications of his rank.

The plain silver neck collar had been replaced with one of gold, each linked plate enameled in black crowns. The hilts of his swords were now embossed in gold and break horn and from his left ear, dangled Verlian's Tear, a blood-red ruby that glinted like a drop of fire in the bright morning sun. There was no question as to who he was or of his authority.

Kitarisa touched the smooth pearl she wore, remembering the day he paid her bride-price and took

his Oath--and the night in his tent. She eased a step behind Mar'Kess hoping she would not be noticed. She did not want him to see her face, or the hot flame of embarrassment that touched her cheeks. As soon as the time allowed, she would release him from his Oath.

Lady Davieta nudged her, reminding her to curtsy.

De'Tai was all smiles and courtesy, even the sour-faced Sur'Mai looked pleased.

"My Lord Prince and Ter-Rey, we are deeply honored and pleased to welcome you to Riehl," De'Tai said. "And I must confess, relieved to see your legions."

"Your hospitality is greatly appreciated," Assur responded formally. He glanced at the assembled Riehlans, the council members, Mar'Kess, and finally his gaze rested on Kitarisa. "I pray Verlian we have brought enough."

The tall man at his side cleared his throat.

"Well, we even brought along the Ponos. They have grown lazy with their boats and fishing--it is time they earned their claim as sons of Ponosel." The tall man beamed at De'Tai. "The boy told me to bring everyone. So," he shrugged, "I brought everyone who could ride."

Kitarisa felt her cheeks go pink at his referral to Assur as 'the boy'.

"Did you leave anyone to watch the women and children?" Assur scowled him.

The warrior made a brief dismissive gesture with his hand. "I gave your sister a sword. If anyone is foolish enough to cross with her, they deserve what they get."

Arms across his chest, Assur looked away--his expression indicating his displeasure.

"And who is this?" the older man went on warmly. Seeing Kitarisa, he shouldered his way past Assur and the gaping De'Tai to take her hand. "A Daughter of Verlian, no doubt. Were you smart enough to pay her bride-price, boy? If you did not, I will."

His warm, dark eyes caressed Kitarisa causing her to look down.

"That is enough, Father," Assur said severely. "Before you seduce the lady, at least let me tell you who she is. This is the Princess Kitarisa Dar Baen of Gorendt. My lady, in case you have not guessed, this is my father, the Descendant Ter-Rey, D'Achadek Taksma Dar Daeamon."

Kitarisa made her curtsy. "I am honored, Your Highness. Welcome to Riehl. We are pleased and relieved that you are here."

The older Talesian prince grinned at her, his delight lighting up his entire face.

"I would fight a hundred marglims for such a woman. That dog, Kazan, will be cut to pieces for keeping such a beauty like you locked up for so long."

Both of them heard Assur making a growling noise in his throat. Achad leaned over and winked at her conspiratorially.

"He is a bore...my son...is he not?" His eyes gleamed wickedly at her.

In spite of herself, Kitarisa could not help but smile at Prince Achad's playful humor. "He has heavy responsibilities, my lord."

"Spoken like a true princess!"

Captain Mar'Kess and Councilor De'Tai had been observing and listening to Achad's banter, and they too smiled at him. The older prince's unabashed humor helped ease their apprehensions about having so many barbarians in their midst. He was obviously a favorite, as all of the Talesians within earshot were grinning and beaming at him affectionately.

"If you are finished?" Assur glared at his father.

Achad turned from her, still grinning, and met the captain and De'Tai. Both of them bowed deeply.

"Your Highness, you are most welcome," De'Tai said formally.

Mar'Kess bowed his head again. "My sword is yours, my lord, to fight marglims or whatever else comes your way."

"You and I will have glorious battles, eh, Mar'Kess?" Achad clamped a friendly hand on his shoulder. "And capture pretty women like this one." He nodded toward Kitarisa then spotted Lady Davieta and winked at her broadly. "Or this one. There will be so many, we will not know which of them to chose."

"Father, enough!" Assur barked.

"The trouble with you, Assur, is you have no sense of humor." Achad sounded as if he were trying to

reason with a small boy. "But, you need not worry. I will not try to take the lady away from you. I will fight you for her," he said gleefully.

Kitarisa never saw the blow coming--just a dark blur as Achad flew backward, landing heavily on the ground with a loud "oof" escaping his lips. Behind him, came the raucous laughter from the Talesians who had been watching the whole scene. Even Kitarisa had to cover her mouth to suppress a giggle.

Achad sat up, shaking his head and rubbing his jaw.

"Finally," he bellowed. "I was beginning to wonder how long it would take before you would lose that iron-willed temper of yours."

"Get up," Assur said sourly.

"You see, my lady," Achad said, getting up and shaking out the dust from his fur cloak, "Assur is too serious and he is jealous just like his mother was--Verlian keep her. Now he is worried he *will* have to fight for you. And do you know why?" His dark eyes danced with mischief.

"No." Kitarisa laughed impulsively at him.

"Because he will lose!"

Before any more damage could be done, Achad took her elbow and steered her away from his glowering son and the amused faces of Mar'Kess and De'Tai.

"Come. I would see this glorious Keep with a lovely lady at my side, before I am forced to fight this jealous Ter-Rey or traitorous Gorendtians!"

Achad did not have to fight Assur or anybody else. Everywhere he went, Achad gathered an amused following of Riehlans. He told outrageous jokes to the Council, bantered with warriors and flirted shamelessly with any woman foolish enough to get in his way.

He ate Riehlian food with gusto, sampled their wine, and when the evenings came, much to Assur's irritation, taught everyone lusty Talesian camp songs. Kitarisa had never heard so much laughter or seen so many happy people.

However, when it came to the discussions concerning Kazan and the White Sisters, Achad was absolutely serious. The amused light in his eyes flattened to the same kind of cold ruthlessness she had seen in Assur's. Even Brekk mentioned it to her.

"Prince Achad is the joy of Verlian Herself, but you must never cross him. He was not far from the truth when he joked about fighting the Ter-Rey."

"Oh?"

Brekk nodded. "Achad is the best sword in all Talesia. Do not let his humor, or his age, deceive you. He can best my Lord Assur in any three out of five matches."

"Brekk, why does not Achad still rule?"

"Talesian custom says that a Ter-Rey may step down, or become the Descendant Prince when he feels it time for a son to take his place. The custom came from making sure no ruler of the tribes became too old and feeble to lead them. My Lord Achad stepped away from his duties ten turns ago, leaving Assur to rule. There is no disgrace in this--he still commands great respect and even my lord seeks his advice. Assur will be the Ter-Rey until he decides he should step aside for his own son, the next Ascendant Prince."

"He has no wife, does he?" she asked cautiously.

"My Lord Assur? No. Not even a concubine. I will tell you in confidence, my lady, he has never found a way into a lady's heart. He has never fallen for the temptress or a lady's wiles--not like me," he said with a grin.

"Do you have a wife?"

"Me? Ha! Who would have this ugly face? Besides, I don't need a wife, but the Ter-Rey will need one, soon."

"For a son?"

"No. For himself."

FOR HOURS ASSUR sat behind a large blackwood table covered with maps, lists and entreaties while listening to the worries and complaints of the Council Circle of Riehl. They were frightened and

doubtful of any peaceful outcome with Gorendt.

"I would not alarm Your Highness," said Councilor Sur'Mai, with a penetrating voice, "but surely you must realize that Kazan wishes his son, Alor, to ascend the Falcon Throne and he will do this even if he must use force. Already, we have reports from the field of great numbers of Gorendtian soldiers amassing near the base of the Rift Cut. It will only be a matter of days before we receive a delegation from Kazan, demanding our surrender."

"Is it true, lord?" another added. "We cannot stand against such forces--and we are told he intends to bring warriors from Maretstan to fight with him. How can we hope to defeat an army such as that?"

Councilor Sur'Mai pressed on, determined not to lose Assur's attention in the matter.

"If they win, we will be governed by a self-indulgent, worthless boy who will merely be a tool for Kazan. Riehl will be in ruins; the people will revolt. For three hundred sunturns we have kept the peace, *your peace*. Now everything will be in chaos. It cannot be allowed to happen!"

"Kazan will not have Riehl while I rule the Eastern Lands. I know what Kazan wants and he will not have it, especially by force. You know that is why I have brought the legions here and you have been fortifying Riehl under Mar'Kess' direction. You will not die," Assur said irritably.

There was a general sigh of relief among the Council members, but the question of who should ascend the Riehlilian throne remained unanswered. De'Tai broached the subject with all his well-known tact and diplomacy.

"My lord, have you had time to consider who will ascend as rightful ruler?"

"The Princess Kitarisa is the legitimate heir. It is now for her to decide whether she will accept the throne."

The Council members shifted uncomfortably and again De'Tai spoke for all of them.

"We wish no disrespect to either you or the princess, my lord, but we have considerable reservations with having her as our ruler."

"What do you mean, De'Tai?" Assur asked sharply. "Why do you struggle over the obvious? You came to me not two moonturns ago, demanding I look into this and here I am with your heir."

Assur stood up, visibly weary and annoyed. "What do you want?" He nearly snapped at them.

"Lord, the Princess Kitarisa is assuredly an excellent lady, but she has had little experience in leading a people. These are desperate times. We need a ruler who will lead us with decisiveness and strength. The Princess has no knowledge of our situation, our needs and the complexities of Riehlilian law--"

"Who do you suggest?" Assur interjected.

Again, there was an uneasy shifting among the council members. None of them had any desire to bring down the wrath of the Ter-Rey--the ancient memory of Talesian brutality was as vivid with Riehlilians as with those in Gorendt.

Assur looked at the Council, growing increasingly disgusted. Until this moment, he had only the highest respect for this handful of men trying to hold together the vast structure of the Riehlilian government without the leadership of a ruler.

"Well?" Assur demanded.

"Your Highness," De'Tai went on, more hesitantly, "we have discussed this matter in considerable detail and we believe we have a possible solution--of course with your approval. We suggest that for the time being there be no prince in Riehl, but perhaps one of your high-ranking officers to serve as a military governor until our internal problems can be resolved. In this case, we would have the strong leader we need to direct our own warriors and an impersonal judge. The ultimate and difficult decisions of state would be, of course, deferred to you."

Assur sat down again, studying his uneasy subjects.

"If I may but add, Your Highness," Sur'Mai said quickly, "the princess would be most welcome to stay here in her ancestral home."

"You insult the memory of your late prince," he said coldly. "Surely any descendant of his line would be wanted over Kazan's worthless spawn. I am tempted to dismiss all of you, but the reasoning behind your request has merit."

"Perhaps if the princess chose to stay here and observe and learn our ways, then sometime in the

future..." De'Tai continued.

"You*might* consider her?" Assur finished for him. "An interesting concept--a council deciding*if* they want the leadership of the rightful ruler of their own land."

Abruptly he stood again, ending their discussions. "I will give it thought, but remember, the Princess Kitarisa is your rightful heir. She must be told of your suggestion and if she does not agree, then I am afraid you will simply have to suffer the indignities of being ruled by a woman!" he finished, now irritated by the whole matter.

Assur strode past the bowing council members and headed straight for the stable yard where he ordered Adzra to be saddled. He was weary of the discussions and papers and deeply upset by the Council's latest demand. How could he possibly tell Kitarisa, even if she had, in fact, renounced her right to Riehl?

As he swung on to Adzra's back, he happened to glance down at the firemark on his arm, no longer a symbol of a victory in battle, but again, a constant reminder of his oaths and duties.

For a moment he wished he could take a saddle knife and cut both the marks from his arms, forever eradicating his endless responsibilities. Assur recalled the searing pain when the iron was pressed into his flesh, irrevocably separating him from his boyhood and from everyone else. The burned marks reminded him of Kitarisa and the scars on her back--her terror, the unendurable pain and humiliation she had undergone.

Beautiful Kitarisa. He was only a hideous barbarian in her eyes, but he would change that, he vowed. Assur made a fist as if to seal his decision and kicked the warhorse into a pounding gallop--a gallop he did not let up until both he and the horse were staggering with fatigue.

## Chapter 15

FOR FIVE DAYS Riehl teemed with activity. Everywhere were the sounds of shouts and curses as warriors and citizens alike hurried to finish the fortification of the Keep and the city.

Daily, Nattuck rode out with a patrol to look for Gorendtian spies or to ride to the top of the Rift Cut to check upon the progress of Kazan's forces and with each day he brought back increasingly bad news. Kazan's combined army was as threatening as the Council had feared. Riehlions would be outnumbered nearly two to one by the time they entrenched at the Kor Breach.

Nattuck seethed for the fight and hounded all the Talesians to improve battle skills already honed to razor-sharp perfection, while Mar'Kess labored long and hard to bring the Riehlion forces back to their former readiness.

Assur and Achad poured over the maps, making last minute decisions where each Talesian should be placed on the Cut or at the Breach. Kazan's forces had numbers and the deadly cross-bows; the Talesians and Riehlions had high ground and the easily defensible opening at the Kor Breach. Kazan had more men, but he had sorely misjudged and forgotten the will and the ferocity of Talesian warriors.

Assur had no doubts as to the outcome--Kazan would be in chains and on his knees before him, begging for mercy. And Syunn? There was an ancient Chaliset punishment that involved the sun, water-soaked leather and a very sharp knife--Assur would make the rest of Malgora's trained pets watch.

By the sixth day Assur had to admit the possibility that both Kuurus and Courronus had been killed or taken prisoner. There had been no news, even Nattuck's patrols could not find a trace of them. If the marglims had killed them, their horses would have instinctively returned to the encampment.

At dusk, as the last scouting party returned to the keep, grim-faced and silent, he knew his old friend and the young Siarsi were lost. Assur silently offered a brief prayer to Verlian, blessing their memory and hoping the Goddess would Summon them quickly. Surely Kuurus and his young nephew would dine at Her side. There would be no tears for a Talesian warrior, no long grieving. Kuurus had died as he had wished--the brave death of a Siarsi. When Assur returned to Daeamon Keep, he would make certain the Holy Chanter and Wordkeeper said the proper words for Kuurus and burn sacred salt and grain in his memory. Kuurus needed no other tribute.

Assur dismissed the solemn patrol leader and headed for the Siarsi encampment. Kuurus had a large clan and a tribe of many friends. It would only be fitting that he should bring them the news of Kuurus' and Courronus' death. Knowing the Siarsi as he did, they would enshrine Kuurus' memory in a long litany of his bravery and his deeds, his battles and conquests. And then they would fight the Gorendtian army like demons.

IT WAS VERY LATE when Kitarisa heard someone knock at her door. She had dismissed Lady Davieta long ago, but still remained awake and restless. When she opened the door, she was surprised to see Del standing in the doorway, blushing and stammering.

"My lady, can you come quickly and bring your medicines?"

"Del? What is the matter?"

The shy Chaliset shuffled uncomfortably. "It is my Lord Assur. He is asking for you."

Alarmed, Kitarisa flung on the white brocaded robe and found her bag.

"Is he ill? What is the matter with him?"

Del looked embarrassed.

"It was a horse, my lady. While visiting the camp, one of the horses got excited and accidentally kicked him--in the side." He pointed to his own side, showing her where the injury had happened.

"He...he can't sleep."

"I am coming right now."

She followed Del down the darkened corridors until they came to Assur's apartments guarded by two burly Siarsi. They made no effort to stop her, but eyed the bag warily.

"It is the Princess Kitarisa," Del explained. "She has come to help the Ter-Rey."

They nodded and let her pass into his rooms.

Assur sat slumped in a chair before a blazing fire, his long legs thrust out before him. He was clad only in his small clothes, a shock to Kitarisa as his lack of clothing made him appear somehow more threatening. His head hung back, the long hair draped down behind the chair and his eyes were closed. In one hand he held a goblet of wine. Even in the soft light of the room, Kitarisa could make out the angry, purple swelling under his left arm.

"My lord?" Del asked tentatively. "Lady Kitarisa is here."

Assur raised his head, his eyes fluttered open. "I am glad you are here," he said thickly, pressing his arm against his side.

"Del says you were kicked."

"Yes. I should have known better, but I found myself caught in a kicking match between two ill-tempered brutes." He groaned softly and bent forward over his knees.

Kitarisa knelt down next to him.

"Let me see."

Gently she lifted his arm. He winced when she touched the bruise. She could easily make out the crescent shape where the hoof had struck him. Kitarisa carefully probed the tender flesh, loathing herself for hurting him.

"I don't think you have broken any bones, but you have definitely bruised some of them. Del, please find two towels, soak one of them in cold water and bring them to me."

The man nodded and disappeared to obey her.

From her bag she rummaged around till she found the small vial she wanted. She uncorked it and dropped three drops into his wine.

"Here drink this--it will ease the pain and make you sleep."

Assur drank more of the wine and leaned back into the chair, his face drawn with exhaustion and pain.

"You should be getting more rest, my lord. You are driving yourself too hard."

"A Ter-Rey gets no rest," he muttered. "Only responsibilities."

Kitarisa stood up and moved behind him. Timidly at first, she pushed his hair aside and began gently massaging his shoulders and neck, but became stronger when he dropped his head and groaned with contentment.

"I used to do this for Alea when she became tense and fearful."

"I am certain Alea did not appreciate it nearly as much as I do."

At that moment, Del reappeared with the towels in a large basin. Kitarisa set the basin on the floor near Assur's chair, then proceeded to tear up the towels into manageable sections and press them against the swollen bruise.

Assur watched her intently, obediently holding up his arm while she worked on him. She tried not to notice, but could feel his eyes on her.

"The pain eases already."

"Good. Now, help me, Del."

She made a poultice of her herbs in one of the towel sections, folded it into a compact square and pressed it to Assur's side. With Del's help, they bound strips of dry cloth around his chest to hold the poultice against the bruise.

Assur sagged back into the chair. "Leave us, Del."

"My lord?"

Assur waved a weary hand at him. "The lady will be completely safe. I can no more harm her virtue than fly. Go."

Del bowed and hastily left the room.

"He is a good man," Kitarisa said.

"Yes, but I do not want him around. The pain is better," he said again.

Still kneeling on the floor before him, she reached up and ran an experimental finger under the bandaging to make sure it was not too tight. Faster than she thought him capable, he caught her hand in his free one. Assur looked down at her, studying her with his predatory gaze. Very slowly he brought her hand to his lips and kissed her palm.

"Am I so hideous to you?" he asked, his speech becoming slightly slurred from the wine and the drug.

Kitarisa fought the urge to pull her hand free from his. She looked down too afraid to meet his gaze.

"No, you are not hideous too me, my lord, but you do frighten me sometimes."

"I would never hurt you, Kita'lara. You have been hurt too much. I wish I could change that."

"What's done is done," she said simply.

Kitarisa sat very still not daring to move. She could feel the warmth from his skin and was acutely conscious of his near-naked state. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the rise and fall of his chest and remembered the night in his tent when he had held her against him.

"How do I frighten you?" he asked, still holding on her hand.

"Well, you are so fast with those swords and--"

He laughed softly. "My lady, if you had carried around a sword since you were barely able to walk, you would be equally as skilled. I remember my mother telling me an old Chaliset saying: 'Go out and practice with your sword and do not come home until you have cut yourself at least once.'"

"She told you that?"

"In jest. Kitarisa, there is nothing remarkable about handling a sword--it is a skill, like riding. The only difference is, I am not afraid to use it. I am sorry if I have frightened you."

Assur let go of her hand and ran a gentle finger across her cheek. "Could you ever love a barbarian, Kita?"

She swallowed and fumbled with the edge of her robe. "I...I do not know."

He struggled to bend down to her and then with infinite care, caught up her face between his hands.

"You loved him, didn't you? Your Rhynn?"

Tears slipped down her cheeks, into his fingers. She nodded. "He was all I had," she whispered. "He was the only one who made me feel safe."

"Kita, I can make you feel safe. Please, let me."

The tender grip on her hands tightened until she was forced to look up at him, into a face more handsome than she had ever realized. Assur's ardent gaze held her in a way Rhynn would never have dared.

"Kita..."

At the first touch of his mouth on hers, she went rigid and instinctively tried to pull away from him, but his hands tightened, forcing her to endure his kiss. A frightening array of emotions shot through her: desire and fear, long-forgotten passion and complete helplessness. Kitarisa fought the urge to reach up and pull him closer to her, to feel what it was like to be held in his arms again. The sweet memory of Rhynn faded deeper into her past as she found herself wanting more of Assur's touch, more of his soft kisses.

Abruptly, he let her go and sat up. He passed a tired hand over the slim line of his beard and then looked away from her. Regret and sadness flickered across his face. The wine had taken complete effect and she could see he was having trouble focusing.

"I am sorry. Forgive me. Kitarisa, help me get to the bed, I cannot stay awake."

With her help, he stood, draping one arm around her slim shoulders. She did not realize how exhausted he was until she felt him lean nearly his entire weight against her. Assur sagged into the bed, his eyes already closed.

"Thank you," he breathed softly. "My Kita'lara. Beautiful Kita'lara." He was asleep.

Kitarisa watched him sleep for a moment. She reached down and touched one of the eye markings, covering it with a light fingertip and saw only the face of a tired man, not a frightening barbarian.

"Goodnight Assur."

And then, bravely, she leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek, her lips just brushing the edge of his beard. She couldn't be certain, but she thought she saw the barest trace of a smile pull at his fine mouth, as if he dreamed she was returning his kiss.

Kitarisa gathered her things and left, before Del or the guards could speak to her or see her tears and trembling hands.

ASSUR DROPPED TO his knees and then back on his heels, placing both swords, tips crossed, onto the tiled floor before him. Behind him in orderly rows, knelt his favored command warriors, swords crossed before them, heads bowed in submission to the sacred Goddess. The hall of the Falcon Throne served well as a place to ask for the Goddess' Summons on this night before they battled the armies of Gorenndt and Maretstan.

Assur's plain jerkin had been replaced with armor fashioned into overlapping metal scales, riveted over leather covering him from neck to thigh--and armguards studded in steel, buckled from the backs of his hands to the elbows. A black woolenshirka lay across his shoulders that would later be wound around his head, covering his mouth and nose to protect his face from the cold, but also so that the enemy would only be able to see his eyes.

Assur placed his palms down flat next to him and bowed his head. He prayed for Verlian to give him strength and courage to defeat the traitorous Kazan and his legions. He did not allow vengeance or rage to disturb his calmness. When the sun arose he would strike Kazan with cold accuracy and show no mercy.

The war drums beat their solemn calling to all the kneeling Talesians, both in the hall and out on the fields surrounding the Keep of Riehl. Every one of them would ask to be Summoned to the Goddess--to die in battle would certainly guarantee them a place by Verlian.

The sacred ritual was marred only by the absence of Kuurus. Behind him, Assur could feel Nattuck seething with impatience. Their long ritual taxed the Siarsi's disciplined training to the limit. Nattuck had taken a personal vow of vengeance toward the Wrathmen and had spent all night sharpening and re-sharpening his saddle knives and swords.

Next to Nattuck, Assur sensed Mar'Kess shifting on his knees. He had asked the brave captain to join them for he could think of no one better than the loyal Mar'Kess to join them in their supplications to Verlian.

Mar'Kess now wore a surcoat of blue and white, the Riehlilian colors, with the copper-colored design of the falcon emblazoned across his chest. He knelt like the others with his sword across his knees in Riehlilian fashion.

Achad knelt just off to Assur's right, the picture of Talesian resolve and dignity. No humor danced in his dark eyes. Achad had taken Kuurus' death with stoic silence and grim resolve. Both he and the Siarsi

had been close since boyhood.

Assur closed his eyes and listened to the pounding drums, a sound forcing him to account for the reasons of this battle: Kazan's traitorous attack on Riehl, the conspiracy with the White Sisters, Kuurus' death and for Kitarisa's humiliation.

There had been little time to see her or to talk to her since he had arrived in Riehl, and since the women and Riehlans were not allowed into the hall for the Ritual of Summons, he hoped Kitarisa would be among those waiting outside the massive bronze doors when he ended the vigil and left the hall. There was always the possibility he would not return from the battle.

When the last drumbeat faded away, Assur stood, turned and faced his commanders. He slipped the gold-hilted swords into the scabbards on his back--a movement quickly followed by his kneeling men.

"The drums tell us it is near first light. Go to your horses. May Verlian keep your arm steady and your eye true."

With a rattle of armor, the assembled commanders rose to their feet.

"E Tah Ter-Rey! E Tah Ter-Rey!" they chanted, as Assur quickly strode from the great hall, with Mar'Kess, Nattuck, and Achad close at his heels.

"E Tah Se Verlian!" *We are called by the Ter-Rey! We are called by the Divine Verlian!*

The inner courtyard overflowed with taut warriors and their nervous horses, stamping and blowing in the pre-dawn cold. The light from the torches cast eerie flickering shadows over the men and animals. Assur looked among the gathered handful of women and the anxious-faced councilmen, trying to locate Kitarisa.

De'Tai stepped forward and bowed.

"May Verlian keep you, my lord," he said quietly.

"May She keep us all, De'Tai." Assur leaned forward so that no one else would hear him. "Where is the Lady Kitarisa?"

"I do not know, Great Lord."

"Does she know we are to leave now?"

"I believe she does. Hopefully..." The councilman stopped as Assur looked past his shoulder to the entrance door. In the doorway he spotted Kitarisa's slight form standing next to Lady Davieta.

Assur brushed past the solemn-faced De'Tai and strode up to her. With one short nod of his head, he dismissed Davieta who dropped a hasty curtsy before slipping away.

"Kitarisa, I was afraid you would not be here."

"I have been attending to one of the ladies," she answered, her eyes cool again and distant, as if she were trying to hold back her true feelings. "I am sorry if I am late."

Assur nodded. "We leave now. We have prayed to the Goddess-- our fate is Her will."

"Then I will pray She protects you." Sudden tears pooled in her eyes as she looked up at him. He saw her struggle to say something and then bit her lower lip to keep from saying it.

Gingerly, she placed her hand on one of his studded armguards. "Please return safely." She looked away from him, trying to control herself. "I...I could not bear to lose another...If you were to die...I--"

Kitarisa suddenly pressed her cheek against the plates of his armor, weeping softly. Assur gathered her close and kissed the top of her head.

"I will come back, Kita. I promise."

She nodded and then pulled back from him. Overcome with embarrassment, she touched her face to blot away the tears, then looked around frantically, hoping no one had seen her.

Assur had deliberately positioned his body between her and the doorway, blocking anyone who might be bold enough to look at them. "You will be safe here."

Kitarisa nodded again. "I know."

Again, she stepped up to him and lifted herself up on her toes, her hands grasped at the edges of his *shirka*. As light as the brush of a bird's wing, she touched her lips to his--a startling, sweet kiss.

"I will wait for you," she whispered. Kitarisa let go of him and whirled away, fleeing back into the interior of the Keep.

Assur watched her disappear, utterly astonished. Almost reflexively, he touched his mouth where she

had planted her warm kiss.

*I will wait for you.*

## Chapter 16

KAZAN'S WAR camp settled into respectful silence for the Reverend `Fa and her retinue. After the mid of the night, orders demanded complete silence--no gambling, fighting or drinking--and if any warrior was foolish enough to bring a woman into the camp, he learned quickly to make sure she was sent on her way long before the strictly-held curfew went into effect.

The Reverend `Fa's great tent had been set to one side of the camp, on elevated ground. Wrathmen posted themselves on all sides of the tent, keeping a sizable space between their mistress and Kazan's army. Wary-eyed warriors were only too glad to keep their distance.

Kazan's own tent had been set not far from the Holy Sister's--he too, keeping his distance from her glacial stare.

An uneasy peace reigned throughout the camp--Kazan's troops staying well away from the hated Wrathmen and Malgora. There were mutterings around the campfires. What did they have to do with the Leashed Ones? Lead Captains and Duty Officers fretted under the strain of keeping the angry rumblings to a minimum, while they were told nothing as to the reason for the `Fa's presence in the camp. Only Kazan's most trusted First Commanders were given any information and they were constrained to silence. The Reverend `Fa would remain in the camp for as long as she wished--there were to be no questions asked and no interference into the plans at hand.

Below the two tents, the army had divided themselves into two distinct camps: the hard, grim-faced Gorendtians on one side and the colorful Maretstanis on the other. Disgruntled Gorendtian warriors watched their visiting counterparts with ill-concealed disgust.

Even the lowliest Maretstani foot soldier wore armor of polished enamel, inlaid with copper or brass wire set in fantastic designs--some in the design of their particular clan. The high ranking officers were resplendent in their brilliant-colored armor--scarlet, azure, emerald green and radiant yellows. Dyed plumes of stiffened horsehair sprouted from their helmets--and even the helmets had been inlaid with designs of silver and brass.

Minor scuffles had already broken out between the two forces--and one out and out fight between a scarred, old Gorendtian and a well-muscled young Maretstani had to be stopped by angry Lead Captains.

The bitter rancor between the supposed allies had not lessened by the time spent near each other. Gorendtian anger flared with each flaunting of the Maretstanis' superior weapons and gorgeous accouterments. Most of the old campaigners, having given long, faithful service to Kazan, kept discipline and suppressed their rage, but the younger ones could not contain their resentment. And why should they? The Maretstanis had arrived in Gorendt after traveling upriver on barges, draped in bright-colored canopies to protect them from the sun. Their officers had dined on wine, succulent fruits and the rare flavored ices--the ice having been brought by fleet-footed runners from the heights of the southern Adrex.

The foot-warriors slept in neat barracks below deck on comfortable pallets--even their horses traveled in specially built barges with row upon row of sturdy, clean stalls, tended to by stable slaves.

Maretstani weapons, particularly their crossbows, long envied for their accuracy as well as their beauty, had not been spared the artisan's touch. The stocks were richly decorated with inlays of brass and silver, rare corals and ivories.

For all their fine weapons and armor, it was quickly discovered they were not the preening weaklings the Gorendtian warriors thought them to be. They were skilled with both bow and spear; their horsemanship could not be faulted and it was painfully obvious they were as equally skilled with the sword. The proud, hot-tempered Maretstanis were also quick with their fists and did not ignore the smallest slight.

Rumors about Captain Mar'Kess and Princess Kitarisa flew around the camp. There was even talk that the princess had fled with Mar'Kess to the west to ask protection from the Ter-Rey himself. It did

not bode well with any of Kazan's men that Mar'Kess was not with them. He was well-liked and respected for his evenhandedness, particularly in the dealings between warriors. He, of all Kazan's officers would have understood their resentment and he would have discovered why they must fight for a witch and her leashed dogs.

IN KAZAN'S TENT, Field Commander Borosa of the Maretstani, fought to control his rising temper. He disliked having to argue with Kazan, particularly over war strategies and especially in front of Kazan's son, Alor. The boy was as worthless as Borosa had feared--a self-indulgent young man with pale hair and a wispy moustache, emphasizing his sulky, girlish mouth and petulant expression.

Alor lounged lazily in one of the few camp chairs, listening to them argue. His slightly protruding eyes revealed only boredom, but Borosa was not fooled. The world-weary expression did not conceal what he knew lay beneath: greed and an unbridled hunger for power. Alor would never sully his pretty hands with the dirtiness of battle, but he would gladly take the power offered to him once their fight with the Riehlans was won.

Borosa had not been impressed with Alea either. The princess was the feminine duplicate of Alor--vain and selfish, given to fanciful airs. She flirted shamelessly with his Field Captains, teasing them like a common whore.

Borosa had been disgusted with the whole scheme, but had dutifully obeyed the wishes of his own Prince Dahka. The marriage between Alor and his daughter, the Princess Dahsmahl, would suit their purposes perfectly. A Maretstani on the Falcon Throne would take control of the rich trade with Riehl. When Kazan died, Alea would have Gorendt, together with a Maretstani husband at her side. The eastern provinces, from the icy wastes of the Qualani, south to the Sea of the Volt, would be in their grip.

Borosa had sworn his oaths and bonds to Dahka; he knew his duty, but he could not suppress the nagging feeling that this war was doomed. His oaths and bonds had not only been given to Dahka, but given through his lord by proxy to the Ter-Rey.

This whole scheme stank of treason. Every time Borosa glanced west to the looming wall of the Adrex, he recalled his old Field Commander's warning: "Never, *never* underestimate the power of the Ter-Rey or his will to use it. He has been silent for too long; one day we will feel his presence...and his wrath."

It had given Borosa a grim sort of satisfaction watching the Princess Dahsmahl. Diplomatic courtesy could not completely conceal her disgust of Alor, and she would certainly never offer any sisterly affections for Alea. Her bows were just short of being considered contemptuous; her usually warm gaze became cold and detached. She, too, knew her duty. Dahsmahl would yield to the wishes of her father and to those of Kazan, but she would not break. There was Siarsi steel in her backbone--hard, unforgiving steel.

Commander Borosa turned his attentions to the map spread before him and Kazan. Irritably, he unhooked the chin strap of his helmet and pulled it off, tucking it into the crook of his arm.

"Why do you wait, Your Highness? We must strike now if we are to take Riehl. The longer we wait, the greater we risk fighting in the snows. And, we waste time--time for the Riehlans to arm and position themselves at a superior advantage."

He pointed to the great escarpment rising above the valley floor: the Rift Cut. It jutted eastward toward the Soldrat Mountains forming the narrow pass through which the Sherehn River flowed. It was a natural stopgap, a bottleneck that was easily defended from any encroaching army coming from the south.

"Are your warriors afraid of a little cold?" Kazan asked, his voice heavy with contempt. "It would seem the warm climate of Maretstan has made your men soft."

Borosa glanced at his Field Captain Abalt. The young officer's face remained unmoved, but the stiff horsehair crest on his helmet trembled at the insult. Borosa drew in a deep breath to contain his anger.

"Need I remind Your Highness that almost all the provisions stored in Sherehn Keep have been destroyed, burned. Your own couriers have confirmed this. How will the horses survive? My men can live on half rations for as long as any Gorendtian warrior, but we cannot waste time or energy digging for

grass in five feet of snow."

"I am fully aware of the conditions at hand, Borosa," Kazan snapped. "We will strike at the appropriate time, when the Holy Sister has given the command."

The Holy Sister! Borosa nearly spat his contempt. By Verlian's blood and blade, what had the world sunk to...taking their orders from a filthy witch!

"Perhaps," Alor drawled lazily from behind them, "we should approach the Reverend `Fa and point out the difficulties?"

"Be quiet, Alor. The Reverend `Fa is quite aware of the situation." Kazan gaze scanned the faces of Borosa and the other officers crowded into the tent. "We will have Riehl before the snow comes. They have no army to withstand us. The walls of Riehl Keep will fall in a day."

Kazan absently jerked at the open edge of his surcoat. "Now get out of here and make your men ready. I suggest you fill your bellies and those of your horses. Riehl is another five day's ride."

The Maretstani Field Commander gave a curt bow to Kazan and slammed his helmet back on to his head. The others followed his lead, making their own stiff bows and marching out of the stifling tent.

"WELL, THAT WENT rather well, didn't it?" Alor said, getting up from his chair and moving next to Kazan to study the map laid out before them.

"However, Borosa is right, Father. How *will* we survive without those spare stores you so cleverly hid--the supplies that lie in ashes beneath Sherehn's ruins? I would be willing to wager the virtue of my prospective bride that our barbarian guests had a hand in it. My, my, what will our High Prince think? Treason, right under his nose?"

"Silence Alor!" Kazan spun on Alor and grabbed a handful of dark green leather under the boy's chin, nearly jerking him off his feet. "All that has been set into motion has been done for your sake, you ungrateful pup. Riehl is nearly in our hands."

He thrust Alor away and turned back to the table, hunching his heavy bulk over the map. "As for the Ter-Rey, it is his folly he has not watched over his eastern provinces. For too long we have labored under the threat of another Talesian attack. While the High Prince squanders his time, we will take back what is ours!"

"Riehl has never been ours, Father," Alor observed, adjusting his jerkin more comfortably over his shoulders. "And I think the High Prince, in fact all of them, have been most generous with us. Both Riehl and Gorendt and all of the tribes for that matter, have been left in peace. The only thing that has been demanded of us is fealty and obedience-- and I cannot recall any Ter-Rey that has found it necessary to question our obedience."

"Politics do not suit you, Alor. Your duty is to marry the Maretstani girl and get an heir--a duty I am sure you will enjoy fulfilling." Kazan rolled up the battle map and stuffed it into the chest behind the table.

"You are wrong, Father," Alor went on coolly. "The Princess Dahsmahl has made it quite clear to me, she will not tolerate my attentions beyond our joyous wedding night. It does not appear you will get your heir, unless Dahsmahl and I are very, very lucky." He leaned forward so that Kazan would not miss the amused look in his eyes. "It is a fortunate, I think, because she does not interest me either Father. She is cold and aloof; I like my women to be willing."

"You mean, you prefer the company of whores," Kazan said, grinding his teeth with frustration. He pointed a thick forefinger at Alor's sullen face. "You will get an heir off Dahsmahl--you will keep trying until she conceives, even if you have to tie the bitch down!"

Alor's brows shot upward in surprise. "Such coarseness does not suit a prince of the Dominion. I will marry the girl and do my conjugal duty, but after that..." He shrugged, noncommittal. "One thing at a time, Father. First, we conquer Riehl, then get an heir. Of course, there are many ways to be rid of unwanted and uncooperative wives." Alor paused, watching the full meaning of his words register on Kazan's brutish face.

Alor was expert at baiting Kazan. It was the one weapon he learned as a boy that made things even between the two of them.

Kazan went purple and swung a meaty fist at him. Alor ducked neatly and stepped into the open tent

flap.

A sneer twisted his lips. "I will leave politics to you, Father, you leave my marital duties to me." He slipped out of the tent and hastened to his own. It would take a full two days before Kazan cooled off over that one. However, Alor knew his father well. Heirs did not really interest him. Riehl did. Kazan had killed his wife and banished a daughter to get it. Alor smiled to himself. And there were also many ways to be rid of annoying brutes like Kazan.

IT WAS VERY LATE when Kazan entered Malgora's tent. For all its spacious size it was simply furnished: glowing braziers stood atop tall tripods of plainly-wrought iron; there were only three folding chairs set upon the thick carpet and a small table placed in the middle that bore her personal items. To his left, red silk draperies divided off the main part of the tent from her sleeping area--blood red silks, so red they reminded him of a warrior's death shroud.

Her retinue was comparatively small, only a handful of silent-footed girls attended to her. Twenty Wrathmen guarded her tent--the twelve males slaves, their heads shaven and tongues having been removed, bore her personal litter.

Behind the tent, two swaying pack breaks carried her belongings and the tent.

Unlike their more docile bovine cousins, breaks were nearly as tall as horses and moved just as quickly. They could travel over the roughest of terrains and live on the poorest vegetation. The wandering Oduns used them for everything: their long reddish or black hair could be woven into clothing and tents, their bones and sinews for tools, their hides for leather goods. Their long, mottled-colored horns that thrust upward and forward over their eyes, were prized by artisans.

It took a moment for Kazan's eyes to adjust to the low light in the tent and to the shock of what stood to his right. A crude wooden frame had been erected inside Malgora's tent and from it, suspended by wrists, hung the battered form of Kuurus. Blood ran from his nose; both eyes were swollen shut and the mark of the liet'fa could be clearly seen on his neck.

Malgora sat before her small table writing into a leather bound book, unperturbed by the bleeding Siarsi.

"Do come in, Kazan," she ordered crisply, closing her book. "As you can see, my faithful have caught a rare prize." She stood and moved over to Kuurus. "However, they were a bit rough with him. He has told us nothing, as I knew he would. They are tough, these Scarred Ones."

She lifted Kuurus' chin so Kazan could see the still-defiant look in his swollen, patterned eyes.

"Their will, their strength, almost surges through them. Do you realize how much *power* can be taken from one of them? It is almost incomprehensible."

Kazan swallowed and shook his head. "No, Reverend One," he mumbled.

Malgora let go of Kuurus' head and returned to her table. "I brought you here to see for yourself the full importance of our work. *This* Talesian is going to bring us his leader--his brave and extremely powerful leader. Do you know who he is, Kazan?"

Kazan did not like guessing games and made a slightly disparaging movement with his hand. "A barbarian, Holy Sister. A mercenary, like this one."

Malgora smiled faintly, pressing her thin pale mouth into a tight line. From a box on the table she removed a knife, a Talesian saddle knife--its deadly blade catching the warm light from the braziers.

"Do know what this is?" She held out the knife to him.

"It is a Talesian saddle knife--they all carry them. Five, I believe."

"Correct. But this is a special saddle knife, Kazan. Extremely special. It does not belong to our fierce Siarsi, here." She nodded toward Kuurus. "It belongs to his leader, his master. You recall the curious little ritual when he came to pay bride-price for Kitarisa?"

"Yes."

"Look at it Kazan. It is a beautiful weapon. So balanced and accurate." She handed him the knife and Kazan turned it over in his rough hands.

"You will notice the mark stamped into the blade--once a clan mark and now the mark of a very powerful house."

Kazan felt his bowels turn to water as he examined the mark: a rose and sword encircled by a crown.

"The Ter-Rey," he whispered, stunned.

She smiled triumphantly at him. "Exactly so. Your barbarian guest was none other than our High Prince. What an honor, Kazan, to have your daughter bound to D'Assuriel. A triumph for House Dar Baen, don't you think? But of course, she has renounced her rights."

Kazan suddenly felt ill; he nearly dropped the knife. Alor was right. That arrogant, lying barbarian now knew everything! It had to have been he who burned the stored up weapons and supplies. Kazan now dreaded the forthcoming battle. For a moment, he almost made the decision to withdraw his army and send Borosa back to Maretstan.

The High Prince would cut him down like ripe wheat.

Malgora smiled again at Kazan's obvious terror.

"We are lost," Kazan breathed, setting the knife back down on her table.

"No! Now listen to me, Kazan. There are only seven of them on this side of the Adrex--actually six. The youngest one, the boy, got away, but it will take him days to reach Riehl Keep and it will take even longer for Assur to gather an army from the west and return. There is plenty of time for us. You must strike Riehl now."

"In the meantime, I will take the Siarsi to the Catacombs. My faithful are on their trail, Kazan. They cannot hide for long. Once I have Assur, then all will be ours. I promise you."

"What will you do to him, the Ter-Rey?" Kazan heard himself ask her.

Her pale eyes seemed to shine with their own kind of secret ecstasy--a madness. Kazan shivered.

"He is the key, Kazan. Once he yields to Medruth, then both sides of the Adrex will be in our hands."

She picked up the saddle knife and returned to Kuurus' hanging body. Gently she poked the tip into Kuurus' throat and he jerked his head up, reflexively.

"We do not want to break him here. That would be a waste. But he will tell us how to lure our High Prince to us," she finished grimly.

She coiled her other hand through the long shank of his hair and jerked his head back. "Shall we cut his hair, Kazan? Did you know, when a Talesian dies he may not enter their goddess' sacred hall if his hair has been cut? Their hair is their pride, isn't it Siarsi?" She shifted the knife to the braids dangling from his temples.

"They fear nothing. I could mutilate him here and now and he would not make a sound, but to cut any of this glorious hair would bring him eternal shame."

Kuurus managed to look into Malgora's ice-colored eyes with enough defiance to enrage her. Roughly, she let go of his hair.

"For as many hairs there are on your head, that will be the number of times I will call for the Affliction to take your arrogance and your strength! You will be crushed, barbarian, as easily as the shell of an egg."

Malgora turned on Kazan, her eyes beginning to turn to their deadly blackness.

"Go! Call your army. You ride tomorrow!" She made a fist and brought it down on the table, making everything on it jump.

"Crush Riehl!"

## Chapter 17

FROM THE ONSET of the battle, it became clear to both sides that victory was not going to be easy. Borosa's archers hammered at them with the deadly crossbows, shearing down row after row of Talesians. But as in the past, the barbarian warriors once again showed the same might and sheer ferocity their ancestors had displayed.

Guiding their horses with only their knees, both swords overhead, the Talesians smashed into Kazan's lines again and again, demolishing everything in their path.

From atop the Rift Cut, Riehlilian warriors rained down a deluge of arrows from their longbows--not as accurate as the crossbows, but nonetheless, equally as deadly. Riehlilian long shafts pierced the fine

Maretstani armor, pinning them into the ground like meat on a spit.

As the day waned, Kazan withdrew to lick his wounds and recoup his losses. Assur ordered his own to stand their ground and wait. They still held the Kor Breach and the Rift Cut--and as the old woman had said, the Sherehn River ran bloody red.

KAZAN DID NOT wait to be invited into Malgora's tent. He did not bother himself with such niceties, not when eight thousand warriors lay dead or dying along the banks of the river. The battle was just short of a debacle for him and for Maretstan. And the Kor Breach was still held in Riehlilian hands. Prince Assur's hands, he corrected himself.

He cursed himself for listening to that foul woman and her schemes and damned her for placing him at the mercy of the Ter-Rey himself. The barbarian presence had been a terrible surprise. Mar'Kess had undoubtedly told him everything, as did Kitarisa. When this battle was over--*if* he lived through it, Kazan would wring that girl's miserable neck.

He tore open the flap and stormed into Malgora's tent, heedless of his filthy boots and blood-stained surcoat. The Holy Sister knelt on a red cushion, head bowed, one palm placed over the other, hands opposite each other, with the fingertips touching the other wrist.

"Crush Riehl!" he sneered mockingly. With short, angry movements, he pulled off his gauntlets and flung them onto the carpet. "Woman, the barbarian is grinding us to chaff. Over eight thousand are dead or dying out there. Borosa, and what's left of his lead command, are near mutiny and even my own men are close to rebellion. So much for our surprise. Ha! The surprise is on us!"

Malgora's eyes flew open. "How badly do you want Riehl?" She turned her cold gaze on Kazan.

Kazan did not flinch. "Badly, but not if it means seeing every last man fall to Talesian swords. I am not the complete fool you take me for, Holy Sister. I still must answer to Dahka. He will be most displeased when he learns that thousands of his finest have fallen to the High Prince and not to inept Riehlilians!"

"Silence! I am aware of all of this." Malgora rose from her kneeling position and smoothed the heavy white silk of her skirts. "Assur has surprised us, but he has not defeated us."

"There is another surprise--the Descendant Ter-Rey, D'Achadek is here, too."

A look of genuine astonishment flickered across Malgora's pale features. "The *elder* Ter-Rey," she breathed softly. "That is indeed a surprise. Two of the world's most powerful men, here within our grasp...it is too...pleasing." She smiled at Kazan. "It appears we have badly misjudged our noble prince. He is far more clever than we could have imagined and will make our cause all the more worthwhile."

Malgora's pale-colored eyes narrowed to slits. Her voice became almost dreamy as she contemplated her prize. "He will restore what is ours. He will kneel to the Divine Medruth and beg to be returned to her fold. He will ask forgiveness and he will forsake that *other*. And when he has given all to her, when he is empty of his will, then Medruth's own prophecy will be fulfilled. Her sanctuaries and sacred houses shall be rebuilt and all will bow to her and shall forsake the Usurper."

Kazan's head jerked up--anger mixed with disbelief upon the realization of her cruel betrayal.

"It was *you* who informed him. *You!* You wanted him to come here and bring his armies; it was you who told him to return Alea and Kitarisa...*You...*!"

"That is incorrect, Kazan," she said smoothly. "I did not tell him at all. Let us say, I merely planted the seed, the Riehlilian Council did the rest. And as for the prince's armies...?" She shrugged. "How was anyone to know he would be that shrewd? He must have kept them someplace in the Adrex, not far from his warning signal. An amazing feat, don't you think--an entire army of noisy Talesians, kept hidden for so long?"

"The only amazing feat will be our surviving this calamity. Unlike you, I do not relish tomorrow. I still must convince my men and Borosa's to attack the armies of the Ter-Rey!"

"There is a way, Kazan," she said, holding up one hand for him to stop. "A way to save everything and still achieve our victory."

"And what is that? Surrender?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yes."

Kazan blinked at her, stupidly.

Malgora moved to the small table set in the middle of her tent and picked up Assur's saddle knife. She ran her fingertips down the spine of the gleaming blade, almost lovingly.

"Because, dear Kazan, we too, have a little surprise."

She looked up at him, the triumph back into her colorless eyes. "Tomorrow we shall free the Siarsi prisoner. Assur's most favored and most loyal subject will be returned to him. The perfect emissary."

"Holy Sister, I don't understand..."

"You will leave the arrangements to me. You will simply do as you are told. Tomorrow you shall have what you want as assuredly as I shall have mine!"

THE HORSES' HOOVES made a clattering sound on the hardening ground and thick white clouds streamed from their nostrils with each labored stride. All of the riders were wrapped in winter cloaks to protect them from the sharp cold. Even Assur had to yield to the on-coming winter and had swathed himself in his heaviest fur of black breck and meerfox. The *shirka* cloth had been wound around his throat and crossed over the mouth and nose, the effect only adding to his already sinister looks.

He was not exactly sure why he had insisted on seeing this through himself. It was too cold. He tugged the wool higher over his nose to keep from breathing in the raw air.

Assur signaled for them to slow to a fast walk so the horses could catch their breath. He pressed his elbow to his side, trying to ease some of the throbbing caused by the jarring ride. The ribs were still tender where the horse had kicked him even though Kitarisa's ministrations had eased the pain considerably. A red crescent-shaped mark under his left arm clearly outlined where the hoof had struck him, but the angry purplish-black swelling was gone.

Assur wished he had sent Achad on this errand--even Mar'Kess had warned him of traps. They all rode quietly--he, Mar'Kess and an able guard of Riehlians, but Assur could not help but feel they were being watched. If it hadn't been for the knife, he would have sent someone else.

The Gorendtian courier had arrived in their camp at dawn.

The saddle knife, the one Assur had given to Kitarisa, had been handed to him by a quaking Gorendtian youth sent by Kazan.

An escort of Ponos, eyes marked in bloody red, brought the frightened boy directly to Assur's field tent, where he prostrated himself to the ground, offering up the saddle knife as a kind of currency for his life. The last time Assur had seen the knife he had taken it from the hands of Lady Falla, who had also used it as a talisman to authenticate her plea for Kitarisa's life.

"Great Lord," the courier stammered. "I bring you greetings from my Lord Kazan and a message from the one you call Kuurus."

Assur's eyes narrowed, immediately suspicious. "Kuurus has a message for me? How is this possible?"

Mar'Kess leaned over to him. "It is a trick, my lord."

Assur nodded and waved his hand for Mar'Kess to be silent.

"Kuurus is dead and Summoned. Tell me how Kazan came by this knife? And I warn you--you are speaking to your Ter-Rey. I have no tolerance for lying."

The boy gulped, eyeing the sword hilts rising from Assur's back. "Great Lord, Prince Kazan sends his greetings and the knife as a token of his sincerity. I do not know how he came by the knife--that is the truth, by Verlian's blood!"

"Go on."

"My Lord Kazan wishes to convey his offer for peace between Your Highness and Gorendt. He wishes to discuss your terms for surrender."

Assur frowned. "Kazan offers to sue for peace after *only* one day of battle?"

"He asks to meet with you tomorrow. He will return your warrior, the one called Kuurus, at daybreak. You will meet him at the village of the split tree, Broken Oak. There, he will inform you of the meeting place."

"It is a trap, my lord," Nattuck muttered angrily. "A trick to expose you! Do not accept his offer."

"What is the message from Kuurus?" he asked, unperturbed by Nattuck's seething.

The young courier glanced nervously from one Talesian to the next, genuinely afraid for his life. He

swallowed hard again.

"The message is for you Great Lord. It is, '*riddagh'mar*'."

The boy's pronunciation of the ancient Talesian word was deplorable, but clear enough to be understood. Assur frowned again. Riddagh'mar, taken out of any context was difficult to translate. It had several nuances to its meaning. It meant 'truthsaying', or 'truthfulness', but in some forms it could mean "the truth to be told or revealed." Why Kuurus' chose such a word was disturbing and unclear. Only a Talesian could have selected such a word, but in doing so, invited a host of speculation. Kuurus could have been hinting that the truth of the battle would be revealed, or that the courier himself was being honest. Or that Kazan was being truthful in his desire for peace. Assur's greatest concern was that the word meant the truth of Kuurus' fate would be now known, as he was certain the Reverend `Fa had knowledge of their ancient language and all of its meanings. It still had the reek of a trap.

Assur leaned forward so the courier would not misunderstand a single word he said.

"You will return to Kazan. Tell him I will accept his offer for peace. His legions will lay down their weapons and he, Kazan, will be at that tree, along with Kuurus. No warriors are to accompany him to the tree, except for Kuurus. And, Kazan will come unarmed. Is that clear, boy?" he said sternly. Assur signaled for him to rise.

The courier nodded and rose to his feet, bowed and hurried away to his horse and the rest of his escort.

He knew Kazan would readily accept the terms, but Mar'Kess and the others remained wary.

Assur was no fool and had heeded their advice. He took a full complement of warriors, heavily armed and alert to the slightest danger.

He glanced up at the dull, iron-gray sky. It would soon snow and he wanted this tiresome business to be over with as soon as possible.

As they approached the great, twisted tree, every nerve in Assur's body sang with warnings. Slowly he drew the hand sword from his back. To his surprise, he saw Kuurus alone, mounted on an unknown horse, waiting for him under the great oak. A broad smile broke over Kuurus' scarred features as he swung down from his horse to greet him.

"My Lord Assur!

His smile was too broad, even for Kuurus, and Assur did not lower his sword.

"You are unharmed Kuurus? What have they done to you?"

"I have been treated well," Kuurus answered, taking a step forward. It was then Assur saw the strained look in his eyes and the paleness of his skin--the same sickly whiteness he had seen the day Kuurus ingested the marglim blood.

"Where is Courronus?" he demanded, still not lowering his sword.

"He is well and awaiting his own release when this treaty is completed.

"And Kazan?"

"Kazan comes, my lord. He--"

Assur was certain he heard Kuurus make some kind of strangled sound in his throat. He lowered his sword a fraction and pulled down the cloth from his face.

"Come closer, Kuurus."

The battle-scarred Siarsi took another step closer to him and stopped. His mouth began to work frantically as if trying to say something. Kuurus' eyes suddenly betrayed an inner desperation, a wildness.

Assur kicked his leg over the pommel of the saddle and slid to the ground. "Kuurus, old friend, what is it?"

Without warning, Kuurus suddenly raised his arms over his head, his sword in his hands. The anguish on his face all too clearly revealed his betrayal and as he swung down on Assur, one agonized word escaping his lips: "Riddagh'mar!"

The truth was being revealed--the truth was a lie.

Assur deftly blocked the blow, forcing Kuurus to lose his balance with the forward momentum of the strike. Taking advantage of him, Assur brought the pommel end of his own sword down on Kuurus' back with enough force to send him to the ground.

Every nerve hummed with hate as he sensed danger behind him. Assur whirled around to find himself facing at least twenty Wrathmen and the sneering face of Captain Syunn.

The Wrathmen greatly outnumbered the Riehlilian escort and while they fought bravely they were no match for them.

Assur flung himself at Syunn in a cold rage, but his efforts were too late. Six of the hated Wrathmen leaped at him, wresting away his sword and pinning his arms back. Assur fought them like a cornered animal. He looked up to see several of his Riehlilian escort take multiple wounds--their death cries filled the chill morning as they fell to the ground. Only Mar'Kess had managed to stay mounted as he slashed down at the encroaching Wrathmen.

Assur struggled in the Wrathmen's grip using every fiber of his strength to free himself from their hold.

"Mar'Kess! Go!" he shouted just as he felt the blow against his neck, below his right ear. One of the Wrathmen had managed to disentangle himself from Assur's struggling long enough to use the end of his staff to strike him. Assur reeled from the blow and collapsed to his knees, his own blood staining his armor.

Mar'Kess needed no second warning and spun the bay horse around and fled, leaving Assur and the dead Riehlilians in the hands of their most hated enemies. A handful of Wrathmen ran for their horses to try and stop Mar'Kess, but a cool feminine voice rang over them.

"Let him go. I have what I want."

Assur looked up to see the form of a woman clothed in radiant white, mounted on a white horse saddled and caparisoned in blood-red. Pure white hair fell beyond her knees, and looking into her face, he saw that her eyes had no color but seemed to bore through him like knives of ice.

"At last, I have snared our royal bird," she said, smiling at him triumphantly. "A worthy foe and a most satisfactory prize. Kuurus, you will disarm him as he will have no need for the swords where he is going."

Assur turned on Kuurus. Beads of agonized sweat ran down the Siarsi's scarred face as he struggled between his loyalty to Assur and the power she had over him. His mouth worked frantically as he tried to form words.

"My lord...she made me...I cannot fight..."

Assur suddenly lunged against his captors, freeing himself long enough to snatch his remaining sword from his back. He whirled on Malgora, his sword poised over his shoulder like a viper's fang ready to strike her down.

"Let him go!"

Malgora's head went back, her eyes closed as if savoring some kind of ecstasy. "So much power in this one...so much strength," she murmured. Her head snapped up and she glared at Assur. "Disarm him Captain, and bind his hands!"

Captain Syunn stepped forward, sword in hand. He smiled at Assur and dipped his own sword in a mock salute.

"So, the traveling Talesian turns out to be a royal barbarian. It will be a pleasure to take a sword out of the hands of a ruthless animal, Holy Sister."

Assur ignored the insult, but faced Captain Syunn, poised and ready for him.

"Then come and get it, lapdog," he said in a soft, menacing voice.

The ring of steel on steel filled the cold morning air as the two of them circled each other and fought in silent fury.

As before, Syunn's skills were excellent, but he did not possess Assur's deadly accuracy, nor the intense ruthlessness. And like before, Assur cut him once in the arm and the second time on the cheek. Enraged beyond endurance, Syunn flung himself at the Talesian--a lucky feint blocked Assur's thrust, but knocked them off balance. Both fell heavily to the ground, scrambling frantically to find lost swords and flinging their encumbering clothing out of the way.

"Enough," Malgora shouted. She gestured to the other Wrathmen who stepped into the fray and surrounded Assur, their swords pointed down at his chest.

"Take him," she snapped.

In quick order her minions stripped Assur of his sword and the other one lying on the ground and

yanked him to a kneeling position before the White Sister. Roughly, they bound his hands in front of him, then took a long rod, a broken handle from a hayfork and shoved it through the bend in his elbows across his back.

Still breathing hard from his exertions, Assur looked up at Malgora with hate filling his black-marked eyes.

"You will die for this, witch," he said evenly.

"Indeed? An interesting threat which you will have little opportunity to fulfill, especially where you are going."

She stepped forward and bent down to him, her colorless eyes were bright with cruelty. "Do not fight me, prince. I can make you feel more pain than you ever thought possible one body could endure. You must save your strength for later."

To emphasize her point, Malgora reached out with one white hand and touched him on the cheekbone and temple. Pain knifed through his head as if someone had driven a steel rod through it. It throbbed behind his eyes and at the base of his skull. He fought an uncontrollable urge to scream, clenched his jaw and took a harder grip on his sanity. He felt something give or break and suddenly blood began to run freely from his nose.

"You are stronger than I thought," she said with a slight smile. "The Siarsi begged for mercy when I touched him. You will be hard to break, but then the rewards will be immeasurable."

She stepped away from him and motioned to Syunn.

"Get him on a horse and watch him. I do not want to lose what I have worked so long to get."

Kuurus' hands shook while holding his own sword as he approached Assur. The agony of his own betrayal clearly etched on his face.

"My lord, forgive me!" Kuurus cried. The fierce Siarsi raised his sword and turned it over in his hands, the sharp point against his own chest as he slowly knelt down in preparation to throw himself on it.

"Stop him," Malgora screamed.

Before he could finish his own sacrifice, more Wrathmen swarmed over Kuurus, disarming him and then binding him like Assur.

"Your death is in my hands now, Siarsi, and your lord will watch you die." She jerked her hand toward Captain Syunn. "Get them on the horses."

"And the others, Holy Sister? In the village?" Syunn asked.

"If any of these warriors are still alive, kill them. Kill the rest in the village, but do it quickly. And hide the bodies well. I do not want them to be found like the others."

The Wrathman dragged Assur to his feet and forced him onto the nearest horse. He happened to glance down to his right and saw a scrap of white ruffle and a gnarled walking stick. The pain left him momentarily as he concentrated his rage into a cold knot of vengeance.

No one seemed to notice that the great gray, Adzra, had somehow disappeared or wandered off. Assur said nothing, but allowed them to shove him onto the nearest horse.

From behind him, Assur heard the screams of the remaining Riehlans as they were put to the sword. Another vow of vengeance-- there would be no mercy. If the world thought Talesians had been cruel three hundred sunturns ago, then they did not know the meaning of cruelty. Assur glanced at Syunn's smirking, self-satisfied face. The Wrathman captain would be first. Malgora's favorite lapdog would beg to die.

The wooden rod had been pulled from his arms and someone flung the fur cloak over his shoulders. A sallow-faced Wrathman took up his horse's reins and the grim band made its way out of the village toward the east and the Catacombs.

THE BOY WAITED a long time until he felt it was absolutely safe to come out of his hiding place. The village was empty now, except for the soft noises of the animals. Slowly he eased out of his hiding place and made his way to where he had tied up the warhorse. He had never ridden such a big horse, only the sturdy cart ponies of the village. But it had been easy to slip up to the big gray, take the reins and lead him away. Left untied the horse had ambled off to the nearest patch of dried-up grasses and leaves.

Unsure the horse would let him get on his back, he approached Adzra and patted him encouragingly.

"There's a good horse," he whispered. The boy led the Adzra up to a nearby cart and sidled him against the wheel. As fast as he could, he scrambled onto the cart and then sprang across the short space into the saddle. His thin legs came barely to the middle of the horse's sides.

The great beast did not move, but seemed to know something was not right. Obediently, he allowed the boy to nudge him into a walk.

It was a long ride to Riehl and he did not know the way. He clutched at the reins with frozen fingers. When it became dark the marglims would be out. He kicked at the horse's sides and surprisingly, the big gray obliged him by breaking into a ground-eating canter. He grabbed for the pommel and closed his eyes. The horse moved much faster than anything he had ever ridden. He prayed Verlian to help him find the way and to save the man he now knew to be the Ter-Rey.

His young boy's heart had taken its first step into manhood now that everyone was gone. All of them were butchered. He did not know much about being a warrior, but he knew instinctively about being brave. He remembered that brief, thrilling lesson and tried to make himself be calm. He shivered and tugged at his inadequate cloak.

Aerik took a firmer grip on the reins and urged Assur's great warhorse into a faster gallop.

## Chapter 18

FRANTIC POUNDING on her door awoke Kitarisa from a restless sleep. She jerked upright, her wildly beating heart matched the hammering on her door.

"Highness, please wake up! It is Mar'Kess!"

Kitarisa scrambled from the bed and snatched up her dressing gown. She had barely enough time before the pounding resumed. She pulled open the door to reveal Mar'Kess filthy and exhausted, Achad pale and serious.

"Mar'Kess, my Lord Achad, what is the matter?"

"You must get dressed right away, Kitarisa," Achad ordered firmly. "Something has happened to Assur and the others."

"What has happened?" She looked frantically into their eyes and could only see a desperate attempt from both men to remain calm.

"My lady, Prince Assur has been taken by Malgora and the Wrathmen. From our sources it appears they trapped him in the village where he went to accept Kazan's defeat."

Kitarisa felt the blood leave her face. "How do you know this?" she whispered.

The older prince and the captain eyed each other uneasily.

"I think you'd better come with us," Achad said firmly.

She dressed faster than she thought possible and then hurried with the two men to the main courtyard of the keep.

A group of soldiers, stablemen, and a knot of tense Talesians milled around the upper steps leading into the interior of the keep. At the center of their attention, a physick knelt by someone or something. Kitarisa pressed through the crowd and looked down at what was causing such a stir. A sob escaped her throat. It was Aerik. The little boy lay on the top step, his thin body wrapped in blankets that could not stop him from shaking. His hands were blue with cold.

The physick noticed her and smiled. "Ah, Lady Kitarisa, I'm so glad you're here. The boy has been asking for you."

She knelt by Aerik and gently pushed back his scraggly hair.

"Aerik, it is Kitarisa. Can you hear me?"

The boy nodded. Relieved, she saw the trace of a smile on his lips.

"My lady, she took him and the others. It was a trap. They took him to the Catacombs. I tried to hurry, but I got lost and...and I was so c-c-cold!"

"Hush now. You were a very brave boy." She looked up at the physick. "Master Nal'Ver, please help me to get him to a warm bed."

"I found him, my lady, not far from the outside wall. It was by chance I happened to see Adzra. He could not have been but an hour behind me," Mar'Kess said, lifting the boy into his arms.

The crowd readily parted as Mar'Kess carried the boy into the keep and headed straight to one of the many guest rooms where there would be a fire already laid out.

Achad and the physick followed close on their heels, followed by a handful of worried-looking Riehlans and Councilor De'Tai.

Once Aerik was comfortably tucked into the bed, Kitarisa sent for some hot soup and began ladling it down his throat.

Gratefully the boy ate all the soup and sank back into the pillows.

"Aerik, when did this happen?"

"Yesterday morning. I saw them from my hiding place. It were the scarred one who betrayed him."

"Kuurus?" Kitarisa asked, astounded, looking up at Mar'Kess and Achad.

"Aye, lady, it were, but he did not want to do it. She made him."

"What happened, boy?" Achad asked quietly from the other side of the room.

"He fought their captain, master. Fought good, but they were too many. Then, they tied him up and she hurt him."

"How so?"

"She made the blood come, like with the others. And...and then they took him away, but they killed the warriors. I saw it! They took their swords and...and...!"

The boy began sobbing uncontrollably, his thin shoulders shook and his hands tried to wipe at his tears.

Kitarisa took Aerik into her arms fighting her own tears. She rocked him gently, kissing the top of this head and murmuring soft words of comfort. She looked at the frowning men and nodded her head, indicating they should leave.

"Hush now. You were such a brave boy. To come all this way, alone. How did you get here?"

"I rode the great lord's horse." Aerik sniffed.

"Prince Assur's big gray horse, Adzra? My, what a feat. Did you know, no one can ride him but the Ter-Rey? Adzra must have known you were very special to allow that."

She rocked Aerik for a while until his crying stopped. His skin was warm now and there was some color back in his cheeks. She set him back into the bed and tucked the soft covers under his chin.

"You go to sleep now, Aerik. You deserve it. You did the right thing, but it was a very dangerous." She patted his arm. "My, the Talesians will probably make you an honorary warrior--they will sing songs in your honor!"

Aerik grinned. "Do you think so?"

"Of course. Do you remember that tall Talesian, the older one? Well, that was the Ter-Rey's own father. He has only the greatest respect for brave warriors like you."

She leaned over and kissed his brow.

"Now go to sleep. I'll be close by; you are quite safe."

The boy closed his eyes and in moments he was asleep.

The men waited outside the room and all their quiet muttering ceased the moment she emerged.

"My Lord Achad, that boy has seen more horror than any adult could bear. Both his parents were murdered by the Wrathmen and now his entire village is gone."

"You believe him?" De'Tai asked.

"I have no reason not to, Councilor De'Tai. Mar'Kess can confirm this."

Mar'Kess nodded. "I saw the village and those women. The Wrathmen had been quite thorough. However, now the question is, what happens with Kazan? Couriers have been arriving hourly with reports that Kazan's legions have passed the Rift Cut."

"Then we must assume Kazan also knows about Assur's abduction and will press his advantage. Without Assur to lead the Talesians or his leadership here in Riehl, there will be chaos," De'Tai added grimly.

"The Talesians will fight; there will be no difficulty in that," said Achad. "I will see to it."

"And what about Assur? Do we just leave him to his fate?" Kitarisa asked.

"Assur is a warrior. He knows how to take care of himself, my lady," Achad went on.

"Your Highness, we cannot leave him. I have seen Malgora's handiwork. She is mad beyond all reason. What she did to the Lady Falla was unspeakable--there are no limits to her atrocities once she gets him into the Catacombs," Mar'Kess said heatedly. "I'll go. Give me three days; I'll get him out."

"There is Kuurus," Kitarisa reminded him.

"All the more reason for me to go." He looked at Achad. "I leave at first light. Watch Kazan's right flank--he'll use it to pin you under the Cut, the escarpment."

Achad nodded and turned abruptly to leave for the Talesian camp.

"What else needs to be done, Captain Mar'Kess?" De'Tai asked.

"Bring the livestock inside the city walls. It isn't necessary yet, but prepare to bring the women and children inside the walls of the keep at any moment. How much fodder has been stored for the animals."

"Enough for the horses, but only through the winter."

"Then find as many men as you can while there is still time and get as much grain and hay into the city. This may be a long siege and I'm not ready to eat the rats!"

KITARISA DID NOT even ask Mar'Kess if she could accompany him, but simply had a horse saddled and waited for him in the courtyard. The captain looked at her and nodded. Mar'Kess did not question her motives either, nor did he try and stop her, but merely warned her that he would not stop until they reached the Catacombs.

He was a good as his word, never letting up the pace and only stopping long enough for a hasty meal or to let the horses rest. Even during their brief rests, he spoke little, but seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts.

"Do you think she will do the same to him as with Lady Falla?" Kitarisa asked.

"Most certainly, only it will take longer."

"What if she kills him?"

"I do not think she will kill him right away. Remember what the old woman said. And, I know what I heard from those two witches in the keep--Malgora needs Assur for his Will. Perhaps it is the way she becomes more powerful."

Kitarisa studied him for a moment, weighing his words.

"Like a leach," she whispered.

"Very likely," he agreed.

"Raldan, if this is so, then why did she let those farmers go and those men we found by the river?"

"I don't think she let them go. I think they escaped and her hounds caught up with them."

They rode on heading closer and closer to the massive mountains to the east, the Soldrat Mountains where the Catacombs lay. There appeared to be only one pathway twisting and turning through the tortuous maze of solid granite--no trees to soften its stark beauty and no gentle mountain meadows for them to stop and rest.

Kitarisa glanced upward at the rocky ledges and deep crevices where someone might hide. "What if there are Wrathmen in those rocks?"

"There could be. If Malgora knew we were coming, she would have caught us long ago."

"She could be waiting for us with another trap."

"True," he admitted. "But we must take that risk. I'll tell you what I think, my lady. I think she is buying time with the battle between Kazan and Riehl." He held out his gauntleted hands to her and made a fist with one. "She has Kazan and Alor in her grasp and they will rule the east." He closed his other hand. "Now she has Assur. If he breaks, she will have control over the west. Malgora will have everything."

Even with the sun still high in the sky, the path became a narrow trail, cutting deep into the interior of the mountain making it seem as if they were traveling at dusk. The granite turned to slate-blue and the shadows deepened against the dark rock.

The walls narrowed as they rode along, until Kitarisa felt as if the chasm walls would brush against her shoulders. There was barely room for a single horse to pass and on occasion she had the urge to draw in

her elbows to her sides to avoid scraping the rock. The sky above them narrowed to a thin blue slash between the cavernous walls.

Mar'Kess held up his hand, signaling her to stop. They had come the end of the pathway and close to the entrance to the Catacombs.

"We'll wait here until it is dark," he said softly.

There was scant room to dismount, but both managed to get off their horses and stand close by their sides to wait until the sun disappeared.

"Look at this," Mar'Kess whispered and beckoned her to come next to him near the opening in the chasm.

Kitarisa barely restrained a gasp of wonder. The black granite had abruptly given way to red sandstone just beyond the opening. Rising above the bedrock for a hundred and fifty feet, and carved into the face of the mountain wall, was the facade to a temple. Five arches supported by massive columns designated its entrance; each archway carved and etched with strange beings and unknown creatures. The deep red of the sandstone had turned bloody-colored in the late afternoon sun.

"The Sisters did not build this, I am certain, but who did?" she asked.

"I don't know. Some ancient people from before the old empire perhaps," he offered. "Kitarisa, it is almost dark. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Cautiously, the two of them crept toward the opening of the massive red temple. They could see a faint light coming from the interior. Once inside, Kitarisa stared in amazement. They had entered into a massive audience chamber extending deep into the interior of the mountain. The side walls were supported by huge columns, carved like the ones on the outside of the temple. The vaulted ceiling soared above Kitarisa and Mar'Kess--each of the cornices decorated with gargoyles and hideous creatures, writhing things with scales and talons and grotesque wings that flapped over their ugly heads. Their mouths had been carved open, revealing long split tongues and rows of vicious teeth. They crouched over their heads as if ready to spring down upon them at any moment.

At the end of the great hall was a high dais, but no throne, only a simple altar stone upon it. In the center of the hall a circular depression had been cut into the floor and from this, there flickered a low fire that cast shadows into weird and fantastic shapes across the walls.

Mar'Kess plucked at her elbow and motioned for her to follow him. He slipped into the side of the hall and between the great pillars--he had discovered another doorway toward the back.

Kitarisa longed to escape to the outside and stay with the friendly companionship of the horses, but made herself follow Mar'Kess.

The interior corridor was longer and darker, there being only a handful of torches bracketed in the wall that stretched further back into the mountain and it smelled old and damp, of something else--like sulphur and a faint odor of animals. From a distance, they heard the soft sound of chanting.

At the end of the corridor, the hall turned to a wide staircase, spiraling downward to the right. The chanting had grown louder. Kitarisa pressed close to Mar'Kess and whispered directly into his ear.

"We are going to be seen, I know it."

"There is no other entrance, my lady," he whispered back.

They continued to make their slow descent into the temple, the chanting becoming louder and the light getting brighter. Still, there were no Wrathmen in sight and no other guards.

At the base of the wide staircase, both of them shrank back into the flickering shadows.

It was another enormous chamber, twice the width of the upper one and nearly three times as high. It looked more like a town square than a room. Three balconies flanked each side of the chamber where they saw dozens of women in white robes. Some were walking sedately in twos or threes and others, younger girls, moved around them as if hurrying to fulfill some important task. The younger girls, novitiates Kitarisa presumed, wore the same white gowns, simpler and shorter, but each of them wore a long white veil, bound to their heads by a flat, white band that tied at the back in an intricate knot.

The older Sisters' hair had pure white hair which fell nearly to their knees. On a few, she noticed, their hair almost touched the floor.

At the uppermost tiers they saw more of the Sisters lining the railing, shoulder to shoulder and chanting in high, soft voices. Every few minutes one of the Sisters would leave and another would replace her to continue the singing in an endless vigil.

The floor of the vast chamber was cobbled in red stones and in the very center was a enormous dais and catafalque. On that rested a glass coffin. Four candlesticks of silver, as high as Kitarisa's head, stood at the four corners of the dais--their flickering light picked up the features of the body within the coffin.

It was the shriveled, dried-up corpse of a woman. The skeletal hands were crossed at her breast and the long, once-white hair was now yellowed with age. It sprang from the ancient, withered skull like a mass of aged spiders' webs.

"It must be Medruth," she said faintly. She saw Mar'Kess nod and heard his soft oath of disgust.

None of the Sisters crossed directly in front of the bier, but skirted well along the edges of the great chamber.

Mar'Kess grabbed her elbow and tugged her deeper into the shadows under the first balcony.

"We need to get deeper into the temple. Do you think you could pretend to be one of them?"

"I think so."

Mar'Kess watched the moving Sisters, some coming to within arms length of their hiding place. A very young girl, the sweetness of her youth and memories of her life before the Catacombs still on her pretty face, moved toward them. Swiftly, Mar'Kess grabbed her and before she could cry out, dragged her into their dark corner and lightly rapped the pommel of his sword against her temple. The girl sank quietly to the stones.

"Quick, get into her robes."

Kitarisa obeyed as fast as her trembling hands would allow. The white gown fitted comfortably over own, but the veil would not stay over her bound up hair. Frantically, she tugged the pins free and fastened the veil firmly over her head.

"How do I look?" she whispered to him.

"Like a witch," he whispered back with a grin on his face.

Mar'Kess nodded toward the back of the chamber where they saw another opening that went deeper into other areas of the temple.

"My guess is they keep their prisoners in a level lower than this. See if you can find it. I'll stay here. If I'm careful, I won't be seen. Kitarisa, if Assur is dead then you must get out as fast as you can, even if they kill me, too. You must get to Achad and tell him."

"But what if they decide to kill me?"

"Then they will know someone else has gotten in and they'll probably look for me. I'll wait a long time. If you do not get back, I'll assume you were discovered. You must be brave, my lady."

Kitarisa nodded and turned away from him. With a bowed head and hands modestly clasped in front of her, she eased into the chamber.

She slipped into the stream of murmuring Sisters, keeping her head down. She had no idea what they were saying, but kept up a constant, fervent whispering of Medruth's name in case someone might spot her.

Behind the great catafalque she found another archway leading into a central juncture where six other corridors met, and those corridors branching off into the deeper recesses of the temple. Sisters moved about her without hurrying, but purposefully toward their various duties. Kitarisa stopped and looked from one corridor to the next, trying to decide which one to take.

"Sister!" a firm voice spoke to her from behind. Kitarisa turned to face the tall, commanding figure of an older woman. Her snow white hair touched her ankles and the clear eyes seemed to pick at her bones. "You have no duties to attend to?" she asked sharply.

"Holy Sister, I am quite new," Kitarisa dropped a timid curtsey, "And I have lost my way."

"What is your name?" she demanded.

"Falanna, Holy Sister."

"Falanna, Falanna," the tall woman muttered. "I do not recall that name on the roster of novitiates. I shall speak to Sister Narenne. However, in the meantime, the Divine Lady does not tolerate idlers. As a

novitiate your tasks include feeding the prisoners. Go to the kitchens at once. Speak to Sister Corianna. You will hurry, but with measured paces. Remember, we do not run about, but approach our tasks with dignity and respect. Go now." She pointed to the corridor to the far right.

Kitarisa made another hasty curtsy and hurried off into the corridor.

The darkness and the feeling of being trapped was nearly claustrophobic as she scurried along the long corridor. Few of the Sisters were heading back to the great chamber, but more, like herself, dressed in the robes of a novitiate were making their way to the bright light coming from the end of the corridor.

She entered another cavern, the stone walls carved into an enormous kitchen. At the far wall, three bright, hot fires burned within their great hearths. Younger girls were set to turning the spits laden with roasting hens and pheasants, suckling pigs, or sides of break. In front of the hearths were two rows of long tables with a small army of women in white robes, chopping and dicing, or kneading and shaping endless loaves of bread. Aside from the roar of the fires and the sounds of their work, the Sisters labored in absolute silence. Occasionally, she heard one of the older ones giving firm orders and to the right of the kitchen, a line of novitiates were carrying away baskets full of food, heading for the far door toward the back.

Kitarisa slipped into the line still keeping her head down.

"Are you new?" a sweet voice asked from behind her. She turned to see the owner of the voice and found herself looking into the face of a girl who could not be more than thirteen. A few stray auburn hairs had escaped the confines of her veil and fluttered against her fair cheeks. She smiled at Kitarisa. The corruption and cruelty had not yet changed her dancing light blue eyes.

"Yes, I am new, very new. I am Sister Falanna."

"I am Sister Ramelet, I am an Odun. Of what tribe are you?" she whispered.

"I am a Gorendt. Do you know what to do?" she asked softly.

"Oh, yes. We are to feed the prisoners. Stay with me, I'll show you."

When it came her turn, a round basket laden with bread and cheese was shoved into her hands by a harried-looking Sister.

"Don't spill any of it," the older woman ordered crossly.

Kitarisa followed Ramelet out of the kitchen and into an endless series of rooms and chambers.

To her horror every room was filled with cages, and in each cage were the prisoners. They were soldiers and warriors from every tribe she knew of and others she did not recognize. There was no noise, no cage rattling, no demand for food--just a dreadful, mindless silence. They looked out from the cages with lifeless eyes, their faces blank as they stared at nothing.

Although the cages themselves were locked, the Sisters moved freely in and without fear and passed out food into docile hands.

There were no beds or any other sort of furniture in the cages, only thick, clean straw, and in the corner of each cage was a relief urn--they too appeared clean and emptied often.

"Come on," Ramelet whispered. "They can't hurt you; these are the good ones."

Kitarisa eased into the nearest cage and began passing out the bread and cheese to the nearest man--a hulking Qualani dressed in hides, with a necklace of black onyx beads and bear claws around his neck. The next two were dark-faced Huons who accepted the food as meekly as timid children; the fourth was a herdsman and the last warrior almost made her weep. He was a Chaliset Talesian and handsome like Assur. No fire lit his boldly-marked eyes as he quietly reached up to take the food. His back and chest were riddled with scars from some recent beating.

"What have they done to you?" she whispered, horrified.

He did not answer, but continued to look at her with unseeing eyes.

Kitarisa returned to the kitchen many times to fill her basket. She lost track of how many cages she entered, but as with the first, every occupant offered no resistance, nor did they try to harm her.

"How many times do we do this?" she whispered to Ramelet.

"Twice a day. Tomorrow they get meat, only it will be our turn to feed the horses. I hate that; I'm always getting stepped on and once I nearly got bitten."

"How many horses are there?" she murmured, turning her face quickly so a sharp-eyed older Sister

would not hear her.

"Oh, hundreds. They belong to the prisoners." Ramelet gestured to the men in the cages.

"Why do we keep their horses?"

"For them to ride, of course. To fight."

"Ramelet, who are they supposed to fight?"

"Sshh!" she whispered, glancing about fearfully. "Whoever the Reverend Holy Sister wishes, silly."

Kitarisa was numb with shock by the time she reached the final chamber--this one like the kitchen, soared into a cavern with niches or cells carved into the mountain wall in higher and higher rows. Ledges and railings were carved along each row to facilitate access to each of the cells. These were smaller than the others, containing only two or sometimes three prisoners and like the larger cages, were clean and dry, free of any filth.

Like well-kept pets in some monstrous kennel, Kitarisa thought.

In the last chamber, it was not so quiet or orderly. The cages were smaller, occupied by only one man and these men did not sit quietly and wait for food, but were lying down and moaning. In the grim light, she saw a few of the older, white-haired Sisters, kneeling and leaning over them, muttering strange words. Some of the men coughed horribly and some merely stared upward at the ceiling, clenching their jaws. A few did not move at all.

From a dark corner, she heard a hoarse whisper, almost inaudible.

"My Lady Kitarisa?"

She could not contain her tears as she rushed to the small niche in the wall, holding only one man.

"The Goddess have mercy! Kuurus!" she sobbed. She knelt by the bars and reached through them to take his hand.

Scars and welts crisscrossed his lean body and even in the dim light she could see that one of his legs did not lie straight, but bent in an unnatural angle.

"How do you like Malgora's legions?" he asked weakly with just a trace of a smile on his cracked lips.

"Legions?" She tried to wipe her tears away with the edge of her veil.

"These are her faithful, my lady, ready to lay down their lives for Medruth."

"Kuurus, what have they done to you?" She reached into the cage to try and pluck the irritating straw from some of the open cuts on his chest.

"My lady, Malgora takes your will to live--everything. If you fight her, she gets stronger until you cannot fight her at all. For good measure, she breaks something, sometimes many things. When you finally give in, you cannot resist what she wants of you. Then," he gestured weakly to an older Sister at the other side of the room, kneeling over one of the prisoners, "they make you whole again. By then it is too late. You do what they say, or it begins all over again. Some do not survive it."

He arched painfully against his wounds and then sank back into the straw.

"Kuurus, I must get you out of here."

"No. Who is with you?"

"Just Mar'Kess, but he is back at the entrance of the temple."

Weakly, he clutched at her hand. "Listen to me, my lady. Find Assur. She hasn't broken him yet, at least I don't think so. There is a back way, where the horses are kept. Get out through there and find Prince Achad. Tell him to bring the legions here." Kuurus looked at her through the cage bars, his eyes dulled with pain. "This is where the battle must be, before she reaches Kazan and joins forces with him."

"Where is he?" she asked, frightened.

"Through the doors with the creatures over them. I...I do not know what they are. Ancient beasts."

"Sister!" a voice barked at her from the far side of the chamber, making her jump. "Give him his food and return to the kitchens at once!"

Kuurus gave her a weak smile. "Go," he whispered. "It will take more than a mere witch to break this old Siarsi."

Kitarisa bit her lip, futilely trying to hold back more tears. She shoved the food through the cage and then squeezed his hand in a final goodbye.

She hurried out of the chamber, keeping her head down so no one would see her tears. The feeding

had been done and the Sisters were now heading back toward the main part of the temple for their own meal. She could not find Ramelet anywhere in the throng of tired women.

Kitarisa deliberately hung back until she was the last of the Sisters to head for the kitchen. When she thought no one would notice, she slipped behind one of the shadowed pillars and waited. She saw no one behind her and the rest had disappeared through the main entrance to the kitchen chamber.

She glanced around at the cages. Most of them had finished eating and were sitting quietly on the straw. Kitarisa shook her head in disbelief. All were still clothed in their own particular battle attire; some glittered in chain mail or armor. One man was even going through the motions of cleaning his helmet with a scrap of cloth he had found. They all looked as if they were waiting for orders--calm and expectant.

They were waiting for orders from their commanding officer.

Waiting.

Kitarisa shoved her knuckles to her mouth in horror.

A commander to lead an army...for Malgora.

Assur.

## Chapter 19

IT SEEMED TO take forever for Kitarisa to find the door with the ancient creatures above them. The labyrinth of corridors and chambers all looked the same as she followed the winding, dark passages. Finally, she found the entrance--two huge doors cast in bronze, with more of the strange flying creatures carved in relief upon them.

Twice, she had nearly been spotted by Wrathmen patrolling this part of the temple and now that she faced the chamber where Assur might be kept, she was terrified there may be more inside.

She peered cautiously into the chamber. Like the other chambers in the Catacombs, this one was also large, circular in shape with a high-domed ceiling. In the center, a crackling fire burned from a sunken circular pit and in front of it was a beautifully carved chair, all in gold.

Behind the fire pit she saw Assur.

Kitarisa bit back a cry of despair as she flew across the floor to him.

It was impossible to say how long he had been in the position he was being held, but his arms trembled from fatigue and his head was bent down, completely unaware she was near him. Assur had been stripped to the waist and forced on his knees, bent over, with his arms stretched out tightly to the side. Both wrists were manacled in iron. Ropes had been fastened to the manacles and tied down to heavy metal rings bolted into the floor. He could neither move nor stand up.

Kitarisa knelt and touched his face. Assur flinched as if she had struck him.

"Assur, it is Kitarisa," she murmured.

Slowly he lifted his head. Kitarisa sucked in her breath. Blood streamed from both nostrils and his mouth--one eye was swollen shut and when he opened his mouth to speak he could only cough a gurgling tortured sound.

"Kita?" he whispered hoarsely. "How? How did you...?"

"Hush. You must not talk. I am going to get you out."

He shook his head. "Save yourself. Find Achad."

She pulled a small knife from the waistband of her skirt and began sawing at the nearest rope.

"The sword, Kita," he whispered, nodding to the nearby pile of armor, fur and swords. Kitarisa ran to get it and lifted the heavy sword awkwardly over her head. In two clumsy blows she managed to sever the ropes and Assur collapsed on his side, groaning in pain.

Kneeling over him, she clutched at the beautiful pearl he had given her and gabbled the first thing that came to her: "Save him, help him, blessed Goddess!"

Kitarisa closed her eyes, placing her hands on his chest and called out again. She could easily feel the broken ribs under her hands and wept in helpless frustration.

"Do not move him, child," a soft voice whispered from the back of the great chamber.

Kitarisa looked around frantically trying to locate the source of that voice.

"If you move him, it will cause more damage."

She snatched one of Assur's swords and scrambled to her feet. "Who is there? Who are you?"

"A friend." As quietly as the voice had come to her, the slight form of a woman slipped from behind one of the tapestries and glided across the room. Her once white gown was spotted and stained with blood and the soil of hard work. Kitarisa glanced down at the ragged, dirty hem. Barely distinguishable from the dirt, she could just make out the wide band of red that encircled the entire skirt.

The woman stopped in front of her and placed a calming hand on her shoulder.

"If we hurry, we can save him," she said gently.

Kitarisa stared into the serene-faced woman, still not comprehending. Her eyes were normal, soft brown and full of compassion. Even her hair had not turned to the icy white like the others, but a color that had once been bright auburn, now softened to a warm, peachy shade.

"You are not a Sister?" she stammered.

"No, Kitarisa, not as you know them. I am Jizrella, a Daughter of Verlian--one of the last, child."

"But I thought they were all gone. My old nurse said the last Daughters died out long ago."

"Almost," she said with a twinkle and a soft laugh. "There are only five of us left. We stay hidden here and do what we can. Malgora is very powerful and we risk much at being discovered. If she knew, she would certainly destroy us. We stay well hidden and do our work at night when everyone is at rest, or when she is not in the Catacombs."

"Then you can make Assur well?" she asked tremulously.

"I will try, child. Malgora has caused much damage, but he is strong and she has not broken him completely. Besides, we must save him Kitarisa. If he breaks, then all will be lost."

Kitarisa started. She clutched at the woman's arm. "Do not let him die, please."

"The Goddess needs him, Kitarisa, to free the warriors below. Malgora has taken everything from them: their will to fight, their will to live, even to survive. They await Assur's call and it must be for their freedom."

Jizrella turned to Assur and knelt down next to him. She ran her hands lightly over his face, down his neck and across his chest, seeking the damage Malgora had done to him.

Kitarisa glanced anxiously first from Assur and then to the Daughter. She appeared unperturbed.

"We are in time, Kitarisa. Come, I will need your help."

"Me? I am not a healer, Holy Daughter. I only know about herbs and...and simple things. I cannot help you."

The Daughter Jizrella smiled. "Did not you help him here?" She touched the spot where the horse had kicked him. "And you *did* save the brave Siarsi?"

"Yes, but that was just...I just gave him the borgonwort."

"Kitarisa, the touch is with you. It is faint, but it will help me. Now, come. Place your hands upon him so."

Gingerly, Kitarisa followed the Daughter's lead and placed her hands next to hers. She felt Assur's chest rise and fall in short, shallow heaves.

"Now, be still. We will call the affliction from him."

Kitarisa almost jerked her hands away, until she realized the true meaning of her words: to call the affliction *from* him, not for him--the compassionate reverse of Malgora's hideous workings.

At first she felt nothing and then a soft tingling in her arms and then her hands. The tingling intensified until it became a mild burning sensation in her palms.

Astonished, Kitarisa suddenly felt bones snap back together and the knitting process accelerate with lightening speed; fragile tissues adjusted and repaired. Blood retreated back into arteries that abruptly sealed. Assur's breathing eased to a steady, deep rhythm. The swelling around the eye began to diminish, leaving only healthy skin defined by the black pattern.

Jizrella's own breathing became more rapid; her eyes closed. Kitarisa watched the woman's hands tremble with her efforts to save Assur.

His eyes fluttered open.

"What did you do?" he asked. "It is as if nothing..." He sat up--a look, first of amazement on his face

that quickly turned to distrust when he saw the Daughter. "By what witchcraft has she poisoned you Kitarisa?" He began to get to his feet, the sword now in his hand.

"No Assur!" she cried. "It was she who saved you. She is not like the others. She is a Daughter of Verlian--a true Daughter, like in the before times."

Unconvinced, Assur took a threatening step toward the Daughter. "We have all paid a harsh price for their meddling, as in the before times. The witches have forfeited their right to live." Assur raised the sword over his head, ready to strike down the Daughter.

"Assur, no!" Kitarisa lunged at his arm, trying to stop his blow. "She is a Healer! She saved you!"

Assur stopped. The struggle with his deep-rooted hatred for the Sisters showed clearly on his face.

"If you do not allow me to help you, my Lord Assur," the Daughter said firmly, "then Malgora will win. She will use you to lead the men kept below against Riehl and your own people. You have felt only a fragment of her power. You cannot fight her for long. Eventually, you will yield."

"I will die first," he snarled, raising the sword again.

"But to what end?" the Daughter pleaded. "If not you, then who will be next? She will find another and another until she has the one man who will lead her forces against the west and take back what she feels has been taken from her and the Sisters. The west will fall, my lord, and it will be even easier if you are dead."

He paused, weighing her words. "I have a difficult time trusting a witch."

"She is not a witch, she one of the last true Daughters of Verlian. There are only five of them left. Please, my lord. Do not kill her," Kitarisa begged.

"If this is so, then how is it you have been able to survive?"

"The Catacombs are immense--even Malgora does not know all the passageways and chambers--and in the darkness, we have been well hidden."

Assur glanced at Kitarisa, still uncertain. "Where is Kuurus?" he asked cautiously.

Taking his uncertainty for acceptance, Jizrella stooped down and picked up his scabbards and handed them to him.

"We have removed him from the holding cell and taken him deeper in the caverns where we can restore him. We must hurry. Malgora will begin her final prayers to Medruth before calling upon the warriors below." She pointed a warning finger at him. "You were to lead the ritual."

"Where is Malgora now?" Kitarisa asked as she began to help Assur dress. She was relieved Assur had finally accepted Jizrella, however reluctantly, and was preparing to follow her direction.

"She is with her Wrathmen giving her last instructions. Come, now."

Assur completed his dressing and then pulled the second sword from its scabbard. He nodded to the Daughter to lead on. Kitarisa knew he would take no chances. If the Daughter failed them, he would not hesitate to cut her down in an instant.

Behind the heavy tapestry at the back of the room was a narrow passageway cut into the rock, barely wide enough for a slim woman, much less a tall man in armor. Assur moved along behind Jizrella in a sideways fashion, arms overhead to avoid scraping the swords against the rock walls.

An occasional tiny flame, a mere candle held bracketed into the walls lighted the dark pathway. Jizrella moved swiftly, unhampered by the dark or the many twists and turns in the tunnel. They passed many other openings to other tunnels that led deeper into the labyrinth of the Catacombs.

Abruptly, the tunnel took a sharp turn to the left and then pitched downward, ending at an iron door. Jizrella released the heavy latch and pushed the door inward.

Four women waited for them, all attired like Jizrella in white gowns that had seen better days and all with the wide band of red at the hem.

The room was sparsely furnished with a table that served both as a desk and a place to eat. A few chests lined the walls and a tall bookcase, filled with ancient volumes.

An older woman, her face lined with worry and the strain of living so long in secret, stepped forward.

"Jizrella, we are relieved." She embraced the younger Daughter, touching her lips to her cheek. She turned to Assur and Kitarisa. "And you have found him in time. Praise to Verlian."

She smiled at Kitarisa and touched the edge of the ill-fitting veil. "It seems the mistress of robes could

not find an appropriate gown and veil for you, child." Then, recalling her manners, the Daughter dropped a deep curtsy to Assur as well as to Kitarisa. The other four followed her, all murmuring their respects.

"We are honored by your presence, Your Highness and you, Lady Kitarisa."

Somewhat mollified, Assur lowered both his swords. He nodded curtly to the Daughters.

"What place is this?" he demanded.

"It is a sanctuary chamber, one of dozens that honeycomb these caverns. Their whereabouts are carefully guarded. Only we five and a handful of the other Sisters know about them. We have had to be extremely cautious in trusting new allies. One slip, and the Wrathmen would hunt us out like snakes in a mouse hole."

"How long have you been here?" Kitarisa asked, removing the veil.

"As Daughters, we have managed to continue on here since Lord Suldán banished us. We are the last to hold to our sacred teachings and remain obedient to the Goddess. For ourselves, I am Thespa; I have been here all my life. Daughter Britta," she nodded toward the woman standing against the far wall, "forty-five turns. Daughter Celinne came with me as a novitiate." Thespa smiled at the kindly-faced Daughter. "Daughter Kell, at least forty, and dear Jizrella, our baby, only twenty."

"And you have kept the old traditions this long? How could you do this?" Kitarisa pressed the older Daughter.

The oldest Daughter Thespa sighed. "When I was a girl, I was given to the Sisters, as was Celinne. We were brought here together and became close friends. Neither of us wished to be here, but our families sold us to the Wrathmen because they knew we had the healing gift. For a time, we went along with the teachings, but then, we both knew we could not believe as the others. The old `Fa, Tualesta was mad like Malgora and she frightened us. We could not do what the `Fa asked and neither of us could truly bow down to that abomination in the Great Chamber. But we dared not disobey, so we pretended."

"And then, one day we took a wrong turn in the tunnels and found ourselves face to face with Daughter Liath. Daughter Liath knew we were frightened and not a part of the Sisters. Secretly, she took us aside and taught us the old ways, the *right* ways. And we met the others."

"How many were there then?" Kitarisa asked again.

"Then, there were about ten, and we discovered there were more of the Sisters, not many, who would not succumb to the `Fa's teachings."

Assur had resheathed his swords and leaned against the chamber wall, arms folded across his chest. Kitarisa glanced at him. She could not be certain if he was convinced or merely resolved to listen to the Daughter's story.

"It took many turns to find the disloyal Sisters, even longer to trust them with our secret, and longer still to teach them the Healing ways," Thespa continued.

"How many of the Sisters are loyal to you?" Assur asked quietly.

"A mere handful, about four. They are our only hope for the future, my lord."

"Oh no, dear Thespa," the one called Britta protested. "There are others, I know it. We just have not found them yet. Once they see the evilness of Malgora's plans, they will be restored to us."

"Perhaps, but I fear it has been too long; they may be lost to us forever."

Assur evidently had enough chatter about teachings and the Sisters. He straightened up, immediately taking command of the situation.

"Where is Kuurus, the Siarsi?" he demanded again.

"He is safe and well." Thespa smiled up at him, unmoved by his scowling expression and predatory eye-markings. "Come with us."

Another doorway at the back of the chamber led to another passageway, much shorter than the first, that eventually opened into a large room, obviously the Daughters' living quarters made homey and warm even with their sparse furnishings. On one of the beds lay Kuurus. His chest was bandaged and one of his legs had been set in splints.

"Kuurus!" Kitarisa sped across the short distance of the chamber and fell to her knees beside the grinning barbarian. Assur stood behind her--she could almost feel his joy upon seeing his comrade alive.

"I shall miss this haven of luxury, my lady," he said happily. "I have been petted and worried over and

now trussed-up like a hen for supper. I cannot even move without their approval. My lord, it is good to see you well."

Assur placed an encouraging hand on his shoulder. "You must rest, Kuurus. Rest and get well."

"It won't be necessary any longer, my lord," Thespa said from behind them. "The bones needed only to be placed into proper position. Now we can call the affliction from him."

The five Daughters surrounding the bed. Only Thespa placed her hands on Kuurus' bandaged chest. Their gentle voices rose in a soft chant calling the afflictions from the crippled Siarsi.

Both Kitarisa and Assur watched in amazement as the scars riddling Kuurus' shoulders and back, vanished before their eyes. The shattered bones straightened and reset and once again the terrible damage Malgora had done was repaired and healed.

Gentle hands cut away the chest bandages and removed the splint. Kuurus sat up, as astonished as Assur had been. He grinned at his lord and at the others.

"I am ready to break a few Wrathmen bones."

"First you must get to the cages below, to free the warriors. Once outside, she will not be able to gather them all back. Remember, it has taken her several sunturns to acquire and hold these men." Thespa said.

"What about Mar'Kess? He has been waiting all this time. He may have been discovered by now." Kitarisa had nearly forgotten about the good captain until she realized she had no veil to hide her hair from the sharp-eyed Sisters.

Jizrella stepped forward and nodded to Kuurus. "I will take you to the captain and bring him here. No one will see us."

Assur again drew one of his swords and handed it to Kuurus.

"You will need this. The Daughter may know the way back, but you do not. If you were to be separated..."

Kuurus nodded and as Assur had done in Malgora's round chamber, re-clothed himself. His own swords were gone--doubtless, fallen into the hands of some greedy Wrathman.

Kitarisa stripped off the hated white robe, rolled it into a tight bundle and set it next to the pile of splints and used bandages.

"I will not need that again."

"No, my lady, but we will use the cloth for bandages. At least one good thing can come of it." Thespa gestured for Kell to take the bundle away.

"And now, we must rally our forces. Jizrella will bring your captain to the lower cavern. You will explain all to him, dear Jizrella, while you return. Britta, Celinne, get below to the kitchens--I am certain you can cause the fires to turn quite smoky. It will buy us time. I will lead you and the Ter-Rey, to the cavern myself--the one that leads to the outside. It is where Malgora intends to begin her great scheme."

With all of them set upon their various tasks, the elder Daughter hurried down an exit corridor with Assur and Kitarisa close behind her. Kitarisa was surprised at how swiftly the older woman moved.

"Reverend Daughter," Kitarisa called, as they sped through the dark corridors. She was uncertain how to address the lady, but the title "Reverend" did not seem to upset her. "What is this place and what are those creatures?"

"The Catacombs have been here longer than we can imagine. It was first a lair for some unknown beast as we have found many great bones in the deepest caverns. The beasts themselves have died out, or maybe they left the caves. We do not know."

"When the original Daughters arrived here, fleeing Prince Suldán, they discovered signs of other inhabitants: humans. The Ancients. And everywhere, they found the symbol of the beast who had lived here before. They found many strange things. I know, I have read the accounts. They found chests made of strange metal and full of wondrous things, healing things, but there is no knowledge how to use them. In the sacred library, I once found a small book. It was so old the pages were brittle and it was written in a language I have never seen before. But it was a healing text, I am sure of it." Thespa stopped a moment to catch her breath. "One thing is for certain, these Ancients did not worship the great beasts who lived here. We found *their* bones, too."

Thespa led them through the tortuous maze of tunnels and chambers until she stopped at the mouth of a narrow fissure in the rock.

"Beyond this fissure is an entrance into the back cavern. Across the cavern floor, you will see the opening to the outside. Below the great stairs to your right, is the cavern where they keep the horses and equipment, and into the entrance at the head of the stairs is the way to the chambers where the warriors are kept. I will leave you now. We can do more here than outside."

"Daughter Thespa," Assur said, still keeping eyes to the fissure. "What will stop this Malgora once we free the warriors? Will they follow?"

"They will truly be free when Malgora is dead and free herself from Medruth's hold upon her. For now, the warriors are as sheep. They will follow you, but you must hurry. Malgora may have discovered you are missing, I cannot be certain. Once she was done with her Wrathmen, she was to have returned to her chamber to finish your breaking and then take you to her holy ceremony to Medruth. When she finds you are gone..." The Daughter did not finish, but allowed the full import of her words settle on them.

"I will go now. May Verlian be with you." She patted Kitarisa's arm and bowed to Assur, before disappearing back into the gloom of the tunnel.

LIKE THE INSIDE of Sherehn Keep, the last chamber was a cavern, but untouched by the stonemason or carver--a black and deep cave in the belly of the mountain.

They heard the distant sounds of horses rising from the subterranean stables--even in the unrelenting gloom of the cave, it was a friendly, reassuring sound.

Assur grabbed her hand and ran in the direction of the horses. Their footsteps clattered on the stone steps, echoing and re-echoing through the immense cave. At the opening to the subterranean chamber, Assur halted and drew back as he was abruptly stopped by the gleaming blade of a Wrathmen, then another, and another, until they were surrounded.

"I misjudged you badly, Kitarisa. I did not realize the fervor of your attachment to our brave Ter-Rey," a cool, detached voice said calmly.

From the gloom stepped the lithe form of Malgora. She smiled at Kitarisa and then raised her arm as if to bestow a twisted blessing.

"How did you get in?" she asked. "How many are with you?"

"None. I came by myself."

"A brave lie, princess." Malgora motioned sharply to the Wrathmen, who immediately swarmed over Assur. It took six of them to hold him until one took the flat edge of his sword and struck Assur behind the knees. He fell heavily to the sand.

"Tie him down," Malgora commanded.

More struggling as ropes were again run through the rings on the manacles still fastened to his wrists and pulled out painfully to his sides. Assur was again forced to kneel before his tormentor.

In two strides she stood behind him and snatched his sword from the nearest Wrathman. Winding her hand through his long shank of hair, she jerked Assur's head back, neck straining to the breaking point and rested his own blade against his throat.

"An old Chaliset trick and very effective. It is often used by my own faithful in subduing heretics. Assur's life beats here, just under the edge of this sword. You should be pleased to see this. The Ter-Rey, the High Prince of Talesia and all the Eastern Lands, is on his knees before you. Maybe you can take back a little for what has been done to you." Malgora paused to look at her. "Where are they, Kitarisa? Tell me or he will die now, at your feet."

Kitarisa struggled against her captors, but they held her too tightly. She looked at Assur. There was no fear in his eyes, only the most savage kind of hate. In less than a heartbeat he would be dead.

"Mar'Kess," she sobbed. "He is waiting above, outside the temple. He is the only one!"

Several of the Wrathmen moved off into the gloom of the Catacombs to find Mar'Kess. Slowly, Malgora dropped the blade from Assur's throat and released his head.

"Only one? You surprise me again, princess. However, breaking Mar'Kess will be as equally

rewarding as punishing your Ter-Rey. There is the little matter of two of my most faithful Sisters in Gorenndt Keep."

"You cannot do this, Malgora. Assur is not an animal. You cannot keep him like some caged beast."

"You stupid girl. Do you think I went to all this trouble to merely keep him like some prize stallion?" Malgora strode over to her, her eyes blazing with cruelty and madness.

"All that he is--his will to live, to fight, to lead--all of it will be mine to use for the glory of Medruth. He will lead the faithful to victory over the west. Then the Divine Lady's own prophecy will be fulfilled."

"You are mad. Medruth is dead and has been for three hundred sunturns," Kitarisa cried, casting aside all sense of caution.

"Silence!" Malgora screamed. "When this great Cause is completed, you will die for your heresy. And then, Medruth will rise and we will be ruled by her grace." She pointed down at Assur. "He will champion our Cause."

"When Verlian slays me Herself," Assur snarled at her.

Malgora backhanded him hard in the face. "*Neverspeak* of that One in my presence!"

The clatter of boots on stone steps made Malgora look up to see the Wrathmen returning.

"We found no one, Holy Sister," the first one said. "If he was there, he has gone now."

Malgora paced in front of the kneeling Assur, infuriated by the news.

"Did you check the cages?" she demanded.

"We are checking now and we have questioned many of the Sisters. They have seen nothing."

"Stupid fools," she raged. "He has gone for reinforcement. Quickly. Take Prince Assur back to my great room and prepare him again. There is little time." She pointed to Kitarisa. "Put her in one of the cages. I will attend to her later."

The Wrathmen reluctantly eased the tension on the binding ropes to allow Assur to stand. Like freeing a wild horse, Assur plunged from the Wrathmen's hold and leaped for his sword, still held by Malgora. Taken by surprise, she stumbled away, dropping the sword.

Kitarisa saw her chance. The guards holding her were also taken by surprise as she jumped free of their grasp and ran straight for Malgora, her little knife held tightly in her fist. She struck at the white silk, only to discover it would be a glancing blow. The knife made a shallow cut in Malgora's shoulder, but enough to make the witch gasp in surprise and pain. She clutched at her shoulder and stared at her own blood in her hand.

"That was unwise, princess," she said in a low threatening voice.

Assur wasted no time in finding his sword and wielded it with frightening accuracy. Two Wrathmen lay dead in an instant. He then turned on the others.

"Run, Kitarisa," Assur called over his shoulder. "Find Achad and bring them here. Hurry!"

Kitarisa ran across the cavern floor to the far opening in the rocks.

"Get her!" shrieked Malgora.

Kitarisa heard the scuffle of running feet. She glanced back and saw several of the Wrathmen skirt by Assur, racing after her, leaving the Ter-Rey alone to stand against three others.

From the dark depths of the lower caverns, she just saw Kuurus and Mar'Kess step into the fight, blocking the Wrathmen's path and cutting them down in fierce strokes.

She turned and ran, stumbling headlong into the narrow entrance to the tunnel. Ahead, she made out the faint light of the night sky and more dark shapes heading straight for her. Kitarisa shrieked in terror as she ran full force into the arms of a man--another Wrathman. A torch flared up behind him and she stared into the laughing face of Achad.

"You see," he crowed happily. "She does prefer me over that worthless whelp of mine!"

"Achad! Come quickly, she will kill him!"

"Do you think I would let that helpless boy try to save his own skin?" He grinned at her and winked.

In spite of the grimness of the moment, she could make out the smiling faces of dozens of other Talesians standing behind him.

"Please hurry," she said, grasping his arm and pulling him back through the tunnel. They followed her back down the tunnel and into the great cavern where Assur was single-handedly fighting three

Wrathmen. Four more lay dead at his feet. Kuurus and Mar'Kess were holding their own with two apiece, hacking and cutting at the luckless Wrathmen.

"Assur," Achad called out cheerily, "we have come to save you!"

The Ter-Rey of all Talesia could only manage a brief grunt of approval as he drove his blade into the next Wrathman.

The combined force of Riehlians and Talesians flew into the fight. Kitarisa watched Achad with a mixture of awe and amazement. He attacked the horde of Wrathmen, bringing his swords down again and again with wild ferocity and deadly precision--all done with a delighted grin on his face.

There was still Malgora. The place where Kitarisa had cut her was now a bloody mass on the front of her robe. She stood off to the side, her lips moving in some kind of malevolent enchantment.

"Do you really think you can defeat me? They may destroy everyone of the faithful, but I will still be here." She stepped toward Kitarisa. "I shall rise again and again until Medruth's prophecy is fulfilled."

"Medruth is a rotting corpse in your own temple. She will not come back, no matter what you do," Kitarisa shouted at her, having lost much of her fear with the presence of Achad and the others.

"I shall kill them all, including your High Prince. Kazan will still have Riehl and I will find another to claim the west!"

In her madness, Malgora backed away from Kitarisa and spread her arms out wide. "You cannot stop me. I will call on something old, princess, something old and forgotten, but will live to punish all. It was here they lived, the ancient ones. Fear me, Kitarisa!"

Malgora threw back her head and called out in an ancient tongue--dark, guttural words from a time lost to memory.

"Stop Malgora! Are you mad? You would break the Measure and the Balance."

Malgora dropped her arms, her head snapped toward the approaching figure of a woman in white with a wide red border at the hem.

"You!" she hissed at the serene-faced Thespa. "How dare you!" Malgora took in the stained robe and the distinctive red border and immediately recognized its meaning. Momentarily forgetting Kitarisa and her Wrathmen, she approached Thespa. Malgora's pale eyes glittered like glass as she stared at the Daughter. The full significance of Thespa's presence and all of the implications registered on Malgora's face, contorting it into a mask of anger and surprise.

"By what magic are you here? I demand to know. How many of you hide in my temple?"

"*Your* temple? No Malgora, this is not *your* temple. It was the last sanctuary for the true Daughters of Verlian, only you have turned it into a tomb of madness. You have twisted the Blessed Verlian's gift of healing into torture and cruelties. You will be stopped, if not by these men, then by me."

Malgora gave a short burst of a laugh. "Stop *me* ? I hold the will of hundreds of warriors within my grasp--all that they are, lives in me and soon I will have the Ter-Rey's. All the strength of our brave High Prince shall be mine!" Malgora stepped back and raised her arms over her head. "Only I know how to use the Measure and the Balance. Stop me now, Daughter," she sneered.

Malgora again began her menacing chant, her black prayer to the dead Medruth. Blinding light encircled the White Sister as she began to change her form.

Amid the clashing of swords, Kitarisa heard a strange rushing sound. The brilliant white light of Malgora's changing flew around her in a fiery roar. The light rose higher and higher into the cavern and expanded into shape and substance. From the center, Kitarisa made out the emerging form of a scaled body, massive leathern wings and a long, spiked tail that grew from its massive body. Taloned claws thrust out from muscular forelimbs and legs, and reaching nearly to the roof of the cavern itself, was the massive rectangular head with huge jaws, supporting rows of long yellowed teeth and a split tongue. The beast turned maggot-white and its eyes, yellow. It stank of sulfur and death and from its scaled throat, it roared a deadly weapon of fire.

It turned to the fighting men on the floor of the cavern. Kitarisa heard the beast take a deep breath to sear them all where they stood.

"Run!" she screamed.

Assur looked up and shouted at the others. Malgora's fiery blast just missed them as they dove for

cover behind the great stairway.

Thespa ran to her and grabbed her arm. "You *must* fight her Kitarisa. I am too old now, but you can. The Measure and the Balance will find you more equal to her in size and will. Malgora has taken the shape of the dead creatures that once lived here."

Hard determination filled Thespa's gentle eyes as she reached up and grasped Kitarisa's face between her hands.

"Child, you must do this. Assur and his men will free the warriors. The other Daughters and I will take care of the Sisters. Will you do this?" she demanded.

Forced to look into Thespa's unwavering gaze, Kitarisa found herself nodding mutely. She was powerless to resist her and somewhere in the back of her mind, she felt herself being gently pulled into Thespa's powerful control. Kitarisa nodded again and Thespa's fingers tightened against her temples.

The Daughter's words came in a rush as she hurriedly sought to equal Malgora's workings. Abruptly, she let go and stepped back from Kitarisa to allow for her own transformation to take place.

The change came so rapidly Kitarisa scarcely had time to notice. She glanced down and she saw her arm immediately begin to elongate and the once pale skin turn dark to the color of smoky ash. Her skin became scaled and her hands seemed to take on a life of their own. Talons grew out from her fingers, sharp and immensely strong. She felt her spine stretch and bones creak in the great effort change her entire form. She grew and filled the cavern with her immense size.

The skin on her back stretched and split to make room for emerging wings; her now-forked tongue flicked over razor sharp teeth and from her throat came the almost irresistible urge to exhale the building, raging heat.

She turned burning red eyes on Malgora and saw her enemy. Kitarisa felt the animal fury consume her and she spread her great wings to beat the air. Drawing in a deep breath, she opened her mouth and blasted a deadly stream of fire directly at Malgora.

The yellow-white beast reeled into the cavern walls making the entire side of the mountain shake. Rocks clattered from the ceiling of the cavern. A large boulder shook free from the walls and rolled over one of the Wrathmen, crushing the life out of him.

Malgora turned to burn them again but Assur and the others had scrambled up the stairs and through the entranceway to the temple, the way being far too small for her to reach them.

Screaming in frustration, Malgora rose to vent her wrath on Kitarisa, but she was ready for her.

From her great height Kitarisa saw the men clustered around the edge of the doorway just out of Malgora's reach. She knew immediately what they wanted and arched her great neck to face the vile white beast. Malgora had blocked the opening to the tunnel making escape impossible. Kitarisa sent another fiery blast, but the cunning beast ducked away and the flames only seared the cavern wall until it blackened and smoked from the force of the heat.

Roaring her own frustration, Kitarisa stretched her great wings and flew to the uppermost reaches of the cavern with Malgora close after her. The two coiled and struck at each other, the sound of the impact echoing and reechoing through the cavern like thunder.

The rank stink of sulphur swirled like a storm from the furious beating of their wings. Kitarisa wheeled around in a tight circle and made a short, hard dive at Malgora. She slammed into her, her claws managing to tear scaled skin and flesh. Malgora howled in pain. She too, turned on Kitarisa and both of them flew upward, grappling at each other, roaring their rage and sending their fiery breaths against the cavern walls.

There was no more room for them to carry on their terrible battle. From the ground, the stunned warriors watched as both of them reached higher and higher into the cavern, until there was a deafening explosion of flesh against stone. A thunderous roar shook the cave as the ceiling shattered, sending tons of rock to the floor. The dome of the cavern exploded and both the great beasts, screaming their defiance, hurtled into the night sky.

## Chapter 20

A STUNNED SILENCE hung between Assur and the others as they watched Kitarisa and Malgora smash free from the confines of the cavern and fly into the night.

"If we hurry, she may give us enough time," Achad said, immediately practical. He gestured to some of the warriors. "Go below and free the horses."

Assur spun on his heel and entered the temple with Mar'Kess, Achad and the rest behind him.

"Has the battle resumed with Kazan?" Assur asked as they hurried through the dark corridors.

"Yes, and Mar'Kess was right--Kazan did try to pin us at the Rift Cut, but we were ready for him. However, he has those crossbows--the new ones. They are more powerful than we thought."

"Then we will have to fight harder, but this time, we will have more help. I will lead Malgora's horde, but for my own cause!"

The ranks of Wrathmen had thinned as more and more were slain, or had fled for their lives. Terrified, screaming women in white ran from the Talesians, trying to hide in the maze of corridors and chambers.

The warrior's blood raced through Assur as he mercilessly cut his way through rank upon rank of the hated Wrathmen. His sword ran with their blood. In the melee, many of the Sisters fell, but he could not stop or pity them.

By the time they reached the chambers that held the cages, Assur was panting for breath. He stared, appalled, at the rows upon rows of cages with their silent occupants. They looked out at him with empty eyes.

"They have no life in them," Achad exclaimed, waving his hand in front of the nearest one. The silent Odun looked back at him mildly as if he had only noticed the flutter of a falling leaf.

"Malgora saw to that," Assur said savagely as he smashed the lock away from the cage door. "Get them out, all of them."

In chamber after chamber, cage after cage, the Talesians and Riehlans alike shattered the locks freeing the hundreds and hundreds of bewildered warriors.

Like obedient sheep they began to follow Assur and the others through the temple corridors to the great cavern and down into the chambers that held their horses.

Through the rush of excited horses and milling warriors, Assur shouted to Mar'Kess.

"Take them out, head for the river. I will catch up."

Mar'Kess saluted him from the back of one of the borrowed horses and hastened to urge the dazed warriors out the cavern corridor.

Assur nodded to Achad and Kuurus: "Follow me. We must stop something that should have ended three hundred turns ago."

The three ran back through the darkened corridors of the Catacombs, heading straight for the Great Chamber. More Wrathmen appeared trying to stop them, but the Talesians cut them down before they drew another breath.

A few brave women, maddened by grief and confusion, flung themselves at the barbarians who had desecrated their sanctuary. Assur did not like killing the women, even as vile as they had become. None carried weapons, but fought only with their bare hands and the strength of their rage.

In the Great Chamber a small group of Sisters stood stalwartly around the massive bier and catafalque of their dead Reverend `Fa. A few had armed themselves with kitchen utensils or swords dropped by fallen Wrathmen.

"Stand away," Assur ordered. He crouched in an attack stance and approached the great dais.

"Stay back, barbarian. You defile the very air with your presence!"

Assur looked up. From the lower tier of balconies, he spotted the somber form of Syunn. He held a cross-bow, a Maretstan double crossbow in his hands.

"The histories will record this momentous occasion, Talesian, how a Wrathman cut down the Ter-Rey of the Dominion in the presence of Medruth herself. I shall be immortal." Syunn smiled evilly at Assur. "In fact, I shall bring down two High Princes and a dog of a Siarsi."

"You will not get out of here alive, Syunn. You only have two bolts," Assur warned.

Syunn slid the crossbow over the stone railing of the balcony's edge and lifted the weapon to his shoulder, taking steady aim at Assur's heart.

"You do not know these caves as I, barbarian prince. The one who survives will have to catch me."

Assur and the others ran for the protection of the great bier, scattering some of the Sisters like frightened mice. The few women remaining at the dais, retreated slowly, holding their crude weapons before them.

"Get out of here, defiler!" one of them cried out, thrusting a butcher knife at Achad. The disgusted older prince swung backhanded at the girl with the flat of his blade, knocking her off-balance into the base of the coffin.

"Stay down, girl," he growled. "You will get us all killed."

The whirring sound of a bolt slipped past Achad's left ear and landed with a soft thunk into the thick wax of the massive candlestick behind his back.

"By Verlian's blade that was close," he muttered to the crouching Kuurus.

"He has one bolt left," Assur said. He glanced behind him, looking for a diversion. "If I can get him to shoot the other bolt, he will have no choice but to run." Assur looked at his father and at Kuurus and knew what they were thinking. He nodded. The coffin.

Seeing his chance, Assur stood, sword over his head. An ancient, savage war cry escaped his lips as a brought his sword down in the coffin with a deafening crash, destroying the Sisters' unsummoned abomination. Glass shards, brittle bones, and rotting silk splattered onto the cobbled stones of the Great Chamber. Assur raised his sword again and again, until he had smashed the remaining pieces of the coffin into fragments.

"No!" A collective scream rose from the remaining women as they backed away, horrified, from the ruined remains of their dead goddess.

A second bolt whirred away from Syunn's crossbow. Achad did not have enough time--he lunged at the nearest Sister, flinging his arms around her legs and throwing her to the floor, but it was too late. He looked up and saw the bolt tip, thrusting upward from the girl's breastbone.

"Now!" Assur shouted.

The three leaped from the shattered remains of the dead Medruth, pushing away the last of the faithful Sisters and knocking down the massive candlesticks to the floor. Flames burst from the tinder-dry silk draping of the ancient catafalque and devoured the shattered remains of the long dead `Fa.

"You will not find me in here, barbarian," Syunn called. The Wrathman captain hurtled the heavy crossbow over the high stone railing, sending it clattering to the red stones below. He turned and fled into a black tunnel as Assur darted toward the nearest stairway that led up to the balcony.

"Leave him, Assur," Achad called out.

Behind them the fire had spread to the hanging wall coverings directly behind the dais. Smoke and ash began to fill the Great Chamber. Both Achad and Kuurus were coughing and waving their hands against the smoke.

"We must save the others--let him go!"

Assur stopped halfway up the stairway before realizing that Achad was right. Syunn could wait, but only for a time.

Verlian's light shone down on the fleeing hordes of dazed warriors as they were herded away from Malgora's terrible prison to freedom. A few had partly shaken the affects of the witch's control and seemed to understand they were running for their lives. Those who were able to ride horses managed to keep moving in orderly files, but still had no notion as to where they were going.

Mar'Kess galloped up to Assur, leading Adzra, and reined in the excited horses.

"My lord, we will be at the river soon and I fear we cannot cross it while they are still under Malgora's hold. We may lose them all."

Assur nodded grimly. "Send some of the Riehlions ahead. Have them find the narrowest crossing. We will wait there at the river's edge." He turned toward Achad. "Father, you must ride ahead to the legions and prepare them to attack Kazan..."

"Are you mad, boy? Fighting in the dark?"

Achad did not see Assur's chagrined expression. "Since when is a Talesian warrior and a Chaliset at that, afraid to fight at night, Father?"

Achad grinned at him. "Not afraid, my son, just surprised. We will cut Kazan's forces down like the dogs they are, whether it is day or night." He glanced upward. "Perhaps we should pray to the Goddess for snow to make the battle more interesting."

Assur, too, looked up into Verlian's brilliant pale light and the blue-coldness of the night sky.

"No, Father. We must pray to the Goddess that She will give Kitarisa the strength to kill that *creature*. Only then can we defeat Kazan."

Qualani and Huon, Odun and Riehlian, all stumbled on into the night toward the Sherehn River. Assur rode up and down the endless lines of men, shouting encouragement, trying somehow to break Malgora's hold on them. Each had been given a sword or weapon familiar to them, but like bewildered children, they held their weapon as if holding a long-forgotten toy.

A dazed Odun looked up at Assur as he rode by. "Where are you taking us, master?"

"Where you can use that." He nodded at the man's long spear. "As you should."

At the river, Assur called for them to halt and wait. He stood up in his stirrups and strained to see across the river to the Talesian encampment. Torches and night fires dotted the shore and nearby hills, and far in the background, he could make out the black hulk of the Rift Cut rising into the night sky.

To his left, farther down the shoreline, Assur could see the faint fires of Kazan's camp. At dawn, they would strike but Assur was uncertain if they could hold against Kazan's armies. He ground his teeth in frustration. Already he could hear the rattle of war drums and the whinnying of excited horses as they made ready for the battle.

Mar'Kess suddenly pointed to the sky and shouted to him: "Look!"

All eyes turned toward the moon in time to see two monstrous beasts rise into its light. Great teeth and claws grappled at each other's flesh, inflicting terrible wounds. Fire roared from the gaping maws that were their mouths, searing scaled limbs and leathern wings. They wheeled away from each other, swooping down toward the ground so close, they could feel the rush of air from the stroke of their passing wings. Both Assur and Mar'Kess instinctively ducked.

"I have never seen such beasts. What *are* they?" Mar'Kess asked in amazement as he watched the two giant creatures again soar upward toward Verlian's light.

"By the Goddess, I do not know. There is no such thing...The Daughter said the Ancients knew them." Assur shook his head, both astonished and in awe of the spectacle. "Whatever they are...Kitarisa, the dark one, must kill the other if these warriors are to be free of Malgora's hold."

Both beasts flew at each other again, this time Kitarisa struck savagely at the maggot-white creature. Malgora screamed in agony and reeled away. Kitarisa's teeth had ripped open a great wound across Malgora's belly. Blood poured from the gash and fell to the earth like an unholy rain.

A collective groan escaped the lips of all the men nearest Assur and Mar'Kess. One man clutched at his head and sank to his knees. Assur heeled Adzra around to face Mar'Kess.

"What is happening, lord?" Mar'Kess shouted.

"Malgora's hold must be weakening! Hurry, head them toward the river."

Assur looked up again, this time to see Kitarisa slash at Malgora's wing, tearing a great gash through it. The beast would no longer be able to fly and arched away from Kitarisa, struggling to reach the highest rim of the Rift Cut.

"Kill her, Kita," he called up to the sky. "Kill her now!"

With each savage blow, Kitarisa drove the loathsome enemy closer to the edge of the escarpment. Her own left forelimb had been burned to a charred ruin from Malgora's fiery breath and hung uselessly at her side, but it did not deter her from her relentless drive to kill the hated witch. She sank her teeth into Malgora, tearing at her again and again--the bitter blood ran from her mouth.

Another moan rose from the captives. All of them sank to their knees in helpless submission to Malgora's tenacious hold.

"My lord, she is killing them!" Mar'Kess called out.

"No!" Assur kicked the great warhorse into a gallop and raced to the river's edge. Up and down the shoreline he watched the warriors collapse to their knees, writhing in agony. Malgora's death throes were killing her captives as well.

His hard-earned discipline was pressed to the limit as he struggled to find a way to break Malgora's hold on them. Behind him, across the river, he heard the strong rhythmic beating of the war drums. Achad had amassed the legions and soon he would release them on the Gorendtian forces.

The men before him were supposed to have been his to lead, only for Malgora's vile purposes--to be used as reinforcements with Gorendt and Maretstan to crush the Riehlian resistance. Once Riehl was defeated, he would have led them across the Adrex to conquer his own home and his own kind.

The voice came to him quite clearly: a serene, feminine voice, as cool as the moonlight above him, speaking directly to his inner ear.

*Call on them, D'Assuriel. Malgora has no power. They are yours now to command. You must right the Balance.*

At first he thought he was hearing things, but the voice came a second time, firmer and louder--and it was not Kitarisa's voice nor Malgora's.

*Call on them, D'Assuriel. They will follow you.*

Feeling somewhat foolish, Assur reluctantly raised his sword over his head.

"Ei Teyan Se Verlian," he called in a loud voice. *You are called by the Divine Verlian.*

From the heights of the Rift Cut, Assur heard a deafening roar, more like a howl of pain and fear.

He trotted Adzra up and down the shoreline and called again, only this time, it was a ringing call to arms.

*D'Assuriel, call on them! I have returned them to you.*

"Ei Teyan Se Verlian!" he shouted.

The roar was much louder, an agonized scream of terror and defeat. Assur turned the horse in time to look up and see Kitarisa make one last blow at the yellowed worm-like body of Malgora. Kitarisa's black talons raked at Malgora's already bleeding throat, ripping the life from the hideous creature, but not before Malgora made a desperate grasp at Kitarisa.

Struggling to keep her balance on the edge of the great escarpment, Malgora managed to sink her right talon in Kitarisa's ruined left, causing her to cry out in her own pain. Writhing and roaring their fiery breath, both creatures struggled to maintain their balance, fought for a hold, and then slowly, almost gracefully, they fell over the edge. It seemed to take an eternity of time as the horrified warriors from both armies, watched them fall to the valley floor. In a cloud of sulphur and fire, the two beasts hurtled through the night to the earth, still roaring their defiance to each other. When they hit the ground, the impact sent tremors rippling across the land. Horses panicked and bucked their hapless riders to the ground--the river itself shuddered, sending rippling waves cresting the shorelines.

Almost reflexively, Assur called again to the stunned warriors. "Ei Teyan Se Verlian!" he cried at the top of his voice. A deafening roar rose from the warriors in one defiant voice--they answered the call. Their commander was before them, ready to lead them on to victory and glory.

Assur raised his arm over his head: "Follow me!"

As one, the army of captive warriors streamed across the rushing Sherehn, heedless of the cold and swirling waters. The crossing point at the river was not terribly deep and in a short time all of the once caged warriors were across, ready to face a new foe.

It was Achad who galloped up to him and reeled in his overexcited horse.

"I cannot hold them any longer; sound the horn. Verlian calls us, boy!" Achad grinned happily at him.

Assur nodded and the signal was sent. From the base of the great Rift Cut, fifteen thousand howling Talesians and Riehlans turned to the south and answered the call of the sounding horn and war drums. A warrior's moon, Verlian's light, led them on, straight toward the awaiting armies of Gorendt and far off Maretstan.

COMMANDER BOROSA yanked off his helmet and flung it at Kazan's feet. "Your witch is dead. She is a stinking pile of guts fit only for the maggots. And the Ter-Rey will have our heads on the end of a spear if you do not withdraw now."

"You will do as you are told and hold your lines," Kazan said through gritted teeth. "You will hold as you have been ordered!"

"It is treason, Kazan. And I will not risk one more man for this ludicrous scheme." He held up one warning finger before Kazan's face. "Let me ask you something: Have you ever seen what Talesians do to traitors?" Borosa waved his hand irritably before Kazan could even speak. "One is the *jarat eis tal*--they hang you on a pole by your thumbs with wet leather thongs. You are hung facing the sun, Kazan, and then they tie open your mouth. In less than an hour, you are mad with pain, thirst, and whatever happens to crawl into you!"

Kazan blanched, but still set his jaw more stubbornly. Borosa pressed on, even more determined to convince this unwise prince.

"The sun is not hot enough now, but they have other tortures, far more interesting and excruciating. Shall I go on?"

"We will defeat the Ter-Rey and take Riehl," Kazan said angrily. "Go to your legions! Stand your ground!"

Borosa pressed his lips together in a hard line and glared at Kazan. It was all he could do not to strike him down. He picked up his helmet and jammed his it back on his head, buckling the chin strap in one angry movement.

"No. I leave now to surrender my sword and my life as personal forfeit for this folly. You would be wise to do the same, Kazan, if you wish to see any of your men left alive."

"I will call the Wrathmen to hold you, Borosa. Do not tempt me."

Borosa stopped and looked back at Kazan. "The Wrathmen have fled for their lives. You know as well as I, Talesians have a particular hatred for Wrathmen." He nodded grimly to Kazan. "There is no sun to torment them now, but there are plenty of marglims in these woods and there is also the river. The river is freezing cold and Talesians are quite imaginative. If not for your sake, at least for the sake of your men, surrender."

Borosa dropped the flap of the tent and hurried into the night to seek the High Prince and try in some way to plead for the lives of his men and for the innocent princess that awaited the battle's outcome in Gorendt Keep.

## Chapter 21

THE OLD WOMAN had predicted correctly: the Sherehn ran red with the blood of warriors and horses alike. And there was no mercy from either Talesian barbarian or Riehlilian warrior.

In one fearless sweep, the combined forces of Riehlilians, Talesians and captives, decimated the proud Maretstanis and defiant Gorendtians. Assur's swords, arms and shoulders were soaked in blood--even Adzra's gray coat was now crusted and filthy and he often slipped and stumbled over the blood-slick ground.

Assur barely had time to notice that the brave Mar'Kess was now on foot--his horse cut down beneath him--hacking away like a madman. The once immaculate blue and white surcoat hung in bloody rags and his bright gold hair was now dulled to a dirty gray.

The shouting, the noise, and the stench all added to the madness. Assur's initial rage had cooled to cold hate as he slashed through row after row of Gorendtian warriors. He felt nothing but the steady, mindless drive to punish Kazan and with each stroke of his swords, Assur satisfied that inner demand until he fell exhausted to his knees unable to lift his arms from his sides.

JUST AS THE SUN touched the eastern skies, the legions of Gorendt fell back and from the midst of the seething army, Commander Borosa rode forward, along with two of his officers. His right flanking officer bore Maretstan's banner, flown upside down in the traditional signal of surrender.

Prince D'Assuriel had set up a rude command post with a folding camp chair set in the middle of a black break hide spread out on the ground. He had not yet taken the time to wash the filth and blood from his hands and armor, but sat in a kind of terrible barbaric grimness that served to remind those around him he was still a Talesian and had not forgotten his savage past.

Borosa dropped to his knees and set his sword on the ground before his High Prince. He fought to

control his inner shaking. He had never seen the Ter-Rey face to face and now, kneeling before him, he knew why his old commander had taken such pains to warn him.

The black-patterned eyes were cold and hard as the hardest steel. While Assur gave the appearance of sitting rather casually in his chair, legs outstretched, Borosa felt he was kneeling in the presence of a coiled viper.

"Your Highness, I am Commander Borosa of the High Command of Maretstan. I bring you greetings from my lord, Prince Dahka. I shall be brief: in my lord's name I hereby surrender my sword and all my oaths and bonds and beg permission to throw myself upon my sword and die for the acts of my men and my prince. I would ask only that you forgive them as they were only doing as their duty demanded. I also beg for the life of the Princess Dahsmahl, who is innocent."

Borosa bowed his head and placed his palms flat at his sides. He closed his eyes and prayed that his death would be swift. He fleetingly thought of his wife, dearest Elissa and the children... Verlian have mercy.

There was a long silence, until at last he heard the High Prince clear his throat and shift in his chair. Borosa did not dare to look up.

"Whose orders were you following?" D'Assuriel asked quietly.

Borosa swallowed, still not able to look up. "Those of my Lord Dahka, Your Highness."

"You will tell me why Dahka was foolish enough to send you on this traitorous errand."

The commander gulped again and cleared his own throat. "Because, Great Lord, my Lord Dahka was convinced of Lord Kazan's scheme to take Riehl and place his own daughter, Dahsmahl, on the throne as wife of Prince Alor."

"And where is the Princess Dahsmahl?"

"She awaits her marriage to Alor; she is in Gorendt Keep."

There was another pause as he heard the High Prince speak in low tones to someone near him. A cluster of Talesians broke away, sent off on some errand.

"You may look up, Commander," Assur said sternly.

Borosa lifted his head and faced the Ter-Rey. He was sitting upright and leaning forward.

"You may not take your life, Borosa--not until I speak with the Princess Dahsmahl. Your surrender is accepted and I will spare the lives of your men, but only when they lay down their weapons in front of me. What is your Field Captain's name?"

"It is Captain Abalt, my lord."

Assur's gaze flicked over the rigid Abalt kneeling next to Borosa.

"Captain Abalt, you will order all of the Maretstani warriors to surrender their swords to me before nightfall. Surrender your own now."

The trembling captain hastened to comply and set his own sword on the ground in front of him.

"I, Jara ab'Abalt, hereby surrender my sword and offer all my oaths and bonds," he said in a voice barely concealing his fear.

"Accepted. Go now," Assur commanded, dismissing the Field Captain. He turned his attentions back to Borosa.

"I have sent for the Princess to confirm your story. Until that time, you will remain in my custody and held as a prisoner of war. And, Commander, where is Kazan?"

Borosa again looked into that hard, unyielding gaze and saw Kazan's death. He shuddered.

"I do not know, Great Lord," he said honestly. "He may have fled. Most of the Wrathmen have already begun to run south. They are afraid--"

"They should be," Assur said bluntly. "I have already sent my warriors after them. They will not get far. Kazan will be caught soon and he will die, Borosa. He will not be permitted to die on his sword either."

Borosa did not miss the ominous tone in Assur's voice. He shuddered again. By Verlian's blade, he did not even want to know how the Ter-Rey intended Kazan to die.

Assur gestured to two of his warriors standing nearby and they stepped forward, each carrying shackles in their hands. They manacled Borosa's wrists behind him and then his ankles, chained just far enough apart for him to walk in a short hobbling fashion. They jerked him to his feet, holding him firmly

between them to await Assur's final orders.

"Take him to Riehl Keep and place him in one of the larger cells. He is not to be harmed." Assur studied Borosa for a moment. "I do not believe you are the same fool as Kazan, however, neither am I. If Princess Dahsmahl's story does not corroborate with yours, I will send your head to Dahka. Am I clear?"

Borosa nodded. "Perfectly, Great Lord. I can only praise the blessed Verlian you have permitted me this reprieve and thank you for your mercy."

Assur nodded curtly to him. "Then I pray Verlian you are truly an honorable man." He signaled to the warriors to take him away.

Borosa's heart ceased some of its wild hammering. For now, he had been spared.

NO WRATHMAN found alive, however, would be spared. Without the leadership and direction of the Reverend `Fa, they ran for their lives. Achad and Nattuck led patrols deep into the forests to find them and once found, the Wrathmen did not receive an easy death. Many were left, hanging from the lowest tree branches by their wrists, to await the next pack of marglims. To make sure the marglims did not miss them, their legs were slashed, allowing the blood to drip to the earth and leave a powerful signal for the flesh-eaters.

As Borosa had warned, the Talesians wasted no time in utilizing what was at hand to punish the rest of the Wrathmen they found. The cold, barren face of the Rift Cut suited admirably to stake out the luckless Wrathmen, and for several hundred turns to come, their dried, fallen bones could be found among the rocks at its base along the valley floor.

IT WAS KUURUS who found Kitarisa, twisted and bleeding among the boulders at the base of the Rift Cut. A sob caught his throat as he tried to lift her up into his arms and comfort her. Her back was broken and her left arm was charred and blackened beyond all recognition--damage so terrible he could see the bones of her wrist protruding from her ruined skin. She was alive--just.

"My lady, can you hear me?" He gently touched her brow, hoping for some response. Her eyelids fluttered open.

"Kuurus?" she whispered through cracked, bleeding lips.

"Yes," he answered. Unashamed, tears ran down his scarred face. He bit his own lip till it bled.

"Is she? Is she...?"

"Yes, my lady. Malgora is destroyed. The warriors are free."

She nodded weakly. "I am glad. And Assur?"

"He is well." Kuurus hadn't the courage to tell her that he too, was near the others, hunting for her among the rocks.

They found Malgora's body--a bloody, torn mass of flesh. Assur ordered her head removed and had it jammed on a spear tip. The spear itself, with its grisly trophy, would be placed on the eastern shore of the Sherehn as a gruesome reminder of what had taken place there and to caution those in the future to heed its warning.

Kitarisa clutched at Kuurus' jerkin with her good right hand and tried to pull herself up.

"Kuurus, you must promise me something. Your oath. You promised."

"Yes, my lady. My life is yours to command."

"Take mine." Her voice was now a whisper. "Take it now, quickly. I could not bear for him to see me now like this. Please, Kuurus. Do it now!"

"My lady! I cannot do that." Kuurus struggled with his vow and his conscience. He could honor neither. "Please, my lady. I cannot."

"Yes, you can. I beg you. Spare me this agony."

She looked up at him, beseechingly. Kuurus' heart wrenched within his chest. She was nearly gone anyway--her pain terrible, beyond belief. And Verlian would assuredly Summon her for what she had done for them. Slowly he reached for his short dagger in his belt. He would be quick--a short deep thrust and her pain would be over. Her tears were more of a torture than he could bear. Kuurus held the knife poised over her heart and waited for her nod.

"Tell him I..."

"What, by Verlian's blood are you doing!" Assur's voice roared from behind him. Kuurus looked up only in time to see Assur's fist come crashing down into his face. He reeled away from Kitarisa, the knife flew from his hand, clattering against the rocks.

"She called me to obey my oath!"

Assur stumbled through the rocks and grabbed Kuurus by his jerkin, pulling him to his feet. "By all that is sacred, I will see you disgraced before the Goddess! How dare you!"

"By the Goddess, she *begged* me!" Kuurus struggled to break free from Assur's grip, but to no avail.

"She killed the witch for us...she--"

"Kitarisa is *dying*," Kuurus' voice cracked with emotion.

Assur stared at him, uncomprehending. He suddenly let him go and turned to find Kitarisa. When he found her, horror riddled his tired face. She was destroyed. Utterly.

"Kita!" Assur dropped between the rocks next to her and tried to pull her out of the rocks, into his arms.

Kuurus looked away, too heartsick to watch Assur realize the truth, that Princess Kitarisa was almost dead.

"My lord, her back is broken...no."

Assur stopped in time and took up her good hand. He, too, saw the ruined left arm and the blood on her face. She lay so twisted between the rocks, her dark, lovely eyes were now dull with the pain.

"Kita'lara, no!" Assur pressed her hand to his cheek. His hands shook.

Never, in his entire life had Kuurus seen Assur so shattered. Out of the corner of his eye, spotted some of the others, Mar'Kess and Achad approach, but hastily signaled them to stay back.

"Do not punish, Kuurus," Kitarisa begged softly. "He was doing as I asked."

"If you wish it. Kita, you must not move. We will get you out of here..."

"No, Assur. No. I will not live much longer." She smiled weakly up at him.

Kuurus knew every one of her tears was like a knife in Assur's heart--the same as for him. In spite of his warnings, Assur could not help but lift her gently into his arms.

"Once you asked me if I could ever love a barbarian?"

He nodded.

"Yes, I can," She smiled again and with her good hand, she reached up and touched his cheek. "I am safe," she whispered.

Kitarisa closed her eyes and twisted against the pain. She turned her face toward Assur--only one soft sob escaped her lips: "Assur", and then...nothing.

Kuurus watched the rage of Ter-Rey's loss roar up through him, like a white-hot inferno of pain. Assur threw back his head and howled like dying animal.

"NO! You can't have her! You can't take her now! Nooo!" He clutched Kitarisa's broken body to his chest and pressed his face into her hair. "Don't take her now!"

Behind Kuurus, Brekk and the others turned their heads in grief. Mar'Kess looked away, trying to hide the fact that he was openly weeping. The sight of the Ter-Rey holding Kitarisa's dead body was too much for some of them. Even Achad was silent.

Assur gathered Kitarisa in his arms and stood up. He turned, to face Kuurus and the warriors gathered around him. Rage, pain, and utter exhaustion twisted his handsome features.

"Find Kazan," he ordered through gritted teeth. "Get him and bring him to me in chains. No one will rest, no one will eat, no one will sleep until he is at my feet. Go!"

In silence the warriors turned to locate their weapons or horses that they might fulfill Assur's wish. No one contradicted the order. Kazan was as good as dead. Kuurus knew Assur would show no mercy to the Gorendtian prince--he deserved none.

"We will make her pyre in Riehl," Assur stated quietly, watching the remaining warriors mount up and leave. "Verlian will take her from the place she was to have ruled."

"My lord, no. Return her to the Catacombs!" Kuurus protested.

Assur glowered him. "Would you have me send her to Verlian from that place of madness? You are

mad yourself to even suggest such a thing. Kitarisa will be sent to the Goddess as befitting her rank."

"My lord, Kuurus is right," Mar'Kess interrupted, placing a restraining hand on his arm. "Both you and Kuurus were restored by the Daughter; it was *she* who gave Kitarisa the power to defeat Malgora."

"The Daughter will surely restore the Lady Kitarisa to us," Kuurus added.

"Kitarisa is dead," Assur said flatly, holding her even closer to him. "Not even the Daughter can bring her back."

"We do not know that, my lord," Mar'Kess went on, "but surely if she changed the lady to another creature, she can restore her to us."

"Great Lord, you must at least ask," Kuurus pleaded.

"And if they cannot? What then?"

"Then, we send her to Verlian as would be proper, but you must at least *try* ." Mar'Kess reached out and lightly touched Kitarisa's hair. "She deserves that, at least."

Assur bowed his head over Kitarisa, visibly struggling with his inner misgivings and his comrades' reasoning. Kuurus knew Assur detested the White Sisters as much as he did, but the Daughter *had* saved both of them and she had changed Kitarisa before their very eyes into that beast--that unknown creature--to do battle with Malgora, but even the Daughter's power was not enough to stop Kitarisa from being taken from them.

Kuurus did not envy his lord's decision, but in his heart, he knew Kitarisa deserved at least the chance to be restored to them.

Mar'Kess place a comforting hand on Assur's shoulder.

"Take her to them. Allow the Daughters to try."

Reluctantly Assur nodded his head. He shifted Kitarisa in his arms and headed for the waiting Adzra.

The great warhorse was nearly spent and stood, head down, waiting for his master to ask him to make one last journey.

ASSUR RODE THROUGH the winding, narrow passage ways of the Soldrat Mountains, alone, holding Kitarisa's ruined body against him with one arm and the reins in his other hand. He was beyond exhaustion, functioning only on the ragged edges of his disciplined training and sheer will-power.

Hoof beat after hoof beat, mile after mile, took him closer to the massive cavern-temple where he would leave his beloved Kitarisa to whatever fate the remaining Daughters held for her. There was the barest margin of room for him and the horse to squeeze through the last opening in the chasm that led to the great entrance to the Catacombs.

Adzra's hooves made a hollow, echoing sound on the red granite steps as he rode the horse into the temple. Miraculously, the flame in the center of the first great hall still flared in the gloom.

In the short time Malgora had been defeated, the remaining Daughters had already begun to show their influence. The dead Wrathmen and Sisters alike had been removed and a sense of order and calm permeated the Catacombs' dark corridors. The ancient hall had been already swept clean as if in expectation of his arrival.

Assur halted the horse just before the dais at the end of the hall and swung down, easing Kitarisa from the saddle. He could barely hold her; his arms shook with fatigue. He could think of nothing else, but to sink to his knees and wait. Assur had never willingly knelt to anyone, except when he had received his swords and the gold band that encircled his brow proclaiming him the new Ter-Rey--or when he prayed to Verlian. All he could do was close his eyes and wait.

He thought he heard the gentle rustling of skirts against the stone floor and voices murmuring in soft tones.

"Good Assur, you have returned to us," a familiar voice spoke to him. He looked up into the warm gaze of Thespa. "And you have brought your lady."

A handful of Daughters and what appeared to be younger Sisters, stood respectfully off to one side. Their eyes betrayed none of the former icy-madness, only deep compassion and concern.

"She...she is dead. Malgora." He could not finish.

"We know and we are grieved."

Assur struggled for his next words. He had never begged for anything in his life and the long-remembered hatred for the Sisters was hard to put down. Fatigue and his love for Kitarisa finally won out.

He bowed his head again in submission.

"I...beg you to restore her to me?"

He sensed Thespa approach him and looked up.

"My Lord Assur, I know this is a difficult thing for you to ask--it has taken all your pride to do so. We will--"

"I will do whatever you wish," he said bluntly, cutting across the Daughter's words.

"We do not ask anything of you, only the privilege to restore our Order and the ways of Verlian's Daughters."

"Done." Assur studied the kindly face of the Daughter, expecting to see the cold gaze and hear more ruthless bargaining for Kitarisa's life.

"We will do everything we can. We can make no absolute promises, but we will try."

"Can you restore her or not?" he demanded.

The Holy Daughter sighed. "What you ask is difficult, even for us. My Lord D'Assuriel and Ter-Rey, we are your subjects too, and we will do all that is within our power. Surely you can expect no more?"

She turned and gestured toward the raised altar stone at the head of the temple. "Come, place Kitarisa here."

Assur struggled to his feet and climbed the few remaining steps to the altar stone where he gently laid Kitarisa down upon it. Stretching his arms wide, he rested his weight on his hands, head bowed over her.

"Restore her to me and you will have your Order and your Sanctuaries."

He felt her gentle hand on his dirtied, blood-stained arm.

"And if we do not?"

Assur sighed. "Then, it will not matter what you do."

"It will matter a great deal, my lord. Without your permission, *wewill* stay within these walls, where we shall remain safe."

He glanced at the Daughter. "That is what she said when she died. She was safe." Assur returned his gaze to Kitarisa, too tired to discuss the issue any further.

Thespa's hand reached for his left temple and cheekbone. Her fingers probed gently until they settled into the correct position. At once, he felt the weariness drain from his body to be replaced with a kind of calming, numb sensation.

"It is an empty relief, my lord," she apologized. "A temporary reprieve from the exhaustion. You must get real rest as it will only last a few hours. You must go now. Kitarisa's safe with us. We will inform you. Go now. Return to your warriors and your people. They need you."

Assur nodded, but still reluctant to leave Kitarisa. He took her whole, right hand in his and placed a gentle kiss in the palm. "I would have taken you home, Kita," he whispered to her still form. Carefully, he placed her hand across her breast and turned away, knowing if he stayed any longer, he would never leave her.

The same relieving touch had apparently been applied to Adzra as the horse appeared fresher and more alert. Without looking back, Assur mounted the warhorse and heeled him around to leave the great hall.

What he did not see, but only heard, was the rustling of many skirts as the Daughter's curtsied to him as he rode out of the Catacombs.

## Chapter 22

THEY FOUND KAZAN deep inside the ruined belly of Sherehn Keep with a remaining handful of loyal retainers at his side--and it was Raldan Mar'Kess who made the discovery. The fallen prince offered little resistance to being taken and bound, but he could not refrain from speaking angrily to his former First Captain.

"So, Mar'Kess, you have betrayed your own prince to that painted-up savage. How ironic that it should be *you* who is taking me prisoner."

The Talesian warriors in Mar'Kess' patrol bristled at Kazan's insult. Even the Riehlans became tense.

"Every word you say will make it all the worse for you, Kazan. I suggest you keep silent until you are in front of the Ter-Rey."

Mar'Kess deliberately dropped the honorific of 'lord' as he was no longer obliged to do so and at this point--he held only the deepest contempt for his former prince.

He nodded curtly for the warriors to take him away. By Assur's own orders, Kazan would not be allowed to ride back to Riehl, but walk, led by the throat behind Mar'Kess' horse. Mar'Kess was briefly thankful Assur had not ordered Kazan to be dragged back to Riehl--an ancient Talesian punishment that all Gorendtians remembered. A torture such as that would leave little left for Assur to punish.

By the time they reached the gates of Riehl, a crowd of angry spectators had gathered to watch Kazan as he was led through their city--the one he had boasted he would take in a single day. Children ran along the grim procession, gleefully flinging mud and horse dung at the disgraced prince, while their parents spat on him and hurled their insults.

Above their heads, Assur watched the proceedings from one of the tower windows. He held a cup of steaming shen tea in his long fingers. He was cold in spite of the warming fires in the keep. With one free hand he tugged at the fur about his shoulders.

"Send for Mar'Kess when he has finished with Kazan," he said to the young Siarsi attending him. The youth bowed respectfully.

"At once, Great Lord," he murmured.

The young warrior turned to go, but stopped when Assur suddenly held up his hand.

"And Lostic, find me a redreed. A long, stout one."

The boy bowed again, a perplexed look on his face, but he hastened to obey his order.

Assur took a reflective sip of the hot tea and sighed. The white-hot rage in him had cooled considerably. As Swordmaster Rame had so often said, never strike a blow unless your heart was cold. His heart was cold, dead-cold and weary.

Punishing Kazan was foremost in his thoughts, but now it seemed an empty revenge, not because Kazan did not deserve it, but because no matter what he did it would not heal his deepest wound. Riehl would be restored, the captive warriors would return to their homes, and order would resume in the Eastern Lands. Even the happy surprise of a returned Courronus, cold and exhausted from his ordeal with the Wrathmen, could not ease Assur's sorrow. None of this would restore Kitarisa to him.

THE FALCON HALL was filled with Talesian warriors, waiting eagerly for their prince. A rattle of a war drum silenced their eager murmurings. In unison, D'Assuriel's favored warriors began to chant in their ancient tongue, praising their leader, their chief--the Ter-Rey of their tribes. Spears beat the floor in time as their voices rose to something near adoration.

To the man, they went to one knee as Assur entered the hall. It took a moment for the startled Riehlans to comprehend what they saw, but quickly composed themselves and followed the others.

Instead of merely walking into the hall, surrounded by high-ranking retainers, D'Assuriel Taksma D'Achadek dar Daeamon, arrived standing on a platform borne on the shoulders by eight burly Talesians. The platform itself was constructed of spears lashed tightly together and covered with a rare, white break hide. It was an unashamed display of admiration the Talesians paid their prince--certainly no Gorendtian soldier would have ever considered singing Kazan's praises, much less carry him on their shoulders.

D'Assuriel's face remained stern, almost impassive. A magnificent cloak made from the black fur of meerfoxes and insets of red fur cut in intricate patterns, draped him from his shoulders past his heels. He carried a spear, the only symbol of his high office--the shaft covered in beaten silver and break horn; the spear's tip made of hammered gold. The only other indication of his rank was a plain gold band encircling his brow.

Kazan shifted on his knees, muttering under his breath. "A proud show," he said angrily, but was silenced by the sharp reminder of a spear point in his back.

"You'd best keep silent," Borosa said, kneeling next to him. "The High Prince will have little mercy for traitors."

"Advice from another traitor? Ha! I will not beg for mercy from a half-naked savage, a barbaric animal who--" He never finished. The business end of saddle knife was pressed firmly against his throat, banishing the last of his words.

The eight bearers slowly lowered Assur to the floor and once he had stepped off, he sat down on the Falcon Throne set on the dais, draped with more of the immaculate white hide.

"You may rise," he said quietly, "but for you." He indicated Kazan and Borosa.

Almost leisurely, Assur stood and faced the terrified court.

"All of you are here to stand witness to disgrace," Assur began, his deep voice ringing with authority. "There is no word to accurately describe my anger. The traitorous activities of a lawless and greedy prince has brought two provinces to the brink of destruction, as well as the death of a rightful heir. For three hundred sunturns, you have been allowed free rein, to govern your province as you saw fit. The only condition ever demanded of you was to obey my Will and keep my peace. No agent of my house has infringed on your right of self-rule. But there have been injustices against you and I have seen the bitter oppression for myself." He paused, leveling his ferocious gaze on his frightened subjects.

"My Will shall be obeyed; there will be order in the Eastern Provinces."

He sat down in the white-draped throne, resting the spear across his knees. "And now to the problem of Riehl. The rightful heir is the Princess Kitarisa, but she is dead. Bring Raldan Mar'Kess to me."

Surprise rippled through the hall as an equally astonished Mar'Kess stepped forward and dropped to one knee before him.

"You have proven yourself worthy, both on the battlefield and in the matter of my own life. You are fit to govern and to lead. My Will is that you be made Prime Governor of Riehl and Gorendt until such time as a royal successor is named. You will swear fealty to me now, Raldan Mar'Kess, if you accept."

Mar'Kess struggled to speak, but finally lifted his head.

"I so swear, Your Highness, with my life," he said solemnly. "My oaths and bonds are yours."

Assur nodded and offered one of his rare smiles. He placed a firm hand on Mar'Kess' shoulder and bade him to stand. "You will stay here by me," he said, indicating Mar'Kess should stand between him and Achad.

"Bring the Princess Dahsmahl and Commander Borosa."

From the back of the great hall, a tall woman, soberly attired in deepest violet, her black hair coifed under a rich headdress and veil, approached the Falcon Throne with measured, graceful steps. At the base of the dais, she knelt, hands clasped before her.

"I have heard private testimony from the Princess Dahsmahl and find no fault in her. She has acted in obedience to her father, Prince Dahka and to Prince Kazan. She is exonerated of any wrong doing and I release her to return to her home, but with this warning: agents of my house shall be posted within Maretstan to watch Prince Dahka. If I learn of the slightest indication of betrayal, I shall not hesitate to seek retaliation."

Princess Dahsmahl looked up and nodded. His meaning was clear. Assur would not tolerate any more of her father's foolishness.

"You are merciful, Great Lord and I shall convey your wishes to my father as soon as I return. And I thank you for not allowing the marriage between Prince Alor and myself to take place."

He motioned for her to stand. "I would not ask a loyal subject to marry the son of a traitor. You are free Dahsmahl, to marry who you wish, but I will warn you too: marry wisely."

Assur pulled a document from his sleeve, sealed and ribboned in his colors. He bent toward the princess so no one else would hear him.

"This is my Directive and Will, Princess, which you will take to Dahka. See that he gets it and obeys it." He handed the document to her.

Dahsmahl bowed again and took a respectful step back, while Assur turned his attentions to Borosa, still kneeling before him. He signaled Kuurus to come forward, bringing something held in his hands.

"Commander Borosa, you have spoken truthfully as well as fighting courageously even for a cause you

knew was wrong. You are released, but with certain conditions. Since you are greatly respected by your own warriors I will allow you to return to Maretstan as their Field Commander. However, upon your arrival, you will be reduced in rank to Lead Captain for two sunturns as your punishment for taking arms against me. You may petition me after that time to be restored to your former rank, but again as I have warned your princess, your movements shall be watched. Should I be told of any traitorous activities on your part, you will be punished and there will be no mercy."

Assur nodded to Borosa's guards to release him from the chains and then for Borosa to stand up.

"I am returning your sword to you. You are not allowed to throw yourself upon it. That is my Will. You will carry it and restore honor to your name."

Borosa took the sword and immediately went down again on one knee. "You are merciful and just, Great Lord. I hereby swear and reaffirm my loyalties and all my oaths and bonds to you. Verlian has blessed me and I thank Her for your mercy."

Assur nodded. "You may go now."

Both Dahsmahl and Borosa bowed and swiftly left the great hall, eager to be homeward bound.

Assur signaled to the attending Siarsi standing on either side of their prisoner and sat down again on the Falcon Throne.

Kazan was jerked to his feet and dragged like a sack of meal across the floor where he was shoved on his knees at the base of Assur's dais.

"Read the accusations."

There was a rustling of papers and a shifting of feet as the court scribe, nearly paralyzed with terror, approached the platform. He cleared his throat and held up the papers in trembling hands.

"In the Sunturn of 738, the Tenth Sunturn of Your Reign  
May Verlian Give..."

Assur waved his hand ordering the poor scribe to dispense with the formalities.

"We find the accused, Kazan dar Baen, Prince of Gorendt guilty of the following:

"The first: Willfully conspiring to usurp, overthrow, and cause harm to Our Person for the purpose of self-gain and the total annihilation of Talesia."

"The second: to empower, enthrone and elevate your son, by name of Alor, to the Falcon Throne of Riehl without our consent, approval, or by issue of petition, or by counsel and consent of the Council Circle of Riehl."

"The third: that you did willfully torture, punish, and cause the ultimate death of your own natural daughter, the true heir to Riehl, the Princess Kitarisa."

"The fourth: that you have willfully conspired and consorted with our enemy, those who are known as members of the Covenant of White Sisters, their agents and minions, in an attempt of subversion to Our Will."

"The fifth: that you did will fully conspire with our servant and loyal Prince Dahka, Sovereign of Maretstan, into traitorous activities and a deliberate attack upon Riehl in order to further the illegal gain of Riehl lands and your own seditious purposes."

"We find you guilty of the above and commit you to punishment for such crimes."

The scribe paused, having finished the complaint, his hands still trembled holding the brittle paper. Assur raised his hand to dismiss the scribe.

"You may speak," he said, never taking his eyes from Kazan's face.

"I have nothing to say," Kazan spat out. "Butcher me now, barbarian, but mark me, there are others who desire your downfall. For too long you have ground us under your heel. There will be others after me who will demand justice and freedom from your heavy yoke!"

A deathly silence filled the hall; no one dared move or speak. All looked at each other with astonishment.

Unperturbed, Assur stared down at Kazan, stroking his jaw.

"A heavy yoke? Tell me, Kazan, when in the last three hundred sunturns have you felt the sting of the lash, or the burden of tribute? Have you suffered under the oppression by my sword? By Verlian's blood, you have suffered more from the hands of the Wrathmen than from me." Assur stood up, his face

darkening with anger. "The issue is *your* guilt. Five counts of treason stand over your head and you *dare* accuse me oppression!"

Assur turned his back to the kneeling Kazan, folded his arms across his chest and looked down as if to reconsider his thoughts. Another long silence filled the hall--scarcely a soul took a breath as they awaited his next words. Assur slowly turned to face his silent subjects.

"I came to the Eastern Lands to see for myself what mischief has been brewing and I nearly came too late--it is my own folly that I intend to remedy. But what I have seen has shown me Kazan dar Baen is not fit to rule. I have seen oppression and hunger; fear and want. Whose yoke do your people bear, Kazan?"

Silence.

"Do you deny any of the charges set against you?"

"No, lord."

D'Assuriel sat down again and studied his defiant subject. "Before I pass judgment on you Kazan, I will say two things. First, you have been given the most difficult task demanded of one man: to rule. But it does not excuse your abuse of that power."

"Secondly, I will acknowledge my neglect of the Eastern Provinces and will move as quickly as is possible to remedy the situation, but I will not tolerate disobedience to my Will. The peace will be kept."

Assur lifted the spear and pointed it down toward Kazan.

"Kazan dar Baen, Prince of Gorendt, I find you guilty of treason on all counts. The punishment for treason is death and I sentence you to be beheaded and your body to be hung from the battlements of Riehl, but first you will taste your own cruelties."

He signaled sharply to the attending warriors to strip Kazan and hold him face down to the floor. Assur took up the whip-like redreed, the one young Lostic had carefully cut from the nearby banks of the Sherehn, and stood over the prostrate form of Kazan.

"Princess Kitarisa is not here to see her own vengeance, but I am, and the others who were witness to your cruelty against her. No one in all of this Dominion has the right to punish you, save for me. You will be punished Kazan, for your crimes against her."

Assur brought the redreed down with all his strength on Kazan's back. The defiant prince jerked against the reed's excruciating pain, but did not make a sound. Again, Assur brought the reed down, cutting into the soft flesh.

By the tenth stroke, Kazan's began to moan. Horrified, women of the Riehlian court turned their faces from the brutal scene, but no one dared to leave.

At the fifteenth stroke, Kazan broke. Alternately howling and whimpering, the traitorous lord writhed on the cold stone tiles of the great hall.

"I'll see you rot!" Kazan flared, still unrepentant.

"Silence!" Assur roared. Again the reed came down and Kazan screamed. By the twentieth stroke, Gorendt's prince was pleading for his life.

"Mercy, Great Lord! I beg you!"

Assur stepped back, breathing hard from his exertions.

"Take him to the cells below, to wait for his punishment. No one is to attend to him and he is to have no water."

He jerked his hand toward the warriors standing over Kazan and without further instruction, they yanked Kazan to his feet and dragged him stumbling and bleeding from the hall.

"Bring those two to me." He indicated Alor and Alea.

Alor tried to make a brave show like his father, but ultimately collapsed before the dais, thoroughly defeated. Alea could only weep.

"I do not believe either of you have the character of your father; you have merely been his tools, however ill-used. I'll make this brief. Prince Alor, I do not think you would be foolish enough to try to avenge your father, but I will take no chances. You are hereby stripped of your rank, titles and lands. You are to leave Gorendt and never return."

Alor's mouth fell open, too astonished to speak.

"And you," Assur turned his attention to Alea, "the same will be for you. As of this moment, you have no title, rank, lands or honors. I will see that you are married, comfortably, but in the meantime, you will get yourself to the mountain sanctuary of the Holy Daughters where you will learn some manners and humility."

"My lord," Alea shrieked, but it was too late. Assur had dismissed them, clearly irritated with having to deal with either of them.

He turned to face the assembled court, his expression still hard and unforgiving from his dealings with Kazan.

"I will warn all of you but once and let this message be heard from the northern lands of the Qualani, south to the Sea of the Volt and beyond to the Barren: my peace will be kept, my Will obeyed."

He offered Mar'Kess a slight bow of his head. "The Falcon Throne is yours Governor Mar'Kess. Lead your people as wisely as I have seen you lead your warriors in the field."

With that, Assur took up the great spear in his left hand. In one sharp motion, he flung the bloody redreed to the tiles and without looking at his warriors or any of his silent subjects, swept out of Falcon Hall with long, purposeful strides.

## Chapter 23

CAPTAIN SYUNN WAS running for his life and for the first time he would know the true meaning of fear.

For two days, Assur and the faithful Kuurus had been relentlessly tracking him. Refreshed and fit, Adzra pounded along the open plain that followed the eastern shores of the Sherehn, eager to find his master's prey.

Syunn had tried to be clever. He crossed and re-crossed the Sherehn several times, hoping to throw them off but the captain was tiring and began to make mistakes. Remains of hastily eaten food had been carelessly tossed along the way; fresh horse droppings betrayed his trail and the most telling sign was a horseshoe--a sure indication that he was not far ahead and his tired horse was lame.

"How will you end him, my lord?" Kuurus asked, keeping his own eager horse in line with the big gray.

"Quickly. I am weary of battles and blood."

"The Goddess will not Summon him if you take his head."

"A Wrathman would never be Summoned, no matter how he was to die. I do not care, Kuurus. Syunn will die by my hand and I will be done with it."

At dusk, they rounded a large outcropping of boulders and spotted the luckless Wrathman in the distance, trying to urge more speed out of an exhausted, lame horse.

Assur tugged the black shirka cloth over his mouth and nose, and spurred Adzra into a gallop.

"You are not to interfere, Kuurus, but only to witness," he ordered sharply.

The captain had heard the rattle of hoof beats approaching him from behind and kicked at his own horse. The wretched beast struggled into stumbling gallop--a pitiful effort that enraged the desperate Wrathman. He beat the animal with the flat of his sword, but the effort was too late.

In relentless strides, Assur's horse descended upon him. Syunn's last vision was that of the Ter-Rey standing in his stirrups, sword overhead and death glittering in his black-marked eyes.

The long sword hissed through the wane light and found its mark. The impact sent the headless Wrathman and his horse toppling into the dust.

Assur wheeled Adzra around without so much as a glance at the dead captain.

"A brave stroke, cleanly done, my lord. A worthy blow for a warrior," Kuurus said in praising tones.

Assur refitted the blade into the scabbard on his back and then jerked the shirka cloth away from his face.

"I am a savage," he said bitterly.

The ride back to Riehl took only one day, much faster than the time it took to hunt for Syunn and as they entered the last gates to the inner courtyard it was nearly dark. Torches flared brightly from the high walls and gates.

Heartsick and weary, Assur handed the reins of his tired horse to the nearest servant and climbed the steps to the keep with a heavy tread.

Mar'Kess awaited him at the top, smiling and beaming at him. The new Prime Governor had taken well to his new role. Clad in a fresh surcoat of gleaming white and blue, the falcon emblem emblazoned across his chest, he looked every inch the ruler of his province.

"You were successful, my lord?"

"Yes. Bring me something to eat," Assur ordered, brushing past Mar'Kess. He shoved his gauntlets at another attending servant and then stopped to remove his swords.

"Of course, my lord, but first you must greet our new guests," Mar'Kess went on, unperturbed by Assur's rude manner.

"I am in no mood for guests, Mar'Kess. I want food, a bath and sleep. Tomorrow we will begin the plans for our return to Daeamon Keep."

"I am certain you will want to meet these guests--they are quite influential," Mar'Kess said, still grinning.

Assur stopped and scowled, thoroughly irritated by Mar'Kess foolish-looking expression.

"Who are these `guests?'" he demanded.

"People of great importance," Mar'Kess said, almost laughing.

From behind Mar'Kess, Assur saw several others grinning and looking equally as foolish.

"No."

"Yes, my lord, you will."

Boldly, Mar'Kess took his elbow and steered him firmly down the corridor, past more smiling Riehlans and beaming Talesian warriors, into the Falcon Hall.

Assur angrily snatched his arm away from him. "You overstep yourself, Mar'Kess! I am in no mood for--!"

"Assur?" the soft, pleading voice called to him, shattering his anger.

He blinked and squinted into the gloom of the great hall.

She was pale and thin from her ordeal and her left arm was wrapped in thick bandaging from elbow to her fingertips, but she was alive and well.

Directly behind her stood Thespa and three of the Daughters, regal in their dark-red robes.

"Kita?" he breathed, scarcely believing his eyes. She nodded and smiled at him.

Without realizing what he was doing, he shoved his swords into Mar'Kess' hands and in two strides was across the floor, pulling Kitarisa into his arms.

"Gently, my lord," he heard Thespa caution. "She is still weak and her arm..." her voice trailed off, knowing her words were falling on deaf ears.

Assur tasted Kitarisa's tears as he pressed a long, possessive kiss on her soft mouth and then pulled her even closer to him, almost lifting her off her feet.

"Assur, your men," Kita murmured against him, but he didn't hear her.

Her toes left the floor as he swung her around him in a joyful, dizzying circle.

"I will take you home, Kita," he said, smiling, pressing his lips to her ear.

She certainly did not hear him either over the pounding spears and raucous, happy chanting:

"Ter-Rey-A! Ter-Rey-A! Ter-Rey-A!"

~\*~

## C.L. Scheel

"My sixth grade teacher encouraged me to write, but an opera star inspires me to persist, to stay with it."

Like most authors, writing has been a part of Christine's life for as long as she can remember. "If it is in your heart, there is no way you can ignore it or stop it."

Under A Warrior's Moon is her first published work in the science fiction/fantasy genre, and she has

plans for two sequels. Having penned several works in other genres, Christine also intends to expand into the paranormal and eventually mainstream.

Born in Portland, Oregon, but raised and educated in the Pacific Northwest, Christine finally settled in Reno, Nevada and resides there with her family, a fluffy red chow-chow, and recently, an elegant, stuck-up black cat. Her interests range from horses to ballet; mountain hiking to opera. However, books and writing are closest to her heart.

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To Robert and Erik.  
My own true warriors.  
And for S. E. R.

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