

# Trail of the Blood Mage

by Carey Cauthen

There were stains on the ceiling, the barest of flecks part of a greater whole. Greater is perhaps not the word to use, Aria thought, as she stood in the ramshackle doorway, letting the image before her imprint itself into her memory. No chance of forgetting this one.

In the middle of a one room shack were the bound remains of a person. Brown-stained ropes tied tightly around ankles, wrists, suspending the body spread-eagled two feet above the floor. Aria could see that poor soul's limbs were pulled out of joint . . . it had been a few days, at least, since this had been done.

Behind her she heard sounds of retching. It was most likely the young guard who'd accompanied her. Although she had seen much, she had to admit that her own gorge threatened to rise in response to the slaughter before her and the rotting smell that permeated the room. She knew what this foulness meant, and it made her queasy.

"Stay outside", she said to her companion. "Make sure no one comes in." A quick check to verify dark suspicious was in order, and then a trip to the castle to ask for aid.

Her steps inside were careful, for she did not want to disturb any details that might help her catch who did this. Standing closer to the body, she decided that it had, at one point, been male, although those portions of the body had been removed and were presumably part of the five small piles of ash that were arranged at the head, hands, feet of the victim. The man's bowels had been cut into and several organs seemed to be missing, though she did not want to look closely enough to identify which ones. The wrists had been slit, and two pools of coagulated blood reflected darkly in the sunlight. The face was horribly mutilated.

"Blood magic," she muttered, disgusted. Scanning the inside of the door she found hand prints in blood. Large and undoubtably human, it pointed

to a killer. Strong enough to tie the body like that . . . he'd have to be at least in his mid-twenties.

She retreated out of the shack and closed the door behind her.

"Lieutenant?" asked the young guard in a shaky voice. He was noticeably paler than when they had walked into the slums.

Aria ran a hand through her short black hair and leaned against the door. "It's blood magic, all right. I've seen it once before and was hoping never to again." She sighed, and looked around the streets. Foul, cramped, and deserted. The residents of the Outer City reacted to the presence of the two City Guards as if they were plague-carriers. "I want you to stay here and keep an eye on this house. Do not allow anyone entrance, and look for anyone who has unwarranted interest in it. I'm going to get a mage. We need to stop this before anyone else dies and we have an increasingly powerful madman on our hands."

"Yes sir," he said, regaining some of the poise he had lost after seeing the body.

She nodded to him once and walked off, treading carefully through the narrow, maze-like streets. If she had not been invited in by anonymous denizens, she doubted she'd be alive to walk these streets at all. Whoever had told the Guard of the murder had seemingly given them permission to enter on this occasion.

It took her a little more than a quarter hour to reach the gates of Brionne, where the guards saluted her and allowed her to pass. It was interesting that the charnel house had been so close to the walls . . . whoever had done this was familiar enough with the tiny streets of the Outer City to choose a site that afforded privacy. Yet even those who lived in the slums would not tolerate the presence of a blood mage, which meant he could not be living in the crime-infested warren. The two thoughts contradicted each other.

She checked in at her sector guardhouse only to requisition a horse to quicken the trip to the castle, having no desire to leave that poor guard alone in the slums for too long. Walking to the castle would take at least an hour. The ride through Brionne's streets, normally fraught with every imaginable impediment, was for some reason easy today, as if the city realized the importance of her message and was allowing her through.

Not likely, she thought with a self-mocking laugh. There's some good explanation of why everyone is on their best behavior.

Dismounting at the castle guardhouse twenty minutes later, and still

wishing she could have made better time, she accepted the salute of the young sergeant who took her horse's reins.

"I need to see the Chamberlain. Is he available?"

"He's in his office all the time now, I hear, making' sure all runs well. The negotiations are to start tomorrow."

"Good. Keep my horse saddled and ready to go." She turned and walked into the castle. Negotiations?

The Chamberlain's receiving rooms were bustling. Scribes scratched their pens busily against vellum; messengers chatted quietly. Aria walked up to desk that sat near the office door. The man who sat there seemed to proclaim his membership in the bourgeoisie through well-made but conservative clothing and a body that, while not in the peak of fitness, betrayed none of the indulgences of food and wine that the nobility participated in.

He looked up at her, his dark eyes examining her brown uniform and then meeting her cool green gaze. "Can I help you, Lieutenant?"

"I need to report the presence of a blood mage in the Outer City."

The man's eyebrows arched halfway up his forehead and he leaned forward. "A blood mage? Are you certain?" he asked in a hushed voice, as if he wanted no one to hear the ominous phrase.

"Yes sir."

He nodded hurriedly. "You may enter as soon as he receives the security report."

Content to wait, but curious as to those before her, she stationed herself near the half-open door. She was pleased to discover she could hear just barley, over the noise of the antechamber, the words being delivered to the Chamberlain.

"We have scanned the entire castle, lord Chamberlain,;; a curiously musical voice was saying. "We have found no dangers born of magic and can proclaim the peace negotiations have begun, our preliminary work is complete."

"Thank you," the chamberlain replied. "Is that all?"

"Yes, that is all," the voice continued. "Unless you have any further need for me?"

"No, nothing further. Good day."

The heavy door swung open and an elf walked out. Aria blinked in

surprise. An elf? Though she was considered tall for a female, he towered over her by a foot, at least, and was gracefully long-limbed. He looked down at her momentarily, and for just a second she was lost in large eyes the color of liquid silver set in a face belonging in the stained glass of a chapel window. Simply slightly, he held the door open for her to enter.

Tearing her eyes away from his she nodded a formal thanks and entered the room, almost fearing to touch him as she walked past. The clothes he wore seemed so delicate, so fragile, that she feared one touch of her roughened leather armor would destroy them. Silks of teal and aqua, flowing like the water they seemed to symbolize . . . utterly foreign to her.

The chamberlain did not look up when she entered, his brown-haired head bowed over the copious mounds of paper in front of him. "Yes?" he asked tersely.

She saluted and cleared her throat. "First Lieutenant Aria Janin of the City Guard reporting, sir," she said, her eyes staring at point just above his head. "I am here to report the presence of a blood mage in the Outer City, sir."

Now the head raised, and she saw his thin pale eyes stare at her in surprise. "What?"

"A blood mage," he repeated. seemingly to herself, "in the Outer City."

Something in his stone bothered her, but she could not pinpoint the reason. He sat in silence for a moment, then looked back up at her. "I cannot spare the services of any of our magi at the moment, Lieutenant. We are beginning serious negotiations and cannot afford to be sabotaged by magical interference from the Peilorian delegation. You shall have to wait until negotiations conclude."

"But sir . . ." she started, surprised. "A blood mage is a serious threat. If he obtains more power- -"

"It will have to wait. Besides, he is preying in the slums, is he not? One or two beggars cannot give him much power now, can they?" Callousness in his voice, pure and simple. Callousness and disdain. "Unless he moves into the city proper, Lieutenant, the matter can wait. Dismissed."

She had to struggle to keep from protesting the decision. "Yes sir." Anger mountain, she spun and walked swiftly out of the room, blindly though the antechamber, and out into the hall. She wouldn't even allow herself to think about it, not yet. Otherwise she would want to turn around and do something that would make her lose her commission. One step in front of the other. Get to fresh air.

"Lieutenant?"

Heat rose in her cheeks. She spun again, her anger apparent, to see the tall elf standing just in front of the closed door of the Chamberlain's antechamber. Taken aback, she forgot what she was going to say.

"Lieutenant, forgive me for interrupting. I unintentionally overheard a part of your conversation, and listen quite purposefully to the rest. And I did not like what I heard." The silver eyes drew her in again and did not let her go for a moment.

"Sir, it is a private matter," she forced herself to say. "A matter effecting Brionne only, with no threat to Peilor or Couerlendon."

He arched a delicate eyebrow. "No threat? Lieutenant, blood magic threatens us all. It is an inherent wrong that must be stopped. Surely you are agreeing with me in this?"

Gritting her teeth was the only way she could force out her next words. "It is an internal affair." Spinning on her heel, she barely saw the expression of surprise on his face before he walked away, through the crowds, and back into the relatively empty courtyard. The Guard was not allowed to bring in outside help without approval, Aria knew Chamberlain would refuse to allow an elf entrance to the most shameful quarter of Brionne. She paused just outside the door and breathed deeply.

"Lieutenant, please let me finish."

She filched. Silent as a mouse, that one. Glancing sideways she confirmed that he stood beside her. "Well?"

"I am offering my services to you," he said simply. "I wish to aid you in capturing him".

She turned to face him. "You're a mage, fight?" He nodded and she frowned, her knowledge of her responsibilities warring with her compulsion to find the killer. After a few moments of internal struggle the need won out. "Very well. We've just found the body. It's a little old, but everything's been left as is. If you think you can help, come with me."

She walked across the courtyard toward the gate. He kept pace with her easily, falling into step beside her. While they waited for the sergeant to obtain a horse for him the elf turned his silver gaze to her.

"You are reluctant, Lieutenant. But you seem to strongly desire a resolution to this case. Why do you hesitate?"

The way he phrased sentences, the cadences in his voice, all served to emphasize his foreignness. "To put it bluntly, you are an outsider, and we

don<sup>1</sup>t normally involve outsiders."

His slight smile grew. "Understandable. Yet you have no cause for alarm. I can assure you that my interests do not extend to the inner workings of the Guards of Brionne. What does concern me is blood magic."

Pausing for a moment she tilted her face up and looked at him, truly studying him for the first time. She found in his face a level of sincerity and honesty that she had rarely seen. "I... I think we can trust you." She bowed, the short half-bow, "Mage of the court of Aelissta, Queen of Couerlendon."

The sergeant led out a well-bred mare, who seemed anxious to be out of her stable. "Here you go, Lieutenant. She'll be returned later?"

"Of course, sergeant. Thank you."

Both of them mounted, and she led the way back through the city. They did not speak while riding; the mage obviously recognized her uneasiness and was letting her get used to him, much as she would act toward an untrained horse who did not know her scent. She could have taken offense at the thought but it amused her instead.

Her thoughts drifted back to memories almost ten years old, back to when she had just joined the Guard. One of the first duties she had performed was to clean up the aftermath of a blood-magic killing, a test from her superiors to see if a bright-eyed eighteen year-old farm girl had the stomach for such slaughter. She had passed the test, barely, and was rewarded by her commander who let her participate in the investigation. That had been a short one, ending in a display of magical pyrotechnics that leveled an entire block before the blood mage was defeated.

The victim had been a boy, just apprenticed to one of the castle magi, who was to have moved to quarters in the castle the next day. Several magi had volunteered for the honor of tracking down the murderer that time. Of course, they didn't have to rely on the Chamberlain telling them about it. The boy's teacher took the initiative . . . . She had no such coincidence to help her this time.

"We'll leave the horses here," she said as they reached the city gates. "It won't take us long to reach the house where it happened."

He nodded and dismounted, and they walked into the slums together. She frowned suddenly at the realization of what a tempting target the elf would seem to the most desperate citizens of Brionne. Celestian, on the other hand, did not seem nervous at all; instead he seemed to be trying to

hide his dismay at the poverty that suddenly surrounded him.

Do they not have poor elves? she wondered. You never hear about them in stories, but that seemed like some idealistic fantasy to me. Then again, I doubt any of our court magi have ever seen a slum either.

His gaze turned to her. "How did you find the body?"

"Some nameless subject thought it in best interests to report it." She shrugged. "We don't know who. The people who live here don't like the City Guards knowing who they are."

"Ah." The simple syllable seemed to contain a whole range of thoughts, from comprehension to aversion to pity.

She led the rest of the way in silence, until they finally arrived at the ramshackle hut. The young Guard, standing outside of the closed door, saw her immediately.

"Sir, I . . ." His voice died as he looked up at her companion.

"You haven't had any trouble, have you?" she asked, prodding him back to some standard of professional behavior.

"Ah, no, sir, no trouble at all." He didn't take his eyes off the elf. Celestian nodded vaguely, but seemed to be concentrating on the shack. He walked up to the door and placed a long-fingered hand upon it, then shut his eyes.

The young guard looked at her. "What- -"

She hushed him with a gesture, turning her attention to the mage.

Though he remained silent, Celestian was mouthing silent words as he ran his hand lightly down the roughhewn wooden door. He frowned slightly and put his other hand against it, repeating the gesture. Then his eyes snapped open. "Interesting." Without explaining, he pushed the door open.

He winced at the sight of the body and paused on the threshold, seemingly studying the sight as Aria had done hardly an hour before. Then he took careful steps inside.

She watched him examine the body for longer than it took for them to walk from the gates, an examination seemingly magicless in nature. And then, suddenly, he sat cross-legged on the dirt floor next to the body, ignoring the blood that still pooled on the ground. He closed his eyes and stretched out his hands to touch the decaying body.

Aria grimaced but watched attentively as he touched the chest of the figure, then the head, and then the rope that bound its right wrist. Each

time he touched part of the body he murmured several words in a language she could not identify. Then he stood, and Aria experienced the disconcerting realization that she could not be certain how much time had just passed.

His silver eyes lowered to meet hers, and it suddenly struck her that he was not as confident as when he first had stepped into the room. "This is . . . odd," he said gesturing at the body. "How much do you know about blood magic?"

"Just that the mage steals the power of his victim, and it involves torture."

The elf nodded. "Those are the basics, though in practice it is a little more complex." He walked toward the door, and she stepped back so he could walk out into the sunlight.

"You know the principles of magic use, yes? That each one of us has a certain amount of potential which follows us to channel and manipulate the natural energies of the earth?" At her nod he continued, "The blood mage has reached his natural limits, and, desiring more, preys on those unfortunates who do have talent but who cannot defend themselves against him. Knowing the proper rituals, he can temporarily transfer some, though not all, of their capacity to him."

He sighed and look back to the body. "This involves the ritual removal of certain organs and the casting of several spells which use pain as a way to transfer that power. Because the blood mage must use magic in the ceremony, it is possible for another mage to read the magical impression that he has left thus identify him."

Aria nodded. "So what did you find?"

"That is the problem. Nothing."

She paused for a moment, staring at him. "Nothing?"

"I do not understand it," he said softly. "Though I know the power was drained, I cannot discover where it went. There is no trace of the mage<sup>1</sup>s personality, something I thought was impossible. Even if he was incredibly powerful, he would not be able to wipe out all traces . . . and I do not think that powerful blood mage would bother with someone like that poor soul. Those with true power find ways to leave places like this."

Baffled, Aria looked at the body, her guaranteed solution to this murder suddenly gone. There were few leads to follow. "Cut him down," she told the other guard, her voice toneless. "Well, then . . ."

Celestian looked as upset as she felt. "I... do not know what to say," he



said softly. "I cannot fathom why the solution to this eludes me."

She watched as the guard cut each rope holding up the body, watched as one limb after another fell to the hard-packed dirt. "You did what you could. Was there nothing else you could find?"

His voice was grim. "The victim entered voluntarily, did not understand why this was being done to him, and died knowing that the people who could hear his screams did nothing to interfere."

She turned, surprised. "Heard? There were people around, then?" He paused, then nodded. "Yes. That is the impression I received. I could only read the most intense of feelings, as I am not a necromancer. But that those around did not help him was very . . . present in his thoughts. Also, after the murder, after the mage left, someone ventured into the room and then fled."

"Well, that gives me something to work with anyway," she said. "That may be the person who reported this, which means he probably saw the killer. What did he look like?"

Celestian closed his eyes for a moment, then shook his head. "I cannot be certain. It is not images I retrieve so much for me to discover. He was here so fleetingly that he left only the barest of impressions."

Smiling grimly she glanced at her deserted surrounding, then back to the mage. "Well, if nothing else, you've given me that much more to go on. Now I get the task trying to make these people talk." She gestured at the abandoned buildings near and laughed humorlessly.

"If there is anything else I can do," he began.

"Nothing I can think of," she answered. "The rest of this is business for the guard. Talking to witnesses, disposing of the body, reporting what I found."

"What will you do with him?"

She shrugged. "I'll bet no relatives step forward to claim the body. He'll be dumped into a mass grave, and that will be set alight when there are enough bodies to warrant the blaze."

A look of distaste passed across his handsome features. "You will not be examining him further?"

"No, there's not much else I can learn from it."

"Then please, let me." He walked back into the room, brushing past the young guard who gave Aria a questioning glance. She merely shrugged and watched.

Celestian once more knelt down beside the body and placed his hands upon it. This time, however, an odd golden glow formed around his hands as he said words in a lilting tongue that could only be eleven. The glow spread slowly until it sheathed the entire body like a pale ray of sunlight. And then, very slowly, the body grew transparent and, after a few moments had passed, simply disappeared.

There was a moment of silence as Celestian remained kneeling. Then the elf stood slowly and walked toward her. "He deserved better than a common grave," he said softly. "If you have need of me, Lieutenant, you know where to find me."

Aria watched him disappear into the maze of streets in surprise, her feet seemingly rooted to the spot. She had intended to escort him back . . . I'm certain he can take care of himself, she told herself. Shaking her head, she looked to her companion. "Well, let's begin."

Celestian sat in a cool stone room in Brionne castle, thinking in silence. One of a large team of magi, and the youngest member at that, he found himself quite unneeded during the peace negotiations. His companions had needed him to transport the Peilorian delegation and the Couerlendon moderators here, a feat that demanded a large amount of power and physical energy. Now the more experienced magi were performing the delicate magic<sup>1</sup>s of negotiation strategy with which he had no experience. He was left with nothing to do.

His mind returned again and again to the body in the human slums, and the problem it presented. If the moment were right, he would ask his teacher what the lack of magical impression meant, but Faindria was too busy monitoring the negotiations. The problem the body presented was perplexing and simply too intriguing to let him forget about it.

The fundamental problem was that there was no trace of whom the magic went to. No personality imprints left behind whatsoever. It was as if the power had been drained away into nothing, drained away but into the person who had butchered the victim. But a blood mage cannot use a proxy. He must perform the ritual himself, else, the power disappears into the earth without a trace . . . Without a trace?

His eyes widened. I wonder . . . He wasn't certain if he could detect whether the energy had been returned to the earth, but it was worth another trip to the site to find out. If it had been, the implications were astounding. Getting to his feet, he walked through the halls of the castle and out into the courtyard. Receiving directions to the barracks of the City Guard, he made his way there on foot.

It was a longer trip than he expected. The streets of Bionne were convoluted in a manner perfect to thwart an invasion but which made travel very slow. When he reached the barracks, the sky had been dark for some time. Two men in identical leather armor were standing outside the high carriage doors. He walked directly to them.

"Excuse me. I need to see Lieutenant Janin. Is she in?"

The older of the two glanced quizzically at the other before responding. "Ah, no, she's busy."

"It is important. She will not mind being disturbed. Will you tell her that - -"

"I said she's busy," the older one said, distrust flaring in his eyes.

Celestain frowned slightly. If I do anything to get past this man, however, it may cause trouble later on, which would endanger the negotiations, something I cannot permit. Ah well. He nodded, acquiescing. "Very well. Pleased tell her when she is not busy hat Celestian has thought of something new and has returned to the Outer City. Thank you."

Without staying to gauge their reactions he turned and walked away. If she got the message then she would join him. If not, well, it would not matter so much. He would merely tell her the results later.

The maze-streets of the slum were difficult to traverse at night, even with his natural affinity for nocturnal light. He saw more activity than he had this morning, but each person he encountered immediately slunk off into the shadows. By time he reached the shack he was thankful for his exact memory; without it he would have certainly become lost.

The door was open, the room unchanged. Closing the door behind him, he walked in and sat near one of the pools of sticky blood. Ignoring the smell, Celestian closed his eyes and placed his hands on the floor.

Many impressions barraged his mind at once, of himself this morning, of Aria<sup>1</sup>'s strong presence, of another shadowy figure who came in and then ran away. Before that, a jumble of intense emotions, shadowed movement, what he was looking for. Ghosts of pain and fear washed over him again, and for a moment he had to fight to separate himself from them. Only if he were simultaneously connected and distant would he be able to examine the faint traces of the deed with the delicate touch this required of him.

Searching the remnants of magic currents he found, finally, an echo of what seemed to have belonged to the victim. He followed it from the pools of blood on the floor -- ach, it would be easier if the body were still here! --

to the center of the room, and then expanding out into a five- point star anchored at each pile of ash. And from there ... nowhere? If it had been a blood mage, the power would have gone to him. But it did not. Celestian concentrated, seeking in his mind the faintest of clues, the lightest of trails . . . and finally it.

"Into the ground," he whispered. "But that makes no sense."

Into the ground it did go, however. The power had been pooled, concentrated, directed ... and discarded. Had the mage been interrupted? No, the impressions in the room said otherwise. Had it been purposefully discarded? Suddenly realization struck him. "He's not a mage," he whispered.

Then something hit the back head with a sickening thud.

The image of the body kept intruding in Aria's dreams. preventing sleep. When it wasn't the body, she dreamt of chasing shadows who wouldn't talk to her. Sleep being impossible, she rose and sat at her desk, where a neat pile of paper contained her notes of the day's findings. She started at the words, frowning at them when they refused to spark inspiration.

Finding anyone to talk to in the slums had been close to impossible. She had left the shack and changed out of her uniform., returning only after enough time had passed for the guard-shy denizens to have returned. Slinking back through the streets in rags, she sat hunched near the house, simply watching those who passed by. After she had established who resided in the area, she infiltrated their shacks one by one, retrieving information from them through threats, coppers, or a combination of the two.

And this is all I came up with. She shifted, running her hands through her hair. Many admitted to hearing the screams, through only a few told of seeing the victim enter the shack. Willingly, just like Celestian said. I wonder what he was promised? She could get no more information about the killer than that of a male, not young, not old, who were nondescript clothing. The victim turned out to be a young knifer who would only have found death another way soon.

Only two bits of information were of any real use. One slum-dweller, an old toothless gaffer who spoke willingly enough for a few coppers swore that he had seen the man before, though he couldn't remember quite where. He suggested that the killer used to live in the slums. Which certainly fits the scenario of how he could find the perfect place to bring his victim.

Her other informant, a young girl who, if she survived life in the slums, would probably become an prodigious thief, took her to another abandoned house a few blocks away. Her information had cost Aria silvers, which meant dipping into her own pay to get the information, but it was worth it. The killer had come to the second shack after he'd finished with the victim, changed out of his blood-soaked clothes, and then left. The thief hadn't been brave enough to follow where he went. The second shack was just as well situated for another murder, and Aria was going to place it under watch as soon as she got the approval of her superiors.

She stretched her tired muscles, knowing her mind was not ready to let the case rest and give her a chance to sleep. Perhaps a walk outside. It can't hurt. She pulled on her uniform of leather and thick-spun cotton, then tugged her tunic straight after fastening her sword belt around her waist. Her tanned hands adjusted the buckles of her knee-height boots.

The guards at the barracks entrance looked at her in surprise. "Lieutenant Aria, is there anything amiss?" the younger of the pair asked.

"No, nothing at all. I just can't sleep." She smiled slightly and continued walking.

"Ah, sir?" the same guard called.

She turned. "Yes?"

"Someone came looking for you earlier. We didn't see fit to wake you. He felt a message." The look on her face clearly spelled out her desires and he hastened to continue. "An elf lord, named Cel . . . Celent . . . something like that, said he'd thought of something new and was going to the Outer City to check it out."

"What?" she asked, incredulous, wondering if she was still dreaming. This was something that would happen in her dreams.

"Just that," the older one said.

"Ye gods, why didn't you tell me?" she demanded, but was not even interested in an answer. Instead she sprinted to the stables and commandeered one of the horses that was kept at ready for emergencies. Leaping into the saddle, she galloped toward the main city gates.

His head was pounding and the edge of his vision were flickering. It took a moment to realize that the flickering was caused by candlelight and not by the blow to his head. Something was pulling at his arms and legs quite painfully. Celestian tried to lift his head but it proved too difficult; fire shot through his skull and he simply could not see well enough to realize more than that he was lying spread-eagle on . . . the ground? Was

he on the ground? He couldn't feel it, and the agony in his limbs was worsening. He let out a gasp pain.

"You're awake," a soft voice said from somewhere in the shadows to his left. "Good."

He tried to turn his head, difficult to do when it was tilting back, unsupported, while the rest of him was not. "Who?" he asked, filing it hard to think.

The shadow moved forward slightly into the edge of the flickering candlelight. Grey hair, grey eyes. Plain of face and of middling years. He was not certain he would notice the man in a crowd. The man reached out a hand and grasped Celestian's head, turning him so they were face to face. Grey eyes met silver, and the stranger smiled.

"You came back," he whispered. "I knew you would."

Celestian's mind cleared for a moment and he knew exactly where he was and what was happening. He strained against the ropes without success. He knew he wasn't strong enough to break free; he'd examined this man's use of ropes just this morning. It would have to be magic. If only his head didn't hurt so badly. Whenever he concentrated, a violent stab of pain destroyed whatever thoughts he had.

"I saw you this morning," the man continued. "I have never seen someone who so desperately called for freedom. I'm glad you chose me."

"Wh . . . what?" he asked, struggling to get the words out. "No, I . . . untie me."

The man laughed. Humorless, merciless, it was almost a giggle. "No. What you have inside you is evil, and I must remove it. I can see it. You know that, of course. You called to me to help you. We will let it out, and then you will be free."

"No. No, please . . . wait."

The man stroked his left arm, running his hand down the soft silkiness of the elf's garments. "You do not need to worry, I know what I'm doing. I can free you, just as he freed her." The thought seemed to strike him as funny, for he giggled again. "He didn't care about me, you know, but he taught what I need to know, showed me the evil inside and how to free it, showed me that even though they didn't know it was there it must still be taken out of them. He showed me."

He ripped the sleeve off at the shoulder seam. "And now we'll start."

Celestian began to protest again when he felt the coldness of metal

against his wrist, then the bite of steel. There was no pain at first, then suddenly there was fire. He moaned and gazed down his arm. Golden blood welled from rather sloppy gash his wrist, flowing slowly over his flesh to pool somewhere below him.

"No," he moaned, trying to summon again the cast a spell. Ignoring the pain that flared within him he gathered his thoughts, fighting against the strangest desire to simply go to sleep. He could feel each drop of blood as it ran down his skin. The words . . . he had to remember the words. You have to have words to concentrate and focus the magic . . . He couldn't quite remember how.

"Lie still," the man whispered in his ear. Celestian shivered. "It's easier if you lie still."

Movement, and then the cloth of the other sleeve being ripped. The touch of wet, cold steel. The words were gone, as if ripped from his mind.

Aria drove her horse as fast as possible through the warren, trusting its denizens to get out of her way. Only moments away now. What has he found? The thought ate away at her insides, her stomach fluttering nervously. She turned another corner and there it was, the shack standing unevenly amongst others, its door slightly ajar.

Dismounting, she pushed open the door, keeping the reins in her hand. The room was bathed in utter darkness. Perhaps the elf had come and gone already? Reaching over to her horse, she detached the hooded lantern from its hook on the chest strap and let the small light chase away the shadows.

No one here. The room revealed nothing. She wondered how long ago Celestian had left the message . . . she'd been in such hurry she'd neglected to ask. The Outer City could be a dangerous and confusing place at night; she could only hope that he'd survived the winding streets.

As she turned to leave, the movement of her lantern picked out the faintest hints of gold on the floor. Curious, she tried the reins around the door handle and entered, kneeling down on the floor to search for what had reflected the light. After a little searching she found it . . . a golden liquid and few silver strands of hair. She stared at it for a moment, her eyes widening in horrified realization.

She jumped back on her horse and spurred it through the streets toward the second shack, pulling the horse to an abrupt halt when reached it. Dismounting, she kicked open the door, her eyes adjusting within seconds to give her a glimpse of what lay beyond. "By the gods!"

She caught just barely the flash of movement to her side and twisted away, watching in curious slow motion as a dagger slammed into the wall where she should have been standing. Then time snapped back to normal and she drew her sword while backpedaling across the room. The shadowy figure lunged at her again.

"You can't interfere! He must be cleansed. He must be!"

What? she parried the attack with her sword. The man was fast, she'd give him that, even if he did sound insane. She parried another swift attack, this one coming from the left. Did he have two knives? Or did he switch hands? Almost impossible to see in the faint light. Have to draw him out . . .

She parried another thrust, then swung downward, cutting one of the ropes that was anchored to the wall near her. Her interference produced the desired effect.

"No!" he shouted, lunging at her as she backed up toward the candle, assured now that she wouldn't trip on the rope. The golden light illuminated a desperate face with dead eyes. She stepped aside neatly and with a swift two-handed stroke cut halfway through his midsection.

He faltered, coming to a stop as his hands groped his side. "No . . ." he said softly. "I'm not . . . finished." Falling to his knees as blood seeped over his hands, he looked down at the wound in amazement.

Aria put a foot on his back and kicked him down. Before he had a chance to squirm she sank her blade into his neck. Bone severed, he jerked slightly, squealed, then, lay still.

She cut the rest of the ropes, lowering Celestia's body with care, then knelt at his side. Her eyes widened at the growing pool of luminous blood that crept across the dirt. Grabbing a long piece of silk that lay soaked next to his arm, she tied it tightly around his wrist.

He moaned and opened his eyes. "Aria?" he asked weakly.

"I'm here. I'm going to get you to the city, you understand?"

He seemed to be trying to nod. She wedged an arm under him, encircling him in a tight embrace, then slowly rose up to her feet.

His weight sagged against her awkwardly; he was so much taller than her. "Come on, you have to help me," she said, trying to take steps out the door. "Come on, let's go . . ."

Fidgeting in her dress uniform, she knocked on the polished oak door, annoyed at how the stiff sleeve of her jacket rode up her arm. She hated



wearing it, but the negotiations had been completed successfully two days ago and the celebratory feast was underway. The elves of Couerlendon had pooled their talents to send the Peilorians home yestereve, and would be leaving for Couerlendon today.

"Come in."

Her hand brushed the cool brass of the door handle, then she pushed it down. The door swung open to reveal a richly furnished bedroom, sunlight from the open windows picking out the gold embroidery that enhanced the chairs and bed curtains. Celestian lay in the midst of a large, four-poster bed, propped up on velvet pillows. His skin was paler and less luminous than she remembered and both his head and wrist were bandaged.

A slight smile greeted her. "Lieutenant Janin. Please, sit."

"I wanted to thank you for helping me find him," she said, claiming one of the intricately carved chairs. "How are you?"

"Much better," he said softly. "My ears are not ringing, my head does not ache, and I can see straight. A improvement, let me assure you."

She chuckled. "But you're not up yet."

"I cannot quite predict how long I can stay on my feet at the moment. No doubt I shall be better visiting the healers at home. We have stayed this long because none of the others were prepared to work the magic that was my responsibility." His smile turned somewhat grim. "I wanted to tell you that I am profoundly grateful you appeared. I . . . could not have escaped that."

He had just answered one of the questions that had been ever-present in her mind since that night. "The other elves, they told me the man wasn't blood mage at all?"

He nodded weakly. "Correct. He was not a mage, yet he knew the rituals and seemed to think he was doing good by performing them. I do not think he even knew what ritual was for. What he did was not about magic, or creating fear and pain. He seemed to think . . . that magic itself is evil, something to be cleansed from the soul."

The elf shook his head, his eyes sorrowful. "I am not certain his other victims had any potential at all, nor how many others he may have . . . purified. I cannot even begin to understand how he could think as he did."

Aria grimaced. "They died for nothing, then. Simple murder, for no purpose at all."

"He had his reasons." he closed his eyes for a moment, taking in a deep breath. "I doubt you or I shall ever understand them."

Silence settled between them for a moment. He seemed do much more human now, Aria realized. The air of mystery and foreignness was gone, replaced by all-too-familiar weakness and vulnerability.

The door opened behind them. "Pardon, we did not mean to interrupt," someone said.

Aria turned to look. Two elves stood in the doorway, one with cropped copper hair and the other with plaited blue glinting eerily metallic in the candlelight. The blue-haired female spoke. "It is time we left, Celestian. Are you ready?"

They nodded and stepped into the room. Aria stood. "Please, let me help him," she requested.

Faindria smiled slightly and nodded, and Aria helped Celestian to his feet. He had not fully recovered his strength; she put her arm around his waist to help him through the door to the main chamber that all of the delegation<sup>1</sup>s rooms circled around. The other elves were there, some concentrating around a golden circle of energy that covered half the floor. Aria's eyes widened in amazement when she saw it, but nonetheless walked to within a few of its glowing boundary. She took her arm away, nothing Faindria's watchful presence at Celestian's side.

"Well," she said, unsure precisely of what to say.

He merely smiled, then took her hand and kissed it. "We shall meet again, Aria Janin." Along with the others, he stepped into the circle of light and was gone.

Alone in the now darker room, she shook her head, trying to banish the surprise that lingered at his words. "Well," she finally said. "I guess we'll see."

Smiling, she walked out through the door, closing it gently behind her.