

All Things Impossible

Crown of the Realm

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Dedication: Thomas Szott, who convinced me that these stories were worth writing.

Prologue

"We won't leave you!" Prince Edillon choked on his words. His younger brother pressed into his side and nodded vigorously.

"You will!" King Valladen's thundered in a voice that left fading echoes throughout the garden. His older son realized that he never looked so regal before, or so sorrowful. Would he truly never see that again? His father's golden hair shimmered like the sunlit prairie, and his sea blue eyes stirred with the power of a thousand storms.

In the back of his mind, the son wondered if he could ever be that extraordinary. But right now, he desperately prayed he would never have to find out.

"You will go now, my sons. You have a chance. Meet your guards and do not tarry for they will be upon you."

"No!" The older son dropped to his knees. "I can't think of life without you!" His throat ached with strangled words that he could not force out. This was too sudden! This couldn't be real! His mother stole his crying eyes. She too was weeping, but there was no panic on her face, only sadness.

The younger brother rushed forward into his parents' arms. "I thought you said they were gone! They couldn't —"

His father cut him down with a glare. "Never did I say that, son. Never think that or you will not know who has slain your family." The brothers flinched.

The eldest pounded his fist against the ground. "Please! We'll all run. If we can make it, so can you, Father... Mother, *please!* They'll never find us!"

Their father smiled ruefully. "I wish it could be so."

The son's tears burned his cheeks. "Give them the kingdom, it's not worth this. Please."

Valladen rested a hand on the head of his heir. "They would not stop with the kingdom, they care nothing for it." He pulled his hand back. "You will succeed. Your duty, the responsibility of the crown, is to protect and save our people."

The crown prince bit his lip so hard that he tasted blood. He finally nodded.

His mother moved in front of him. She spread her hands out before both her children. "I pray that your lives are eternal and full of love and joy."

The eldest remained kneeling and lowered his face to hide his shame. His voice was surprisingly low. "I accept your blessing, Mother."

"Go, my sons."

He rose and took his place beside his brother. "Must —" He bit his tongue. "We shall."

"We love you," Valladen whispered.

"We love you too." The youngest hastily dashed forward and buried himself in their arms, just as a small child hugs a pillow against a nightmare. Valladen and his wife pushed their second child away.

"Forever will you sing the first songs," they said the traditional farewell.

"Forever —" the brothers' unified voices faltered at the same time. Their words hung helplessly in their open mouths.

"Do not tarry with farewells, go." Valladen swept his arm wide to the brilliantly white archway.

They bowed low and long before turning away. The eldest did not look back.

Alone in the garden, the lady sagged against her husband. "Oh, my love, this is all they've ever known."

Her slender frame seemed so fragile to him. "I know." He buried his face in her hair and held her tightly.

They did not have long to wait before the sun's warmth faded from their skin. The once vibrant air chilled to a damp, slimy feel. Shadows lazily stretched and bloated while spreading to abnormally huge proportions. Valladen looked heavenward where the sun still shone, but the light looked as though a greasy film had been pulled over it.

Then the world faded to gray, like the gray between dusk and absolute darkness where the colors just leached away from the world. The storm-readers' light. As all the stories said to see it was to die.

He glanced around the muted garden. His heart beat mournfully as he thought of how the gray light defiled this scintillating, laughing place.

A voice sliced through the oily air, smooth as silk but it felt like a whetstone scraping against the king's delicate ears. "You give your own lives freely."

"We couldn't run. You know why."

The voice chuckled. "Oh, I know. We will kill your offspring. You only bought them time."

"You speak with confidence."

"You die without purpose." The voice was sweet with venom. "Love is a weakness that cost you what you did not have to give."

"Our children live freely." The words hissed through Valladen's teeth. The polluted air drew the very breath out of him. He held his beloved wife closer.

"Until we find them," the voice replied tartly. "Our king said that our victory is well deserved. You know, we earned our immortality, unlike you – and you never treated us as your equals in your jealousy."

"Your rise to immortality was a horrendous sin," the king snapped. "Now, stop gloating and do what you came to do."

The queen took her husband's hand and Valladen dropped his crown to the ground. It rang loudly in defiance. His wife kissed him. In that kiss, he was not sure of the exact moment he unnaturally expired.

Chapter One

Riversbridge

"Ready?" The shout carried with the wind.

"Ready!" Derora Saxen hollered, and then adjusted her helmet on an afterthought. Her hand snatched the lance from the boy's arms as he timidly held it up. She grinned. The lance's balance slid into place at her side, and she angled it toward her opponent. Her dark green and brown eyes flitted back to the center of the field, eagerly awaiting the flag signal.

Swish! The sound of the flapping banner reached her eyes only; she couldn't hear it for all the blood pounding in her ears. She leaned forward and kicked her horse hard. This was the fun part. The animal under her heaved and surged forward in motion that was anything but smooth and graceful. Ignoring the probable danger of falling off, Der watched her opponent's charge with an eagle's focus. She shifted her lance to hit high on his chest. He also realigned his weapon, but a smidgen hesitantly.

Suddenly, neither of them had any more time to plan. Der's lance struck first, a solid impact she felt through her arm and torso. Her opponent's lance clipped her left shoulder exactly when he lost control of his mount. She grunted and jerked forward to stay in the saddle as the horse beneath her spooked. She failed. Throwing her lance out wide, she cleared herself of the galloping animal. She saw her opponent also tumbling off his mount.

The force of hitting the ground was much worse than the lance. The impact echoed throughout her entire body. After a moment of intense groaning, she rolled onto her back, and propped her head against the dirt to see where her horse charged off without her. She winced; her shoulder was already shooting spikes of pain.

Der sat up. Someone at the edge of the meadow chased after her horse. He would be too shaken to ride for a while. She eased off the pot helm to reveal dark hair. It was originally a boy's bowl cut, but it since had grown out. The young woman was average in height and looks. She could have been pretty, but she didn't care to be. All her potential was diverted to things she did give attention to, like weapon play. She looked about the clearing, forcing herself to stand before anyone could offer her a hand up. The small meadow they practiced in was hidden out of view from the village of Riversbridge, and it was the common place where the youth had met for several generations to escape their daily chores. She walked up to her opponent and grinned.

He shook his head and rubbed his chest. He appeared beat, but smiling. "We need spurs."

"No, we need warhorses, Donley."

His grin spread. "Der dares again."

She glanced at him sharply. "What does that mean?"

He looked innocently at the sky. "Nothing, Der. Dare. Said the same for a damned good reason." He grinned.

She rolled her eyes and caught the angry gaze of the approaching redhead girl two months her junior.

"The both of you need armor, or at least padding on your shirts!" Avice scolded. She had already folded the blanket used for a flag. She was the seamstress's daughter. She provided the three blankets they used: one as the flag, and two to soften the blow on the end of the blunt wooden that lances Donley had cut. He was the forester's son. They were lucky neither of the lances had broken yet. These weren't sleek or refined, and in fact, they were little better than planks.

Derora turned away from Avice to the plough pony one of the children had led back. It sidestepped anxiously. "It's alright, boy. See? We're done. You did well today." She scratched gently between his ears.

Donley stretched. "It took them forever to get used to these lances, and mine spooked too when I fell off. You'd reckon they'd be used to the action by now." He turned to glance over at his shoulder where his younger sister was holding their pony.

"They're not as bad as they used to be."

"Are either of you hurt?" Avice barked. "Don't worry about the silly horses."

Der patted the pony on the shoulder. "I'm fine. Donley took the worst blow today."

He rubbed his chest. "I'll live, Avice. Der, do you have to hit so hard?"

"Um," she chewed her lower lip, "Well, you would hit harder than this in real combat."

"This isn't combat!" Avice flared. "Sometimes I think you take all this play too seriously. There's never been real combat here! You're just teaching these children to fear!"

This was not the first time she put her thoughts to sharp words to her about her so-called exploits with the youth of Riversbridge. It wouldn't be the last either, Der muttered silently to herself and rolled her eyes while the other girl talked, everything around here ran in never-ending circles.

Donley nodded, looking at Der matter-of-factly. "It's true, at least." He chuckled and shook his head. "I don't think I'd want to face you either."

She rocked back on her heels defensively. "But, think about it, what if something came about and we did need to actually fight?"

"Then I'd doubt we'd be jousting on plough ponies." He tilted his head. "You know swordplay, and if you are serious, you could teach us that."

"But, I only know what my father taught me."

"And you didn't know anything about jousting, and we're doing passably, I reckon."

"What!" Avice yelped. "You've been out here in danger of breaking your stupid necks and you didn't know *anything* about it?"

"We're figuring it out as we go!" Der snapped back. The rest of the youth crowded around the three eldest. Their constant arguments were about as entertaining as the joust.

"I am going to tell your mother about this. I'm sure she would be glad to know what her daughter is doing."

Donley stepped between the two as Der balled a fist. She wasn't bluffing. All his life he had grown up with her and she had yet to make an idle threat. The girl could outfight most of the boys in town too because she never gave up and went absolutely crazy with her fists and feet. He also had a few scars from her teeth when he'd thought he'd already won the matches. She did anything to win. "Avice," he spoke sternly, "You know as well as anyone, that what happens and what is said in the meadow isn't said anywhere else. You'd better not break the rule."

Der dusted her trousers and forced a grin. "It's all play anyway, Don." She looked at the sun. "We should get back to work; we've spent enough time here."

Their parents would know where they had been, of course, but they never asked. Der figured they remembered their younger days spent here. She made a face, thinking of this generation's children and if they would ever ask their children what they did in the meadow. She'd decided that she'd be elsewhere when that time came.

Donley, being the oldest, dismissed the gathered youth. Der walked down the lane back to town alone in her thoughts with the pony following doggedly behind her. She hardly noticed as the others around her dispersed and took different trails back to town. It was common they didn't parade back in to Riversbridge together and be entirely obvious.

She stubbed a toe into the ground. She didn't want to return home; her father had enough help. The girl did not even notice when she passed the first house.

Their quaint village no inn, nor any temples, but it was entirely self sufficient. Geographically, it was odd because it was so far removed from any fortified lord's home. There were many nearly identical villages hiding amongst the forest's trees.

Derora stopped at the blacksmith's. The forge was on the outskirts of the town, in a medium sized building Donley and his father had built four and a half years ago. Over the entrance hung the hammer striking the anvil, the symbol of the Blacksmiths Guild. She tied the pony outside.

Her closest friend was the apprentice, and he always labored over the forge. The master smith was used to her, and bore no complaint because she didn't interfere with Kelin's work. In fact, she often assisted with things that neither of them wanted to do. Sigard waved to her as she walked in and then hunched back over his current work. She nodded and ran a hand over her sweaty forehead; the extra heat was pleasant in winter but not in summer.

She found Kelin sweeping out the back. "Almost done for the day," he said, sweeping as fast as he could. The young man was from a hearty breed, with a good sized build and hands that seemed too large for the little stick of a broom he held. His dark curly locks hung damp against his forehead, and he hadn't shaved in days, as usual.

"You're done early then." She grabbed the spare broom.

"Had to happen someday. You're not on the farm."

"We have more than enough people for harvest; there's really naught I can do there now." She started sweeping. "I knocked Don off his mount today."

"He deserved it too, I'm sure."

"Can't have him building an ego greater than mine," she joked.

He laughed heartily and shook his head. They worked in silence after that, sweeping out different areas. Finally, Kelin presented the broom to Sigard and pointed to the floor.

"Huh. You and th' lass work fast. 'Tis well enough, see you tomorrow." He waved the pair off. They dropped the brooms and ran for the door.

Der shut the door behind them and turned to Kelin. "He seems interested in something else."

He nodded. "Whatever it is, he's nearly done with it."

"Do you know what it is?"

"No."

"It's a weapon, isn't it?"

"I don't know." Then, he grinned. "Of course, everything's a weapon to you."

"Makes me all the more dangerous." She gestured her arm at the town. "I'm never unarmed."

"Aye." He laughed again. "I'll never forget the time you threw that chicken at Don. I think he squawked as loudly as it did."

She flushed. "I couldn't think of anything else to do!"

"But, throwing chickens is not the point of wrestling!"

"Ugh, that's something I'll never do well, and I didn't want to lose!"

Kelin only laughed and shook his head. Then, his face darkened. "Sigard is truly serious about this project he has. He won't even let me see whatever it is, and he hasn't seen that new apprentice he's considering in a few days."

"He's taking on another?"

"Aye, he says it's because I'm almost ready for the guild examination." A grin swelled on his face.

"That's good news." She paused. "So, will you be going to Duelingar to take it?"

"I have to. They don't come to me," he said lightly, with a twinkle in his eye. "What? You want to come?"

She nodded – there was no use being dishonest to a friend who could discern those rare times she tried to lie. "I've got to get out of here."

He cast her a reproachful look. "It's not that horrible of a place, Der, it's actually a nice town."

"But it's... it's *boring*." She glanced ahead onto the ancient stone bridge for which the village derived its name and to his house just on the other side. They crossed the water at least eight times a day. They hardly noticed any more.

Kelin nodded. "I know, I know."

"You're right, it's nice, but there's nothing for me to do here. Yes, help out on the farm, but it's not what I want to do. I want to you know, live dangerously, be unpredictable."

He coughed into his hand to hide his smile. "You know, you're actually quite predictable once someone knows you though." He winked. "It's simple, you take a situation that no one would want to tangle with, and then make the stupidest decision possible and make it work – when you're lucky."

"I thought you were my friend."

"I am, so I'm telling you the truth." She stared at him, and he continued jovially, "To a lesser extent, I think that's an ordinary trait in warriors, even if they're supposed to have common sense. Of course, if they had any, they wouldn't be fighting in the first place!"

"You're as much as a fighter too."

"I never said I had any common sense." They both laughed. Kelin shook his head. "However, if there's no horrendous crisis to challenge you, you tend to create them for yourself, like with your mother."

"What! My mother was always like that, it's not my fault she wants me to be something I'm not."

"Exactly. You are upfront and bold and completely honest about what you think, and never even consider finding another way out of the predicament that leaves both sides unhappy but with a solution. You know, a compromise."

"They don't compromise on a battlefield, victors and vanquished." She ran her fingers through her hair. "I wish my brother would come back more often. He could deal with my mother."

"Have you gotten a letter from him recently?"

"No, not really." She sighed. "I don't understand how he can be happy being a clerk and a scribe. I just don't understand that."

"He is, so you should wish him well." Kelin shook his head as they stopped outside of his home. "I would invite you in, but I know you've got to return home."

"I do, I just don't want to. Greet your parents for me."

"Of course. Mum says you've a place here if things get too nasty."

"Thank you," she said sincerely. In her opinion, Kelin's parents were the best in Riversbridge. His father was the local miller, but his mother was the gem of town. She spent her efforts teaching the youth and many of the adults how to read and write, making the community much more educated than most villages in the whole of the kingdom.

"You're brave enough, now go along. Your mother isn't a demon, she's a lady."

"There's a difference? The rest of you don't have to struggle with your parents."

"Der, your family *is* different. You farm the land like everyone else, but you have to remember you have some noble blood in you. That's why your father was squire for all those years. He would rather be a farmer than a knight; and yet that doesn't change that he knows how to fight or that your mother is more of a lady than a farmer's wife. Your family has far less children than everyone else, just you, your sister and your brother. You don't have to use the community barn because you have your own, you've hired hands from town, and you farm twice the land anyone else could afford to."

"We're not nobility, not anymore. We have no power in court. Dad owns his farm, and that's all the land we have. I was born here, not in some castle or manor."

"Which makes you like the rest of us villagers, but that's not what your mother thinks."

She exhaled loudly and crossed her arms. "So, when did you acquire this vast amount of wisdom?"

"Mostly from watching you making mistakes all the time," he said, smiling. She started but finally shook her head and grinned too.

Rhoesia was not pleased with her youngest child, nor was she pleased with her husband for allowing Derora to work the fields with the lads. Her scowl deepened as she watched the girl walk determinedly to the doorstep. Chera, Rhoesia's first daughter, scooted into the kitchen to be pleasantly out of sight.

"Derora Saxen," her mother addressed. "You've been gone all day and you're dirty to the fingernails."

"All two hours of afternoon, Mother. I was in the fields from dawn until noontime." For years, frustration and impatience made a cozy warehouse in Der's mind, and it didn't take much to open the doors. "And if my fingernails were clean then that would mean I wasn't working."

"You're needed here, not in the meadow."

"I was here, in the morning. Then I didn't have anything to do, so I left."

Her mother's lips tightened. "You're needed here, child." She might have been polite, but her patience had long worn away with her second daughter.

"I am here, Mother."

"Then why didn't I see you?"

"Because you're not looking!" She may not have been on the farm all the time, and she did feel a little selfish for it, but she had the village youth to attend. She actually slacked off less than most of the hired hands.

"Are you?" Rhoesia squeezed her hands against her hips. "Or are you off playing warrior again?"

"I'm not playing!"

"Quiet, child. You should learn when to listen."

"I will, when I'm sure you do know more than me." Der smiled a little too brightly.

"Do what you're told, we all need to work together to make this farm function," Rhoesia sighed.

Der's temper was glowing as red as a new sword in Sigard's forge. "I do too work in the fields! So I'm not like Chera, does it matter all that much? So I'm not housebroken like those little toy dogs I saw in the city when I was child that you so loved!"

She felt her lungs inflating again, but she never got the chance. "Derora!" A booming voice called from the barn. Riodan Saxen waved her over with one hand, and shooed the farmhands away with the other.

Her father was somber as she approached. She felt like she was walking barefoot on chips of glass. He cut an impressive figure for a farmer, with broad shoulders and a sharp chin. "Arguing with your mother again. Is there anyone in the village you haven't had words with in the past month?"

She wasn't sure if she was supposed to answer or not. "Uh."

"You're not content here." It was a statement.

She stopped many feet from him. "Restless, sir." When he didn't say more, the silence prodded her on.

"I'm sorry about Mother but I just can't bring myself to agree, so I won't."

"Have you ever thought that perhaps we, as your parents, know more than you?"

"Yes, sir." She ducked her head.

"You don't appear to."

"It's not just you, Dad. But, before I do anything, I want to be sure of it. And I don't want to be a housebroken lady."

"Housebroken? You said that to her?"

"Aye, sir."

"By the Holy Empire! She'll be upset about that for days." He ran a hand over his face, and then turned to gaze back to his daughter. "Young ladies are not supposed to say such things to their mothers."

"But I'm right and she's not!"

His mouth twitched in brief amusement. "How do you know that?"

Der shrugged.

"Tell me."

She shuffled her feet. There was no escape this time. "She's never done anything to prove that I'm wrong, and since I'm not convinced, I'm going to do things my way."

He smiled wryly. "That is the attitude that makes you such an influence on the rest of the youth in Riversbridge. They follow you. You're seventeen summers, old enough..." He paused, and Der could not remember seeing that expression on his face before.

"Old enough to what?"

He smiled down at her. "You're like rearing a racing horse to a plough. You fidget and fight and make work all the harder for the rest of us."

"That's it, Dad. I don't understand how you can be happy here, in your little plot of land with the rest of the world out there, without –" She bit off her sentence, but he waited for her to continue. She began playing with her

fingers. "I don't understand how you can be satisfied to live an ordinary life." She felt that saying it aloud condemned her dream. "Our surname means swordsman, I'm a fighter."

He looked at her for an endless moment. His voice was soft and serious. "Only someone who wasn't ordinary would say that. Most of us are happy this way, living a peaceful life, and glad we're not in any peril."

"You're not frightened because you're not in danger here. I want to see the world."

"Don't you think that's selfish, doing only what you want? Communities succeed by everyone giving up their personal goals and laboring together. Not many people get to see the world."

"I know it sounds that way. And the villagers, they all want the same thing anyway. I'm different, I want, oh, I don't know. I want something better."

"Better?" His eyebrows rose. "I thought I taught you humility. When did you become so arrogant?"

"I'm not!"

"So what then, divine guidance?" He held out his hands before him in an open gesture.

"No."

"Then that's arrogance, Der."

She huffed and crossed her arms.

Riodan sighed. "Then what do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I don't want to be a farmer. Become a fighter."

"You can't do that here in Riversbridge." He smiled, a little sadly. "You've a good heart if you're a little too stubborn, and you've intelligence enough when you decide to use it."

"Dad!"

He lifted a hand. "Don't interrupt. I taught you the swordplay to defend home and some tactics to guard the farm in case of the worst. That was about this particular farm, and then I hear about you teaching your friends about sentry duty, the discreet signals and how to use the weapons they have on hand; which led to one of the boys almost losing his eye to a rake. You figured that if our farm was attacked, then everyone else's would be too, which is true. You gave them the same speech I gave you, and told them to practice these when strangers. Gerin told me." Der glared where the hired help had dashed off. "He also told me about the mock battle you staged after trying to adapt the tactics I made you and the hired help learn, and the result."

She cringed at the memory and felt her cheeks heat up.

"What did you hope to make of it? No, not about defending the town, but for yourself, Derora Saxen. Look at your friend, Kelin, he's a good head on his shoulders, and skills to secure him for the rest of his life. You don't. You want to fight, and I can't teach you everything you want to know or show you the world."

"What are you saying, sir?"

"I told you not to interrupt. That's a habit you'll have to forget if you're to join an army." A spark of satisfaction shot across his face at how quickly that caught her complete attention. "Aye, I think joining an army is the best thing you can do if you want to be a fighter. It may turn out to be enough for you, or mayhap it will show you more fighting than you want to see." He chuckled at her squirms to stand still. "And *if* you still have the stomach to be a hero, you can go from there. Perhaps to a knight order, king's champion, or perhaps you'll return to me as a dragoon knight."

Her face reddened further at the implied compliment. She had never thought of that, never imagined herself attached to any order, but she never imagined herself alone either. She wondered how he knew about her secret dreams, and realized how obvious they were. Her face blushed deeper. But, the image was already dancing across the insides of eyelids. She rode her own horse, wore that shining armor and carried one of the dragoon banners. How incredible! She blinked as her father continued.

"I would warn you to stay out of trouble, but that's not going to happen, so avoid excessive trouble, please." Then, he stepped smoothly into the barn without looking to see if she followed him or not. She blinked and then ran after him.

The former squire bent low in a corner, meticulously removing layers of dust and loose hay. He uncovered an old wooden chest. Der saw it was emblazoned with two crests of noble houses, which once must have shone brilliantly. She recognized the crossed yellow rose and black sword as the shield of Saxen, but she did not know whose the falcon was. Riodan reverently brushed off the oldest dust and opened the chest; she was surprised it was unlocked.

He raised a longsword from it, and she hopped back as if he were lifting it from a coffin. The sword needed to be cared for again, witnessed by a slight glaze of rust, but the metal hadn't dulled with age. The design was simple, and Der saw the elegant crest of the Saxen House shone on either side of the guard. Her hand twitched in a bubbling excitement and she fought hard to keep her face straight.

He held his sword out to his daughter. "Take it."

She cautiously took the weapon and nearly dropped it when Riodan released its grip, not expecting the sudden weight. She cursed herself; she knew how much a sword weighed! It was a real sword, and a blade of quality, crafted by a master smith who served the nobles of the kingdom, not a local blacksmith. It surpassed the

shortswords Sigard made at Riodan's request to protect the farm.

While she was awestruck by the sword, Riodan reached down to lift up a swordbelt and unstrapped the leather pouch from his belt. With the same ceremony he gave his sword, he handed her the money and belt. He didn't let his stare go and his voice seemed deeper than usual. "You have my permission to return after you've had your fill of the world."

In his eyes she could see that he was speaking honestly. She wondered if this was a sudden decision or not. But, in those eyes that matched the color of her own, she also saw worry and love. He wouldn't see her grow cramped here but he truly worried for her!

"But the farm!" she squeaked.

"Finally, there's that responsibility I taught you, eh? No, child, I've enough hired help."

"What of my mother? She won't agree."

He barked a short laugh. "She has been trying to turn you into a lady for years and you'll never be. She's your sister for that; you're my child. No, she'll respect my decision." He turned serious again. "She loves you, I hope you know, she just has trouble seeing that you're *her* daughter."

"Yes, sir," she said with a crooked grin, and realized that she wasn't angry with her mother anymore. She felt as if her mother could never bother her again.

"Good." He nodded. "Then, I have a mission for you. You must complete it first and then you may go and do what you will, such as join the king's army. Take a letter I will write tonight to our Count in Duelingar."

"I will." She bit back another excited grin, a real mission!

"Good, I'll give it to you the day after tomorrow. That will give you the time you need to gather the supplies you'll need to travel." He did not smile again as he left the barn. Derora stood transfixed; he had not taken the sword back to hide until the time for her to leave. She tried the belt on, and as she expected, it was too big for her. She stood there and could not decide what to do with it. She slung the belt over her shoulder and sighed. She wouldn't be able to draw it quickly at all. This wasn't going to work, she thought as she shoved the blade back into the chest and hid it again in the corner. Then, she sprinted out of the barn door, nearly tackling the returning farmhands.

"Sorry!" She was gone before they could complain.

Der spent the rest of the afternoon elatedly garnishing paraphernalia from around the farm. When she had swept together all she would need, she ran down the lane toward Riversbridge. The sun was long set, and the darkness didn't slow her pace in the slightest. She had long ago memorized every stone and bump on the path. She felt lighter and freer than she could ever recall. She was going to live her dream! The stars winked down at her laughing grin. Most of the village quieted after nightfall. No one could afford to waste candles, so the townsfolk went to bed when the sun ducked under the horizon.

She stopped barely in front of the miller's house before running into it. She darted around to the back wall and slammed fist into it. She banged repeatedly until someone on the other side of the wall hit back. Taking the cue, she jogged around to the front of the house.

Kelin hung in the door in his nightshift. "We had better be under attack."

"Even better!" Der bounced on her heels.

"Your mother tossed you out of the house?"

"No, my father!"

"You father tossed you out?" He coughed in alarm.

"No, no! He sent me out to join the army!" In a few breathless minutes she recounted the entire story to him as he leaned in the doorway. She wound down with exactly what he expected. "You're leaving for Duelingar soon to take the guild examination, so I figured we could go together."

"I'm not going to day after tomorrow! Der, I couldn't afford it, and now, mayhap I'll go even later because I'm missing some sleep!" He shut the door on her nose.

Chapter Two

Small Steps into a Big World

Kelin's hammer bit fast and deep into the hot metal. Sigard watched him carefully. He wasn't concerned with his apprentice's competence; he hadn't been bothered with that for a few years. Casually, the master smith leaned against a table and waited for him to finish pounding the horseshoe.

"Why'd you start so early?" Sigard had arrived at the forge at dawn as always to find Kelin and the full morning's schedule done. He was pleased, but he was a little offset by how it had happened. The lad was not the kind to cheapen his efforts to get things done sooner, but he didn't work more than he had to.

The apprentice shrugged. "I couldn't sleep last night so I thought I might get something done."

"Good. I thought you might be coming in early so you could get off early again." The smith chuckled roughly in an effort to lighten the dark circles under the boy's eyes.

"No, I know you better than that, you'll just make me work longer." He smiled, barely.

"Work makes a man. So what's yer trouble?"

Kelin set his hammer down. Then he picked it back up, only to put it down again. "Derora."

"Oh." The smith pushed himself off the table. "What'd the lass do this time?"

He barked a strained laugh. "I don't know, but she's leaving Riversbridge for it."

Sigard's eyebrows jumped. "That bad, eh?"

"No, I don't think so." Kelin's face softened. "She was excited – the happiest I've seen her in years."

"Her mother threw her out?"

"No, her father."

"What!"

"No," Kelin said for the third time. "He didn't toss her out, and I don't know what she did."

Sigard nodded, stroking his iron hard stubble. "So, Riordan finally sent her off?" Kelin nodded. "I thought he might someday. She's a strong lass and forged for things Riversbridge can't offer."

"Well, I think she's taking a huge risk."

"Why?"

"She's running off to become a soldier." He slammed a meaty hand into his leg.

Sigard exhaled, and shook his balding head. "Aye, I've made enough swords to know what they're for."

"I'll admit I enjoy a good brawl, so I don't have much ground to stand on and say this, but I don't think she realizes what she's getting into."

"Folk like her have to live their own mistakes to learn."

Kelin blinked, surprised by the smith's simple wisdom. Sigard was right too. He still shuddered at the idea of her running off into the world alone, especially to become a warrior.

Sigard hefted his massive hammer. "Long, long time ago, before the Centum Wars and Midan the Merciful's armies from the paladin empire came over here, women didn't usually participate in warfare. Hell, they didn't do much at all 'cept pop out wee ones. Back then, no one on Solquin would accept them into their legions, save the dragoon knight orders, but they hardly took any humans to begin with. But, in the Wars the Imperial Army of Pallens came, and the other kingdoms, well, they were just plain running out of men to fight with. Meanwhile, away from the battle fields, women were running the kingdoms and towns, and they stayed in power for a long time, until about a couple hundred years ago, some kings and nobles started becoming quite reactionary; saving ours, of course." He shrugged and frowned. Usually, Kelin pounced on rare tidbits of useless facts that were not practical for anything in Riversbridge. The two often squared off in an ongoing contest to best the other with the most obscure detail. But, this time he wasn't countered with another trivial delicacy.

Kelin sighed. "Then I'm sure she'd run off to the dragoons, just to fight."

"Mayhap she's leavin' to fight for something, or –" Sigard faltered.

"That's it! She doesn't have anything to fight for! So, why?"

The smith rolled his eyes up into his head. "I don't know." He brushed his heavy leather apron. "Yer going to Duelingar soon enough, and that's more than halfway to the capital. You could go with her."

"I'd need the money first, and I won't have that by tomorrow," he replied bitterly.

"Tomorrow?" Sigard straightened. "So soon? Armies don't recruit much this late in the summer, 'cause the farmfolk can nay spare the hands." He winked at the lad's confusion. "I know this, back in the capital, they order their weapons for their new 'uns 'bout now, and the sergeants would complain."

"That won't stop her."

"And it won't stop them from takin' her. Lad, mayhap this is what the gods want her to do, 'cause they've given her naught here."

"Mayhap." He forced the word through his teeth.

"Bah, let destiny have its way." He pointed his hammer at the apprentice. "It's back to work with you now, wastin' me time talkin' to you like that!" He absently grabbed a handful of tools: chisels, hammers and butchers.

He could slack off for the rest of the morning, but he wouldn't. He shoved the smaller chisels away, he wouldn't need to make tight curves yet, and the larger sized ones cut the straight lines.

The master smith settled back as his hands worked for him, especially since they knew the metal better. Then suddenly, he quickly put his tools away, and leapt to an inspection of the forge. He bent around, sniffing to see if anything was out of place as much as using his eyes. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and took his apron off. "Kelin, I've got an errand to run, leaving the forge to you for awhile, don't ruin my business!"

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Never question yer master," Sigard fired back. He shut the door none too quietly on his way out, leaving Kelin standing there with his hammer over the anvil and a confused glare on his face.

An hour later someone came in. Erb, the forester, brought his pony which badly needed new shoes. The big man scratched his matted hair.

"I don't understand, I don't doubt yours or Sigard's work but the last ones just fell apart. I haven't been making her haul more than she usually does."

Kelin shrugged, producing the shoes for Erb. "Couldn't tell you. Donley takes care of her, right?"

"Aye, he does, that's the other thing, and I don't doubt him either."

The apprentice smith debated telling the forester about the jousts in the meadow, but he respected the secrecy of the youth's sacred place. Although, he was certain Riodan knew by now. "You'll have to wait for Sigard to return 'cause I'm no farrier. I can make the shoes but the beasts don't like me near their feet."

Erb sighed. "Where is Sigard anyway?"

"Out on errand, and that was all he said to me."

"Well, he couldn't go far, I'll just wait for him then. Donley's out in the forest, and he'll just have to wait too." Some tint of light in Erb's eyes and his son's small punishment made Kelin wonder if perhaps he knew more than he was telling about the pony's swift deterioration of her shoes.

Kelin went back to the forge, still well ahead of the day's demand of work, but looking busy kept him from further conversation. He still had other things on his mind. Sigard should be back soon, he hoped at least. He wanted to know what the blasted smith was doing! His patience slipped a little farther away from him, and he hardly noticed when the mayor stepped into the forge.

"Kelin!" Oric Halvorson shouted. With his back to him, the apprentice slowly set down his hammer and paused to compose his face. Oric didn't wait. "Where's Sigard?"

"Out on an errand, lord mayor." He walked over and dusting his hands. "What can I do you for?"

"Just coming to ask about my plough."

Kelin pointed over to a corner. "Right there, lord mayor."

"Excellent." Oric rubbed his hands together. The door behind him opened again and in stepped the master of the forge. Finally, Kelin thought.

"Greetings, lord mayor," he said quickly but formally, if he didn't bow. "Here about yer plough?"

"Aye, master smith." He nodded his head over the area that Kelin had already shown him. "It looks marvelous."

"Hardly," the smith replied with one his deep bellowing laughs. "But it will cut the land ten times harder and deeper than it would if it *looked* marvelous."

Oric shook his head with a wide grin. "Naturally. The price we agreed upon, then?"

"Of course!" Sigard pretended to be offended. "I wouldn't charge you more 'cause I made a better plough than you asked!"

Normally, Kelin would have laughed along with the three men, but not today. It didn't take the smith long to shoe Erb's pony, nor to trick Erb into helping the mayor move the plough to the mayor's farm with the pony's aid.

"So, Kelin," the smith rounded on him. He was a powerful man, but so was Kelin. This time, however, Sigard seemed the bigger. "Is she taking that longsword?"

"Aye," Kelin said slowly. Neither he nor Derora had known of it before last night.

"Good." Sigard nodded. "It'll serve her well enough for now, until she outgrows it."

"Swords ain't clothing."

The smith took no notice of his apprentice's tone, and appeared almost jovial. Whatever his errand was about he seemed mightily pleased with himself. "Course they ain't, but that's her father's sword, not hers."

"She won't lose it."

"Then perhaps she'll send it home when she has her own." His rough features twisted into a funny expression. Was he actually awkward about something in his own forge? The apprentice retreated a step. "Uh, Kelin, I don't mean to pry, but are ye just friends? You always seemed worried 'bout her."

The question took Kelin off balance. He coughed, and looked at Sigard curiously. "I've known Der since we were babes in our mothers' laps," he began cautiously. "She's my closest companion, and just a friend whom I trust, even with my life." His tone was solemn but internally he laughed at the prospect. Der in love? She would

rather lose a limb!

"I'm glad to hear that, complications are bad."

"What do you mean by that?" Kelin asked sharply, but Sigard was already to work and ignoring him.

"Mother doesn't agree with Father."

Derora scowled at the floor, mulling over the argument she heard between her parents last night. She exhaled. "Chera, Dad and I agree. That's what matters. She'll come to see we were right in a few years." She glanced up at her sister and waited until Chera dropped her eyes. They were alone in the house. Riodan was tending the fields and Rhoesia was visiting Avice's mother about a new dress.

Her sister was petite, standing taller than Der with a slender build and complexion that the elements had not blemished. "I keep thinking of all the horrible possibilities. Let's put the sword under a blanket, it's making me nervous."

"I can't look away," Der replied wistfully as the naked blade pulled her eyes to it. When she saw it, she felt it in her hands and she was riding with a great army to sweeping victories against terrible hordes of ogre-ish invaders. The pounding hooves of the warhorse beat beneath her, so much stronger and more fluid than the plough pony. She forgot that she was in her shared bedroom in a farmhouse, and what she was doing.

"Ouch!" She dropped the swordbelt and the bone needle. She stared ruefully at her bleeding index finger, sucked the blood and spat it out.

Chera quickly picked up her sister's sewing attempt. Der had come in earlier with the sword, a wicked looking knife and the brown swordbelt. She promptly cut a length of leather from it. She tried sewing the ends together in huge, ugly stitches with an equally ungainly needle.

"Here, I'll finish it for you, Derry." Chera's nimble fingers already were soothing the coarse work her sister had done.

"I can do it." Der half-heartedly snatched at the belt.

"I can work faster," her sister responded, proving it she spoke. She bit her bottom lip. "You shouldn't go, even the cities are perilous, let alone an army. Father left the army."

"I know." Her shoulders hunched as she watched her sister's flying hands. She couldn't lose her temper at her sister anymore, not since last year. She didn't know, but she suspected she was finally maturing. However, her mother was still another feature of her life; and Rhoesia's continuing disapproval only heightened her desire to leave. Part of her was secretly scared at stepping alone into the wide world, or being crippled in battle, or maybe even dying in a distant land. She shook her head and told herself that she was *not* going to think about that. What worry still teased her the most was that her mother could be right in the end.

She looked back to the swordbelt; she would need a new one when she passed by a tannery. She required a new kit in order to care for her sword as well. She had old, odd pieces of what Riodan had used, but the kit was incomplete and aged. She was also taking a short bow, arrows, spare clothing, her sword, dagger, food, a waterskin, some money, a backpack and nothing more.

A loud knock on the house door made them both jump. Der waved Chera down. "I'll get it." Then, like a doe, she lightly leapt out of the room.

She opened the door to an anxious Donley. "Greetings." He inclined his head. "I heard you were leaving tomorrow."

Her mouth opened. She hadn't told anyone save Kelin! She tensed. "Um... Sorry I didn't tell you, I just couldn't think of what to say —"

He shrugged. "It's alright, Der. Damn, I'm surprised you've waited so long." He ran a hand nervously through his hair.

"Did Kelin tell you?" She hadn't thought he would.

Don shook his head. "No, his siblings heard, their house isn't so large."

"I'm sorry..."

"I want to say my piece." His mouth suggested a smile. "Hear me, you be careful. I'm serious when I say that I think you are meant for great things. I think this is the best thing for you, and for the people you will meet. But, here, I will miss you." He blushed and looked at the floor.

She staggered back into the house. His words hit something she whispered to herself all the time. "Thank you, Don. I didn't know you were a prophet," she said with a helpful smile.

"No, just a hopeful friend." He did smile. His hand dropped to the small sack he had brought. "We wanted to give you something for the road."

"I won't accept anything." She retreated further into the house.

"You will." He followed her inside. "Because we won't take them back." He pulled the first item out. "This is a handkerchief Avice embroidered awhile ago — so she says. 'Tis the walking staff of Amiery, so you'll have good fortune on your travels." It was much fancier than any mere walking staff, and instead a knotted stave, it bore brightly colored flowers growing from the top. He put it back into the sack. "We also gave you a few bits of meat

and cheese that we could spare, and all our money. We wanted to give you more, but this is all we have." He lifted the plain leather pouch to her.

"Don, it is all you have, and I won't leave you here with nothing."

He stood his ground. "Please, Der, we have no real need for money here, you know that. Only Oric insists on using money, you know the rest of us barter or just give it. You'll need it." He forced her fingers around the small purse. "Besides, you can pay us back when you ride back rich and famous on a fancy steed." He winked. "You'll also have to show me how to properly joust."

She grinned as she closed her fingers around the pouch. "It's a deal." She grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the room. "You have to see my sword, *my* sword."

Kelin walked home as the sun dwindled and crossed the bridge without thought. The back of his neck tickled in the prevailing gray light. His day had been long and full of toil and heat, the usual. He pushed open the door, suddenly contemplating its weight underneath his hand. He hesitated in the doorway; both of his parents were seated in the front room that also was their kitchen and living area. It was warmer to sleep here in the winter too with the stove. Gaius Miller and his wife, Calindra, gazed at their middle son with optimistic expressions.

"What?" he asked suspiciously.

His parents exchanged nods. Gaius cleared his throat. "Son, Sigard came to see us today. He told us about Derora, and also that you are ready for the Guild examination in Duelingar."

"Oh no, I know what you're going to say." Errand indeed! That old man!

"We've already packed your things, and spared what money we could."

"What makes you think that I want to do this?" he shouted, finally snapping after the long day.

His parents took the outburst stoically. His mother said, "We know you care for your friend, and don't want to let her make a stupid decision by herself." They all chuckled a little, and Kelin suddenly realized that he was going to leave with Der, and found no more use for arguing the inevitable. Besides, the creeping fingers of sleep massaged his mind and he sagged in the doorframe.

Calindra smoothed her skirt. "We support this, and knew you had to leave soon anyway. Come home if you can and write always."

"I will, Mum."

"Wonderful, now sit and spend your last night here with us."

Kelin backed a step. "I will," he promised. "But there's someone I must see first." He ducked out of their house and raced to the forge. If the old man wasn't there then he would run to his cottage, that conniving villain!

Sigard broke into his gap-toothed grin as he saw his apprentice burst through the wooden doors. "I have yer letter of recommendation here, and the ink ain't yet dried." He passed his hand over the flat surface of metal he used for a desk as well as other things.

"You!"

"This town ain't large enough for two smiths."

"How could you!" Kelin trembled; the impact of the news had finally struck his deepest chord. He was leaving Riversbridge! He wasn't sure if he was in favor of it or not.

Sigard ignored him. "I've pulled out yer best pieces of work, of course, you'll have to make yer own in the actual examination, but these will help them determine yer worth too. Also, I'm *giving* you some mighty fine tools. I would make you buy, but not on this short notice."

"And it's all your fault, that's why you're not making me pay."

The smith shrugged. "'Tis awful to accuse yer master." Then his face lengthened. He rose and walked over to his prized possession, a safe he had crafted years ago. It was a symbol of pride more than anything, because nothing in the village needed to be locked away. At least, that's what Kelin had known all his life, and in the moment, he was very abruptly no longer sure of that. The younger smith opened his mouth to make more accusations, but shut it instead. Sigard fished the key from his pocket and removed the lock in a ritualistic fashion. Kelin tried to peek over his shoulder, but the old man was too large.

Sigard turned around, holding an extremely odd looking sword across his hands. It had a long, ornate hilt and a smooth, slightly curved blade with a very tiny circular guard. The single sharpened edge was keener than Der's new blade.

Kelin gasped. "Your secret project?"

Sigard's expression remained grim. "Your hammer isn't enough to hit the world with, you'll need a proper blade too." He ignored the stunned silence and glared at the sword. "I hadn't intended to give this to you, but I think you'll need it more than I ever will. Still, I'm glad I could do it. I saw a sword like this once, long ago in the capital on a very brightly clothed warrior from a very distant land..." He snorted. "Man looked like he was wearing a dress. Anyway, I wanted his sword, and I am a smith, so I made one. I think it should be close, but my memory's not what it used to be."

The apprentice was startled. "I know it looks strange, but the metal's sound, I can see that from here."

"It is a sound blade, would I make anything else?" He said in his usual dwarf-like gruffness. "Now get out of my forge, you'll need sleep." He tossed a plain scabbard, specially designed for the curved blade, onto the desk by the letter and various pieces of metalwork.

Kelin walked home with his arms loaded. Riversbridge was still as an undisturbed pond. It gave him time to think of how suddenly his life was changing.

"Arise, warrior."

Der pushed her eyelids open, and wondered when she fell asleep. She had been far too excited during the night, seeing battles not yet joined, victories to be won and beasts to be destroyed. She rolled out of bed carefully so not to disturb her sister. She almost wished she would, so she could say farewell, but her father was whispering.

"Morning," she croaked through a dry throat.

Riodan nodded in return and quit the bedroom. She dressed rapidly and then reverently buckled on her sword. It felt awkward with the weight on one hip, but she liked it. She picked up her boots and tiptoed out the room.

"Put socks on," he instructed when he saw her still carrying her boots.

"Yes, sir." She set her backpack down and reached into it. Her sword banged loudly on the floor as she bent. She cursed her clumsiness under her breath, and imagined what her father must be thinking. He said nothing.

When she had both socks and boots on, she straightened out the rest of her clothing, including the swordbelt and turned to face him. In the early light she saw him more as a commanding officer than her father. His inspecting eyes did not disappoint the vision.

He held a sealed scroll out to her. "You must swear to deliver this to Count Calloway." He did not let go until she spoke.

"I swear I will deliver this to Count Calloway," she said in her most serious voice.

He hesitated to let go. "Then may Amiery speed your travel." His tone relaxed as he continued. "His castle is near Duelingar, but he may be at court in Second Acron. They should admit you if you act the nobility you are, and they know my name. Or at least they should, I spent half my life there. The capital is where you'll join the army – if you so choose."

"Yes, sir." She opened her mouth to say more, but then thought better of it.

"What?"

She shuffled her feet. "I know it's not my place, but I'm curious about what's in the letter."

He shook his head. "No, it's not your place, and next time, don't ask. I'll tell you because you have a right to know. No law reaches here and if we keep growing, and other villages like us, we'll become far too tempting targets for raiders and brigands."

"What about an invasion?"

His jaw tightened slightly, but he shook off whatever he thought. "I'm much more worried about brigands than any foreign invasion, but we couldn't withstand that either. This can be a lethal problem, Der. Our militia would be mostly trained by you, and I'm only half joking."

"I don't know anything in the current court, we may be friends with old enemies or enemies with former allies." Der wrinkled her nose, but didn't say anything. Riodan sighed, reading the visible naiveté on his daughter's face. He did not mention he didn't know if the Count was still alive or not; he probably was, but he hadn't been there in twenty years. He cleared his throat. "You'll need everything I've taught you to make it long enough for you to learn what you'll need to know. I only pray I've taught you enough."

Riodan reasoned this was the hardest thing he had ever done, and concern creased his eyes. He'd been nervous enough when his eldest and only son had left the village to be a scribe, but this... It was the risks that she was going to be taking that made him quit. He left when Chera was born, because when he held his second child, he knew he valued life too much to be a warrior. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he hoped his daughter would see the same things he did and leave, but he also wanted her to be satisfied with her life.

"I'm sure you have, Father. I will do well."

"Then farewell, my daughter. You have my permission to return when you will. Until that day, may Carenth grant you many blessings and Zine many victories."

She nodded, swallowing the bile that crept up her throat. She didn't know what more she could say, so she turned and began her trek off the farm. She looked at the barn, where the farmhands would hustle to work soon enough. The road was quiet as it was not yet dawn, but Der did not fear the familiar darkness. She felt a twinge in her chest as she stepped onto the stone bridge and stopped about halfway to watch the water. How she had ignored this simple beauty for so many years!

She would not see it again any time soon, if ever. The idea chilled her like the cold water under her feet. She grimaced and made herself walk over the bridge. Then, she thought of Donley, Kelin and Avice asleep safely

in their beds. At least this way she wouldn't have to make the farewells.

A grin slowly accumulated as she kept her pace, and her step came with some spring to it. She started to whistle *Victory Over the Bridge*, thinking it vaguely fitting. She soon felt as if she could fly. There would be no more of her mother, and there was the unexplored world beckoning her. She heard the teasing whisper tickling the back of her mind, and it was irresistible, like she was an animal hearing the call of the wild.

Her song died in mid-note as she passed the last house. "Kelin! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I thought I'd walk up to Duelingar for the Guild examination." He paused, as if he'd been rehearsing. "Aren't you going the same way?" He twirled his walking staff, and eyed the sword at her side. He shifted his own backpack to a more comfortable position, pretending not to hear the metal scraping against more metal inside. He leaned forward and wheezed.

"Indeed I am." She couldn't help but smile, and much of her fear of facing the world melted. She wouldn't be alone. Confusion flickered across her face as she saw his sword.

"Might I walk with you then?"

"So long as you're not trouble. I want to see that sword."

"On the road. Come on, let's go."

She fingered her sword. "I wonder what we'll face out there."

Kelin chuckled. "Oh, me, I'll be cooped up in my own forge making a decent enough living like the rest of us mere mortals. You, however, will probably be fighting ogres in a month."

"Aw, just ogres?"

"Oh, let's not forget about dragons, leviathans and vampires." He laughed at her grin. "Who knows? Perhaps even a few mysterious chemmen."

She batted at his shoulder. "Oh, come on, everyone knows they aren't real." She paused in mid-stride. "Are they?" Brief remnants of campfire stories of humanoid monsters that ate souls or something flitted across her mind. Of course, they looked exactly what she imagined ogres looked like too.

Kelin shrugged massively. "Why would I know? They may have been once. I think they were killed off in the Centum Wars. Who knows?"

She shrugged too. "The elves would. Perhaps we'll meet some! Or dwarves too. Wouldn't that be incredible?"

He smiled. "How about we get to the city first?"

Chapter Three

Duelingar

"You're still carrying that dagger?" Kelin blurted, and then jammed the rest of his waybread into his mouth.

"Aye." Her hand shot to the blade and she dropped her sandwich.

"It's worthless!"

"You're only insulting yourself. You made it." She picked up her partially nibbled lunch in her left hand.

"Years ago!" He stabbed a finger toward it. "That was the first blade I ever made."

"Then you should be complimented I'm still using it!"

"Let me see it."

She nearly threw the dagger into his waiting palm. It was worse than he remembered. She had tried to keep the edge keen, and done a credible job, but the blade was notched. He rolled it about in his hand, and then placed it on top of his first finger where the fulcrum point should be, and the dagger tipped toward the blade. Part of him was amazed it hadn't broken already.

"It's not the best in the world, but I can still use it." She grinned a little.

"If you would have told me back in Riversbridge, I would have made you a new one. Now, you'll have to buy one."

"Well, I didn't make it."

His mouth twisted at her tone. "A warrior should keep serviceable equipment." Years of practice told him exactly where to stick a verbal knife.

A spark ignited in her eyes, but then she hunched her shoulders. "I was planning to get a new one anyway."

"Were you?"

"Yes!"

He sighed. "Well, how much farther are we from Duelingar?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I can't imagine too far though." She wiped the crumbs off her hands. "The sooner we get back on the road, the quicker we'll find out."

It wasn't until the next day that the sight of Duelingar greeted them. Der's childhood memories hadn't captured its vastness. Great gray stone walls, dotted with turrets, surrounded the city. The place seemed as if the earth had just risen and declared the city under its protection. Beyond the walls, they could see hundreds of busy buildings. Who could ever need all that accommodation? Riversbridge possessed all it needed in a small space.

As they closed in on the city, the finer detail of the individual stones came into focus. The gates themselves boasted two portcullises and manned towers on either side. Staring upward, Der could see up the slits of the murder holes, and the bottom of the boots of guards up above.

A guard held up his hands. "Hold it."

Kelin nudged her in the center of her back. "Der."

She blinked and looked quickly around, and at the tall guard immediately in front of her. She could make out a weathered stained face below the open helm. She also noticed the guards were speaking with everyone coming through the gate. She stared up at the guard and tried not to notice her hands beginning to shake. "Yes, sir?"

"The two of ye?" He nodded back and forth between her and Kelin. He scratched his nose through the noseguard.

"Yes, sir."

"What's yer business here?"

Der felt her face heating up. Kelin stepped forward. "I'm a blacksmith, going to take the Guild trials to become a journeyman."

The guard sucked his tongue. "You got proof of that?"

"Why should we show you?" Der snapped.

The guard chuckled. "I hope that your smithy skills are as sharp as your tongue. And, ye should tell me because ye won't get past me without." He glanced down at her sword. "Do you even know how to use that?"

"They're just kids, sarge, let 'em through already." This guard leaned against his halberd behind their would-be interrogator. He pushed himself forward. "That sword don't look that bad. Let me see it, I might buy."

Her jaw dropped. "Buy?"

"Sure." The guard shrugged. "I can offer a decent price too. Let me see it."

She scuttled back and closed a hand protectively over it. "No, no, it's family."

"Oh, I understand. You're just carrying it, 'cause it's awful wrong for you anyhow." He nodded sagely.

"Watch yourself, girl, some other people 'round here might not ask."

She drew in a breath. "Of course it's mine and I can too use it!" At least, that was her intention, but the

words dried in her mouth. She blinked confusedly and tried to look down at her tongue, and actually said, "Uh, thanks."

Kelin cleared his throat. "Why bother us, sir? Has there been trouble?"

The guard looked toward the sergeant, who shrugged. He said, "Well, there's been a bit of trouble out west, ye hear?" He grinned a little nervously. "And our orders are to keep out that trouble."

"The Wild Lands are the only thing west of here."

The guard forced out a small laugh. "Aye, and I don't know. We just don't want trouble here." He waved at them. "Go on through, it's past midday already."

Out of earshot, Kelin grinned. "You want to do that for the rest of your life?"

Der straightened her shoulders. "I'll be more than a gate guard. Of course," she amended quickly, "I might have to do a little to start."

But, her friend was no longer listening. The noise of the city swept over her too and she stared ahead, around and even up. Hundreds of people shoved past each other. The buildings crowded each other, wall to wall. There were more people than Der could count.

Kelin cupped his face. "I've never even seen a two story building before, and did you see that one? It has four. I counted them. Four!"

"I see it! I see it!"

He wiped his forehead. "Do people even need all that space? Honestly?"

Der licked her lips. "So, where's the Guildhouse?" she asked brightly.

He glared. "Hush up."

"Let's go back and ask the guard."

Over an hour later, after being lost twice, they gazed upward at a very solid plaque of a hammer striking an anvil. Above the building, heavy plumes of smoke fought for height before dissipating.

Der crossed her arms. "You know, I could think of a better symbol for it. It would be like a falcon with its claws spread, or something."

Kelin frowned. "How would that represent blacksmithing?"

"I don't know. It would certainly be more exciting."

He rolled his eyes.

"Well, you first. It's your trial."

He nearly tripped over his unmoving feet. "I know."

She tapped her foot. "You're not moving."

"I rather noticed." He bunched a fist at his side, and then sighed loudly. "This is the rest of my life, Der. What if I do something to ruin this?"

"You can't ruin it if you don't get your arse inside."

"Der! That is *not* reassuring." He shook his head. "Maybe I liked the way things were back home, and Riversbridge isn't big enough for two smiths. Hell, Guild recognition doesn't even mean anything there anyway. I wouldn't even be here if it weren't for you."

"I know. But, this is what we want to do. Now, our lives are not going to happen unless you go inside." She pointed at the heavy wooden door.

"Let's find an inn. We can come back first thing tomorrow morning." He exhaled his tension at the idea.

"What! What are you doing?" He tried to turn, but Der shoved him forward another step. She had to squat low, dig her shoulders in and *heave*. He was like rolling a boulder uphill.

She grunted. "Bringing your future to you."

He stumbled through the door into the surprisingly well lit entryway. The stubby hall was lined with racks of solid metal weapons and horseshoes. A man in a thick leather apron spat and wiped his hands. "What do you want?"

"I – uh – I'm an apprentice, I, uh, want to take the trial exam. For journeyman."

"Oh." The man held out his hand. "Letter?"

"Oh, right!" Kelin laughed hastily and threw down his backpack. "Here it is." He shakily proffered the scrolled document.

The man's eyes brushed over it for a second. "Alright, we can fit you in today. Got a few others taking the journeyman trial too. Just go on straight back through that door there. And, you," his gaze drifted over to Derora, "You'll have to wait in that hall over there if you want to remain here." Then, he returned to a chair in the center of the room and didn't glance their way again.

"Yes, sir." She turned to Kelin and grinned. "Best of luck, my friend."

He swallowed and nodded. "Aye. Thanks."

She watched him through the back door, and then cautiously poked her head through the small arching doorway into a medium sized room lined with benches along the walls, there were perhaps three other people

already waiting. Then, she stopped and stared.

There was a dwarf – absolutely no mistaking the height, black beard tucked into his belt, armor and definitely no misgivings about the huge axe that was strapped to his back. She had never seen a non-human before. She tried not to stare while she slammed down onto an empty portion of the bench.

The dwarf grinned, as far as she could tell between the beard and heavy mustache, all she saw was the hair move and assumed there may have been a smile underneath. She grinned hesitantly in return.

“Yer no craftsman, I can tell,” he said in heavy accented Common. “What are ya here fer?”

She cautiously set her backpack on the floor between her knees. “Uh, I’m waiting for my friend. He’s here taking a trial.”

The dwarf nodded, and seemed to be satisfied with that. He kicked his legs; they didn’t touch the floor. His boots looked not only steel toed, but steel tipped. Der watched the tiny metal triangles on the boots, and laughed.

She quickly coughed. “Excuse me.”

“Yer not from the city, are ya?”

She grinned uncertainly. “How did you know, sir?”

He chuckled, and it sounded like gravel rolling down a hill. “Little signs. Yer far too tense and yer eyes keep rovin’.”

“Oh.”

“First time to the city? Ya know them walls, them city walls, they is dwarf work. ‘Tis why they’s held so long.”

“How old are they?” she inquired politely.

“Seven centuries young.”

“Truly?” Her eyes shot wide.

“Indeed, lass. This city was originally built by dwarves fer trade, ‘tis why the Blacksmiths Guild is here and not in the capital.” He leaned back and banged his helmet against the wall. He did not appear to notice. “Name’s Gnirun Heavyaxe, of Clan Heavyaxe. Ya know it?”

She shook her head. “No, sorry.”

“Oh.” He slouched down, and looked a little shorter. “I thought all humans ‘round here knew the name Heavyaxe.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

“Bah.” He shrugged. “Not yer fault ya ain’t been educated.”

“I can read!” she shot back, louder than she expected.

“So?”

The third man in the room chuckled and looked up. “Not most farmfolk can, master dwarf. I do not mean to intrude, but I thought this might bridge the river.” His voice was silken and soft, not to mention instantly trustworthy. He looked at Der. “Most dwarves are taught to read, and they don’t know that many humans cannot.”

“What are ya here fer?” Gnirun demanded.

“Myself? I am a merchant. I’m visiting the guildmaster about a late shipment. Alas, he’s busy and I must wait.” He face was decorated with woe.

Der tilted her head to the side. “What?”

Gnirun snorted. “That the shipment with the elvish goods in it? Heard about that. Ain’t comin’.”

“Beg pardon?” the trader asked respectfully.

“Ain’t comin’.” The dwarf kicked his dangling feet. “Something ‘bout that lousy outlaw everyone’s a-huntin’. Dwarf news, doubt most of the humans got word yet.”

“He robbed it?” The merchant knotted his fingers together. Knuckles creaked and popped.

The dwarf stopped kicking his feet and his voice deepened. “Not that I know, but the shipment ain’t comin’.”

The trader grabbed his hair. “No! That’s the one shipment that I wait five years for! Every five years! Do you know how hard elvish stuff is to find?”

“Aye, I do,” Gnirun said simply, and started swinging his boots again.

“Elves?” Der pressed her hand tightly against the bench. “Honestly, elves?”

They were beyond the wild. The Wild Lands were those mammoth wildernesses that eschewed attempts from human settlers. Thealith was the furthest kingdom west, and lived only in the Wild Lands’ shadow. Beyond the wild were rows of murderous mountains, and human civilization knew they were there only by maps from the other races. Finally, beyond those was the elvish kingdom. Der thought of that like heaven or hell – it was so far away it didn’t seem to exist in the world, and it wasn’t something to worry about in the meantime.

“Aye, elves,” Gnirun repeated, and then spat. “They cut off trade, suddenly. Don’t know why.”

The merchant rose stiffly and bowed. “If you shall excuse me, I have to discuss this with my colleagues and clients.” He walked stiffly out of the waiting room.

Der chewed her lip. "Um, I don't want to be rude, but, um, he certainly trusted you."

The dwarf pointed to his helmet. "Heavyaxe."

"Oh, very well respected then."

He chuckled. "Aye. 'Course, ya don't seem o'erly concerned yerself."

She held out her hands helplessly. "Why does what happens in the elvish kingdom affect me?"

He shrugged. "Fair 'nough, girl."

"So, um, master dwarf," she tried using the trader's term, "Do you know where I might purchase a new dagger? Surely they have some here."

Gnirun shook his head slowly. "Only beginners keep them here, the rest sell elsewhere. I do know where ya can go."

"Uh, I should wait for my friend."

"Bah. The trials take awhile, ya have plenty of hours."

"Thanks." She hopped to her feet.

The dwarf raised one stubby looking finger. "Be on your mind about this outlaw. Not that you'll meet him, but keep yer eye on those turds stirred up by his ugly wanted poster."

She nodded again and then hovered in the doorway. "Do you know where I could get a dagger at all?"

Derora had no mind to be sidetracked, but when she saw a great temple arching into the sky, she knew it would only be proper to thank the gods for the successful journey. She dug her fingers into her pockets and belt purse, and turned up nothing worthy of a godly gift. She sighed, but the gods her father had taught her to follow weren't avaricious, so her thanks should be enough.

The temple's stunning white marble walls swirled in the sunlight. The glass windows, set high in the walls, danced in the light with multiple colors and pictures in the patterns! Der had never seen anything so exquisite before.

Quite humbled, she hurried up the steps and entered. She waded her way through the gathered people to the shrine of Carenth, king of the gods. She was almost to it, within reach of brushing the marble sandals.

A priest in rich velvet robes, cut in front of her. "You can't have weapons in here. Don't you warriors know this is a place of peace?"

Der coughed. "Pardon me?" He called her a warrior! And he truly meant it too! She bit her lip as she realized she was in trouble. So, some things didn't change. "Forgive me, I am a stranger in the city, I did not know your rules."

"I'm sure you didn't," he sneered and stepped forward.

Her gaze hardened and she squared her shoulders. "Forgive me; it was an innocent mistake after all." She wanted to make him repeat it.

"Get out of here, you and your weapons." He inhaled and puffed his chest out.

"Acolyte!" Another vividly dressed man said sharply, his tone cut through the crowd watching the confrontation. Der gasped at the sight of him, he was much more luxuriously robed than the acolyte! His blue silk robe shimmered with real jewels. She had never seen such finery, but the back of her mind kept pushing its way to the forefront and she couldn't help to think that those precious gems would be better off buying food for the poor in the city or something like that.

"You may return to your duties."

The acolyte made no rebuttal, unlike what Der expected, but merely bowed his head and backed away. The priest turned to Der with cold, concentrated eyes. She felt she could hide her secrets from him no more than she could her sword.

His voice was gentle but firm. "He forgets that warriors keep the peace. You are always welcome here, my child."

Relief relaxed her muscles. "Thank you, sir." Then, she wondered if there was some priestly title she was supposed to call him instead.

He smiled warmly. "Where are you traveling from?"

"Riversbridge, sir."

"I am not familiar with it, and I see that you are not familiar with the city." He nodded smiled, and she smiled hesitantly back. Then his eyes suddenly glazed and his gaze struck deeper into her than before. She staggered away from his gaze. His mouth worked in a chant, was it a prayer? It was the oddest prayer she ever heard. He closed his eyes and stretched forth his hand. "You are chosen and blessed, but you will be taken into a world of gray."

Der's knees wavered as the floor suddenly started spinning. She leapt for the door, shoving people out of her way while colliding with a few of them. Her feet were too dizzy to run straight. Everyone in the temple stared at her, but she didn't care. Was that some kind of spell? She ran faster.

Once away from the temple, she slowed and caught her breath. She mentally scolded herself for going

into the temple in the first place. He must have been putting on a show for everyone else. That must be it. City folk were too dramatic, Father always said. They had gone mad because they had no simple work to keep their minds occupied, or maybe it was the confined space they lived in. She nodded to herself. He was faking a spell for attention, because a real priest would be humble and not wear gems.

"Lady warrior!"

The shout jerked her attention back. She looked around wildly until she saw the merchant. How different carrying this sword made people react to her! Der paused, and he began to sell. "I have a holy relic of Zine's! It has power that will give you strength in battle."

She raised an eyebrow. "Prove it."

"I cannot since I am not a warrior, but you could."

She shook her head and walked on. Around the market, she saw seasoned warriors and weapons wherever she looked. She noticed more guards in the city's colors in this district and many personal guards for the merchants. All of them were alert and dangerous. She grinned.

A sign suddenly hung in front of her with the name Gnirun instructed, the Sword and Dagger. It wasn't an open booth, but a proper shop in a building. She reread the sign, suddenly thankful for the ability. She had called it pointless once, and in Riversbridge, it was. Here, there were also pictures for those who couldn't. She glanced in the shop. There was the merchant, standing behind the counter wearing profligate purple robes that made him look silly in her eyes, and a young man browsing around. She stepped inside, wondering if weapons were allowed here. Of course they were, she berated herself, it was a weapons shop.

Her eyes drifted to the young man. He was tall with a svelte frame, but anything from lanky or clumsy. Short, well trimmed platinum blond hair spilled out from under his green cap. He was handsome and his movements were graceful, down to the way the feather his cap dipped and swayed with every bob of his head. A long, thin sword adorned his side, and that captured her attention. It seemed too small to be effective, barely over half the width of hers, but by the look of it the sword fit him perfectly. The weapon itself seemed rather blurry to her, as if she couldn't quite focus on it.

She turned to the daggers on display behind the counter. There were some fancy ones, but her eyes quickly passed over to the utilitarian blades. The merchant glided over. "Ah, looking to buy a new dagger, are you? You've got quite a good eye then, those pretty pieces over there won't stand up to everyday use. No, these plain blades have the longest lives and the most use in them."

Der thought she heard the blond stifle a chuckle. She started as she realized the merchant was waiting for her answer. "Uh, yes."

"Then you couldn't have come to a better shop." The merchant stepped behind the counter and set the plain daggers before her for inspection.

"Actually," the blond said, his voice carrying the intonation of bells and trumpets in a splendid mix, "They have some cheap ones in the next shop, but they weren't as good of quality." He stepped beside Der and smiled gorgeously. "I'm looking for a new dagger as well."

She looked at him again. He had cascading blue eyes, like two gentle waterfalls. Part of Derora's mind told her she should be swooning right now, whatever that was, but she shrugged and instead started examining the individual daggers. Eventually, she started guessing which one would fit in her sheath best because they all looked quite functional to her.

"You like this one?" He asked her kindly and held up one of the simple blades.

"Thinking about it."

"I'll make a special deal for you, just twenty silver." Der staggered back a step. That was an incredible amount of money! For just a dagger! She could buy enough food to last her a lifetime in Riversbridge with twenty silver.

"Huh," the blond said, taking interest. "That's the one I was looking at."

The merchant's silk smile increased as he ducked under the counter and came up with an identical dagger. "Not a problem."

"Well," the blond folded his arms and leaned against the counter casually, "Since it's not a unique piece, it's not worth half the price you're asking."

"I suppose I could shed a few coins since it's not unique, seventeen."

"Perhaps." The blond shrugged. "But look at the guard's design, it's rather weak, don't you think?"

"I would not sell anything weak, sir."

"I'm not saying you are, but the design of the dagger does have its flaws, so it can't be worth seventeen."

Der watched as the merchant delightfully dropped the price to fifteen and some copper. The blond shook his head and turned to her. "Let's go to the other shop, decent prices at least." He shoved off the counter and started to walk away. She followed, figuring he could indeed get a better price at the other shop.

"Thirteen apiece, and quite the bargain," the merchant said from behind.

The blond stopped and appeared skeptical. "We'll give you seven."

"Twelve, no less."

"Ten." This time he grinned. "Or we truly will go to the other booth."

"Fine," the merchant sighed. Der thought that his rich robes had lost some of their luster. "Ten for each dagger."

"Oh, I need a kit for my sword too," she added.

The merchant nodded wordlessly and pulled a small pouch out from underneath the counter and laid it out so she could examine the vial of oil, whetstone, cleaning cloth and a dwarf-made wire brush. He smiled as if the blond hadn't bargained him down at all. "Eleven."

The blond shook his head slightly, and she said boldly, "I'll give you five."

"I'll go as low as seven, and I assure you, you're getting quite the bargain."

"Oh, agreed." She doubted she could get him to go any lower, and began to pull out her money.

"I'm glad you both happened by my little business," he said pleasantly. The blond made no return comment.

"Actually, I was told to come here." Der gathered up the kit and dagger.

"Oh, who might that be?" The merchant puffed up his sleeves proudly.

"Gnirun Heavyaxe."

He paled. "Pardon? You're a friend of his?"

"Well, not exactly. I just recently met him at the Blacksmiths' Guild."

He stared at her for a long moment with critical eyes, and then thrust out his hand. "Give me those back!"

"What!" both of them exclaimed.

The merchant rolled his eyes and ducked under the counter. He placed two very fine, and obviously expensive daggers, worth thrice the ones in their hands. "Even trade, dagger for dagger." After they had taken their new blades, he bit his lip and excused himself, and ducked behind the curtain until they left.

Der smiled as she exited the shop, and tied the sword kit to her belt. "Thanks. I never would have gotten him to go so low on my own."

He grinned while also tying the sheath onto his belt. "You're welcome, and it's always a pleasure to beat traders in their own experience. Your friend must have much influence in this town; the merchants would rather lose money than cross him." He held up the fine dagger to the light. "I lost my own a few weeks ago."

"I'm only just finding out."

"Dwarf by name, yes?"

"Of course," she replied, acting as if knowing prominent dwarves was a common thing for her.

He winked at her as if he knew she was only pretending. "Well, you're welcome again. Farewell." He waved nonchalantly and immersed himself into the crowd.

She called her farewell and started off in the other direction, in search of a tannery. She still needed a new swordbelt. She couldn't get nearly as good as a bargain on her own, but she tried. She bought, at a rather costly price, a new black leather belt and a sheath to match for the dagger. She also spoiled herself and bought two gloves. By the time she was done and back at the Guild, Kelin was sitting on the front steps. She jogged over as soon as she saw him. "Sorry I took so long. I thought the exam would be longer."

He shrugged. "Where have you been?"

"Buying things. I got a new dagger and swordbelt." She straightened her new, squeaky leather.

"I noticed." He rose slowly, and one of his knees popped.

"Sorry, I thought the trials would take longer. I met this dwarf, and he seemed to know everything in this city, and he told me I would have enough time."

Kelin shrugged. "Alright. You met a dwarf? So did I. They work at the guild."

"Great. How was the trial?"

He sighed. "Boring. All I did was show the things Sigard packed for me, and answer a few questions. I didn't know the one about limestone though."

"Limestone?" Der asked.

"Right. Why limestone is used to remove slag. That's all though. I passed without hardly a second glance. Then, I had to pay the fees." He smiled grimly. "At least my load is lighter though."

"Oh. What's slag?"

"It's impurities in the molten metal."

"Oh. Right. So, what are you going to do now?"

He hands hung at his sides. "I don't know. Go with you to Second Acron I suppose. I can't go home, Sigard's there."

"We'll find something."

"No, we won't. Because you're joining the army. Maybe I can make weapons and armor for them, but we won't be with each other anymore. You know, I have never been this unsure in my entire life. I've never been away from home. Most people never travel further than twenty miles from where they are born, and I'm not certain

that's such a terrible thing!"

She stepped away from him. "I'm scared too, Kelin, but that's no reason to think about it."

He blinked. "What?"

Chapter Four

First Fight

Derora came round hugging her backpack. She spat a leather strap out of her mouth. Then, she yawned. Slowly, she approached cogitation as she listened to the sounds of a dozen of the inn's other patrons still snoring. Carefully, she unwound herself from her pack and the thin blanket she'd found in a pile by the door last night. She slapped on her sword and dagger first, and then looked around the room.

She saw that she was the first awake. Around her, everyone else remained splayed across the large, flat panels lain over hay that served as a communal bed.

She shoved the pack over one shoulder and poked her head out the door. "Ah." She grinned and picked up the bucket of cold water. Clean water was worth waking up first. Back inside, she splashed the icy water on her face and gasped. She shook her head. "I knew it was going to do that." She pushed the bucket back against the wall for the next person.

The next person was Kelin, who yelped as she kicked him in the ribs.

"Wake up."

He glared up at her with one eye open. "You didn't have to do that."

She shrugged. "I didn't kick hard."

He rolled his eyes. "I guess that you just don't understand that you can tenderly *shake* someone awake." He glanced up through the small hole cut in the wall that served as a window and vent for fresh air.

She sat down on the massive pallet, and began tugging on her boots, completely ignoring the sleepers around her.

Kelin sat up and rubbed his scraggily face. "It's too early, Der."

She shrugged again, and then she grinned. "I want to get going. I mean, this isn't just a new day but this is the rest of our lives that starts today!"

He sighed and pulled himself upright. "Does the rest of our lives include a breakfast?"

"Uh. It could."

"It would be nice, just once, if you could think of life in terms of meals."

She blinked. "What do you mean by that?"

"Never you mind." He sighed again, louder this time.

"Come on!" She leapt to her feet.

He pulled at his own backpack. "Only if there's food."

Downstairs, the inn was beginning breakfast. Der snatched up some bread while Kelin sat down at a table. A few other early risers were munching away at their meals.

Der turned. "What are you doing?" She stuffed a piece of bread in her mouth. "Let's go."

He shook his head. "No, because it's too early and I want my breakfast. It's not even dawn."

"Come on." She backed closer to the door.

"No." He put both hands flat on the table. "Not this time."

She unshouldered and threw her backpack down at his feet. "Fine." She plopped down into the chair and put her chin in her hands.

Kelin finally cracked a small smile. "You probably won't ever change."

"Probably not." She drummed her feet on the ground beneath the table. "I just want to get going!"

"I know! Believe me."

A barmaid silently brought them the morning's stew with a thick, black ale each.

Der snatched up the mug. It was bitter and much stronger than what was brewed in Riversbridge. She forced herself to sit back in the chair and not cough aloud.

Very methodically, Kelin dissected his stew.

Der tipped up her bowl and used the spoon as a shovel.

Meanwhile, Kelin glanced around. It was quiet here, so quiet that he could distinguish distant sounds of snoring drifting down from the ceiling. He paused for a glare at Derora, but she didn't notice.

She sucked down the last of the stew and slammed the bowl on the table. "Well?" She looked over at him.

Kelin delicately set the spoon on the table next to his bowl.

Der frowned. "Kelin, this isn't funny."

"I know." He leaned back in his chair.

"Kelin..." Her voice warned like creaking wood.

He stared at his spoon intently. "No. I'm going to eat my breakfast, *patiently*."

She slammed a hand on the table. "Come on! I just want to get going! This day is the start of the rest of our lives, don't you see that?"

"Yes," he snapped. "And I'd rather start that day with breakfast."

She slapped the table again. "You're missing my point!"

He shook his head firmly. "No, I'm ignoring it. There's a difference."

"I just want to begin this – this – this –" she bit her lip, "This adventure. I want to fight! I want to see the world! There isn't a war that can frighten *me* away! I don't know fear!" Without thinking, she hopped on top of her chair and drew her sword skyward.

Kelin exhaled to the cacophony of dropped plates and shrieks that was almost music to him by now. He'd certainly heard plenty like it growing up around his friend. The maids dashed to the kitchen. Around him, he saw the innkeeper flush white and then a brilliant rose. Everyone else, patrons and servants alike, ran for the door.

Der sat down with nothing more than a shrug at the sudden panic around her. Kelin sighed and pulled his bowl protectively toward him. They might get chased out of town, but he would at least have his breakfast. He watched the innkeeper who was standing as if he was chained to the floor.

In the ringing silence, someone applauded like a slow spoken drawl. A lone silhouette, outlined in the morning light, stepped into the room and turned out to be the blond Der had met. He chuckled. "Impressive, but more suited to a battlefield, unless this town has changed the meaning of food fighting."

Kelin still clutched his bowl. "You've never had breakfast with her before. Who are you?"

Der's face splintered into a grin. "He's a friend. I think. He helped me out yesterday."

The blond grinned. "The name's Kaleb." He bowed.

"Oh. I'm Derora Saxen." She tried to point to herself with the sword. "And this is my friend, Kelin Miller."

Kaleb's smile widened. "Pleasure. I see you have a new sword belt, Derora, but no armor to complement."

She hopped off the table and sheathed the weapon. "Aye, I know. That will change."

Kelin thrust around heaping spoonful into his mouth.

The newcomer glanced meaningfully at the innkeeper, who had the look of an angry volcano. He opened his hand toward the door. "It's becoming a lovely morning, and I believe the perfect time to begin going to wherever your travels may lead you." With that, he ducked out the door.

Der glanced at the innkeeper and then scuttled after the blond.

Kelin swallowed as much as he could, and hot stew slipped down his whiskers. He looked at the innkeeper, who was panting and starting to raise a fist. The blacksmith flung some coins on the table. "I'm so sorry." And then he ran for it.

Outside, Der matched pace with the blond. She grinned. "We're both from Riversbridge."

He glanced behind over his shoulder. "Never heard of it, sorry."

"Oh." She shrugged. "So, where are you from?"

"Someplace that I'm sure you don't know. What can I say? The world's a large place full of tiny towns." He held up his hands helplessly. "So, what brings you to Duelingar?"

She grinned. "Well, I'm on my way to Second Acron to join the army."

Kelin jogged up behind them. "Aye, and I'm now on my way to search for work with her. There's no room for another smith back home – and old Sigard's got another apprentice anyway."

Der smiled, but looked down at the street and kicked a loose cobblestone. "It's frightening to think that perhaps we've already seen the last we'll ever see of home."

Her companion nodded. "Aye."

Kaleb sighed. "Yes, I agree too."

"What about you?" Der asked. "Where are you going?"

He shrugged. "Like you, I'm just passing through."

"Oh? Which way are you going? We could travel together."

"Der..." Kelin petered out, but glared sideways at her.

Kaleb chuckled. "You haven't traveled much, have you? Well, you don't just travel with strangers." He frowned. "Unless you're shipping down the river or overland with a caravan, or you just happen by a group on the road..."

Her eyes danced. "Right. People do it all the time. It's safer than being alone."

"Maybe I've just spent too much time in the city," he replied cautiously. "Please, forgive my suspicions."

She looked anywhere but him. "That's fine. I've got my friend – I – I was just trying to be polite."

He smiled. "Thank you, but I just have to move quickly."

"Good luck," Kelin said.

"Yeah." Der still looked at the ground. "You'll need it, especially traveling alone so quickly – people are going to think that you're the outlaw." She risked a small grin. "That might slow you down."

Kaleb simply stopped walking. "That's not funny."

She smiled and shrugged.

They stepped out into a busy street and let the noise of the city break around them. The two villagers stared upwards at the two and three story buildings.

Kelin cleared his throat. "Why do they even need a space so big? What could they possibly use it for?" Der shrugged. "Oh, I didn't tell you! Yesterday, I found this temple, and it had a gigantic stained glass window!"

"What's that?"

"What do you mean, what's that?" Kaleb cut in.

Der grinned. "My dad told me about them. I'd never seen one before."

"So, what are they? Like a whole colored window? Why would anyone want a whole window that's blue or something? You couldn't see out of it!"

Kaleb raised his hands. "No, no. The window is usually many pieces of glass which are all stained different colors and set in lead, and when combined they form a picture."

"What? Like a painting?"

"Aye," Der added. "They were all of the gods, or something. But, they were beautiful."

Kaleb nodded. "And you're right, Kelin, you can't see out of them, but the light shines in from behind so the picture glows."

"Oh? Really? I want to see that!"

Der looked around at all the intersecting streets. "Uh... We could ask someone where it was."

Kaleb laughed like chiming bells. "I hope the both of you realize that Second Acron is much larger than this town."

"I like it," Kelin said, and then frowned. "Although, I think I could do without some of the thugs." He tilted his head over to some roughly dressed fellows lounging against a wall. "Saw more of them yesterday."

"It's not usual to have so many," Kaleb said quietly.

"That dwarf was right." Der stopped walking abruptly.

"What?" Kaleb and Kelin asked in unison.

"He said not to worry about the outlaw – whatever that bastard did – but to mind those turds that have stirred up after him." She nodded to a pack of men that looked like they had just ridden through a tornado and not noticed. One of them was cutting his fingernails with a knife.

"Right." Kaleb pulled a hood up over his platinum hair and hat. "I see what you mean."

Kelin shifted the weight of his pack. "I wonder what this man did. I mean, the reward must be something powerful."

"In this kingdom, I heard it was a noble title, land and money," Kaleb dropped his eyes.

"This kingdom?" Kelin echoed. "There are rewards for him in other kingdoms too?"

"Yeah, now I want to know." Der frowned. "We never heard about this back home."

"Der," Kelin sighed, "We wouldn't know if the king had died. Makes you wonder why your father moved out there."

She shrugged, and looked over at Kaleb, who had hunched his shoulders. His face was stone. "We should go now to avoid trouble." He swerved into the current of the street, and the villagers followed.

"I don't like the looks of most of these types." Kelin pushed himself away from a wagon, and noticed how the sounds of the hooves and wheels seemed louder than usual. Suddenly, everything was just a little louder and the colors swam more sharply in his vision.

Der frowned and turned back around. "It looks like they're following us. Why would they?"

Kaleb scowled beneath his hood and his eyes changed to a deeper blue so dark that they almost became purple. Der stared, but managed to keep her mouth shut. Kaleb said, "I don't know, but we should find a guard as soon as possible. I'm sure the city is in no mood to suffer fools. Derora!"

She whirled around. "What?"

"Don't stare at them. Now, come on." He quickened dramatically.

Kelin tasted his mouth drying. His legs slowed with a leaden feeling and his clothing became too tight. He glanced behind at those coarse men with those huge, *heavy* swords. Suddenly, he surged forward.

Kaleb growled. "Stay together. Do not get out of sight."

Der looked over her shoulder. "They're following us. I mean, they're really following us, it's not an accident."

"Get ready to run –"

But, she had turned around again.

"Der!" Kelin yelled.

She didn't blink as she marched up to the crowd of four men. A large man in a bulky robe stopped and stared. So, did the rest of them. She came up to the group and put her hands on her hips. "Does one of my friends look like this outlaw to you?"

The fat man's lips parted, but nothing came out. His eyes bulged.

Kelin and Kaleb inched up behind her.

She frowned. "No, we're not, so why are you following us?" One of the other men started snickering, and

Der fired him a steely glare. "This ain't funny, so shut up."

His hand shot to his sword.

"Derora...please..." Kelin tried to whisper. He felt trouble and fear climbing up the back of his throat along with breakfast.

That fat man simply stared at her. Something sparkled, half-hidden beneath his robes. She reached out and pulled a gold medallion. A serpent's body supported striking heads on both ends.

"What's —"

Kaleb grabbed her arm. "Run!"

But, Der just stood there, staring. Distantly, she heard Kelin shouting something. She discovered her feet were hypnotized by the grinning man as he drew a wickedly curved knife from his sleeve.

Kaleb yanked back on her shoulder and lunged with his sword. The slender blade bit deep into the man's gut. He looked surprised as he tumbled forward.

Der felt a stab of dizziness as the world snapped back into place. She tugged her sword out of its sheath and fell back in line next to Kaleb. "You just — you just —" But, she did not have to time finish as the rest of the men closed in on the pair.

Kelin came up behind them, drawing the curved sword and dropping his backpack at the same time.

Der thrust, and was immediately forced to parry the man's counterattack. She never imagined that she could move so quickly, but she didn't want to imagine the alternative. When their swords clashed, she felt the tremors all through her body. She also learned some important lessons in one rapid heartbeat: her father's blade was too big for her and that she wasn't nearly as good as she thought she was.

Her opponent lunged with his sword and she barely managed her parry. She forgot to counterattack. He thrust again. She parried again and hit back this time. They fought frantically, and she beat at his sword with all her might.

Kelin nearly tripped over his pack as he pedaled backward. He cursed and struck out wildly. He drew first blood. His enemy must have expected a complicated move from the fancy, curved sword and barely batted down the straight thrust that stung his thigh. Kelin lost his grip on the sword and hopped backward. The man screamed and lunged; Kelin barely dodged. He dipped down and ripped the hammer out of his backpack while ducking beneath his attacker's swipe. He ground the hammer in his opponent's groin.

The man screamed again and grabbed himself. Kelin snatched his sword back and thrust. Then, to his surprise, he found that he was no longer ill. He roared in savage victory.

Kaleb had already felled the man in front of him. He quickly gazed at the widening ring of panic surrounding the fracas, and cursed violently.

You struck at your *opponent*, Der suddenly remembered, not his weapon! In the space of furious seconds, she got several bloody flicks through the man's guard.

"You little bitch!" He chopped at her arm instead of her torso — she wasn't expecting that! She parried, but it was late and she failed to push his blade far enough out and it sliced down the side of her arm. She yelled and dropped her weapon. Her opponent's face lit up in happy, evil surprise, but she was faster and slammed a punch in his face with her hand. While he was reeling from the hit, she jerked her dagger free from her belt and stuck it in his neck. He sank slowly to his knees and then to the ground.

Der glanced at her arm and gasped at the sight of her own bright blood. But, it didn't hurt much; she stiffly flexed her hand. She glanced around in the sudden, deafening silence. "Is that it?" She scooped up her sword.

Kaleb stuck his bloody sword back in its scabbard. "We have to run! Now!"

Der gazed down at her arm. "But..." She blinked experimentally.

He grabbed her other arm and pulled. "No time!"

Der yelped aloud as a hand snatched her ankle. She whirled and stuck the point of the sword at the man's throat, but hesitated. The fat man with the medallion stirred, and his black eyes sprang open. With blood leaking from his lips, he hissed, "A curse on you all! The sword of Sennha will cut you down!"

Chapter Five

Trust of Strangers

Kaleb threw his hands on top of Der's and slammed her sword down through the fat man's throat. She flinched when the point clashed against the street.

"Run!" He grabbed her arm and yanked.

Der opened her mouth but nothing came out. He pulled again, and the motion shook the dead man's hand off her ankle.

She looked up and saw a wall of people around them. In her vision, they blurred together with the buildings until everything was a slow seething blend of color. In the distance, she heard the city's bell ringing. Someone always rang it for emergencies. She started to sway. Back home that meant a flood or a fire. Or a funeral, she recalled with a shiver.

She'd never killed before. It had just been so fast, she just had to react, just had to survive. Now, she was suddenly standing over the bodies of the slain. But, they had been standing, fighting, *breathing* not even a minute ago.

Der reeled from a sudden slap across the face, and felt her sword tip swing upward on reflex alone. Kaleb swam into focus. "Run, you fool!" He tightened the grip on her arm and started to run himself.

Kelin nearly tripped over his backpack again as he turned to run. Kaleb let go of Der's arm and the three of them thundered down the street. Around them, they heard shouts and yells. Der glanced over her shoulder and stopped to stare. More men with swords drawn gave chase. She couldn't say if it was more guards or bounty hunters or whoever.

Kaleb spun nimbly into an alley. Kelin tried to make the turn and crashed into Der. She gasped and rebounded off the wall. But, she regained her feet and hauled Kelin after her. Kaleb was already at the end of the short alley. They just ran – it didn't matter where.

He checked around the corner into a network of alleyways and back toward the thoroughfare. He ducked around the corner. Then, he cupped his hands and turned to them. "Alright, up."

Der finally shoved her sword back into its sheath. "What?"

"Derora! Up! Now!"

She put her foot in his hands and flew up onto the roof.

She rolled back to the edge and threw her hands down to Kelin. With her pulling and Kaleb pushing, he clambered above the manmade precipice. He groaned as he felt the thin wood sink beneath him.

Der threw down her arm over the edge. Kaleb shook his head violently. "No! Other arm! Other arm! Pay attention, godsdammit!"

Then they both heard something coming down the alley. He grabbed her arm and jumped. She gasped at the weight on her injured arm, and felt him slide on her blood. But, he was up with amazing speed.

Der dropped back onto the roof in a ball and clutched her bleeding arm.

"Don't move," Kaleb mouthed.

Below them, they heard the rhythm of boots down the alley. Someone below growled, "Damn this maze. You three, that way! Rest of you, follow me!"

When it felt safe to breathe again, Kaleb propped himself up on his elbow. "Don't move. There may be people below us."

"I left my pack," Kelin panted. "I left my pack. It's in the street." He still had his bloody hammer in his hand and sword, and he rolled the weight of it around in his hand.

Kaleb just shook his head. Across from him, Der held her arm. The blood was still flowing, and so were quiet tears from her eyes.

"We can't afford a blood trail. Can you hold up your arm?"

She bit her lip and lifted the limb. He pulled out a shirt from his slender backpack and slowly tore it along the seams. He began to wipe the arm clean.

"You should have used your other arm."

She shrugged, and immediately winced. "I didn't think – that's the hand that I use."

His fingers were nimble as they cleaned and inspected the wound. He poured his water skin over it. He whistled. "You're lucky. He just shaved off your skin, didn't sever anything you can't grow back or get down to the bone. I think you're losing a lot of blood though, and I also think you're wearing most of it."

She almost laughed and hissed as it finally hurt, and it really hurt! The pain sprinted from her arm to her head and she thought she would faint.

"Lie back, just lay back and close your eyes."

She nodded and leaned back. She had no idea how long they waited.

Kelin started rubbing his shoulders against the roof.

"Stop it," Kaleb hissed.

"I can't! We've been here too long and I don't know you and Der's hurt!"

"We can't let the guards catch us."

Der opened her eyes. She was still cradling her arm. "Why not? They started it. We didn't do anything wrong."

Kelin snapped, "They started it, right. They started it when you turned around and confronted them, right?"

"They would have." Kaleb's eyes darkened to almost purple again, but he looked away.

Kelin still glared at his friend. "Then why'd you run away, huh, Der? You know, they're still out there hunting us! And, because of you, Der, I'm hiding from city guards on a roof!"

"Because – because, we were running – and we'd just killed those men! Kaleb dragged me!"

"Yes, I did," Kaleb answered sharply. "This is the city. Those guards don't know you and they won't trust what you say. And Derora did start it – people saw that. Now, when they find the medallion, the events will lean in our favor, but we can't take that chance, and I don't have the time."

"Medallion?" Der's eyes narrowed. "You mean that twisted snake thing?"

Kaleb closed his eyes for a moment. "I assume that you've never heard Sennha before."

The blacksmith shook his head. "No."

The other man nodded. "Yes. Well, he's a deity, and one whose will is not in the manner of flowers and charity."

Der blinked. "An evil god."

"Yes, exactly."

"So, we just killed a follower of an evil god?" Kelin asked.

"More than that," Kaleb replied. "Only the priests carry that medallion – or so I've heard."

"We're heroes!" Der started to punch the air, but immediately winced.

"Not so loud!" Kelin hissed.

"But, Kelin, this is what I've always wanted to do! Be the hero!" She was grinning so widely that she felt like she was endangering her balance despite that she was lying on her stomach.

"Yes," he sighed. "Yes, I know. I just didn't know that I'd be here on the day that you proved your insanity."

"What?"

Kaleb broke a smile. "Yes, but at least she isn't afraid to fight."

Kelin shook his head. "No, that has never been in any doubt."

Der tried to stop wiggling. "I told you that."

Kaleb smiled but shook his head. "We shouldn't speak. We'll wait until nightfall, and then part ways."

"Part ways?" Der asked. "Why?"

"Well, their looking for three young people, and, I don't know either of you. Sorry, Derora."

She looked ready to argue, but dropped her eyes. "Call me Der."

"Dare?" he repeated.

She nodded. "See? Now we're friends."

He almost smiled. "I wish life was that simple."

"He's right, Der. It's best to part ways." Kelin chimed crisply. "Now, what's the best way out of town?"

"We still have to get to Second Acron," Der said, "So, we should go that way."

Kaleb shrugged. "Main highway out of town, you could probably get through – but not with your weapons."

Der clutched her sword in her left hand.

"Sorry, but you won't move through crowds with it. What's your hustle to the capital anyway?"

"I'm delivering a letter."

He nodded. "To whom, if you don't mind me asking?"

She frowned for an instant. "Count Calloway."

His jaw slipped open.

"What? Is something wrong?"

His eyes darted around. "Providence indeed." He looked back at Der. "That's where I'm going."

"Really?" She leaned her head to the side. "Do you have to speak to the Count as well?"

He shook his head, but was still staring off into the distance. "No, oh no. Mine is a much more personal errand. One of his staff is a relative a mine with whom I need to speak."

"Great, then we should stay together." She grinned encouragingly.

He shook his head again. "Well, I honestly am thunderstruck."

She thrust out her hand. "Then, what do you say?"

Slowly, his face twisted as he pondered. "Alright." He nodded again. "Alright."

"You seem distracted."

A brief struggle crossed his features, but wound up with a brief grin. "Ah, I'm just surprised. Not many things have gone my way recently."

Kelin sighed and rolled over. "Let me introduce you to my friend: things either go impossibly well or straight to hell. There is no middle ground."

"What does that mean?" Der demanded.

"What I just said," he shot back.

And then they heard a thumping from below. The tip of the drill chewed through the roof. Kelin yelled and Der bit her tongue. Kaleb materialized a knife in his hand. Der tilted her head. "Not how I was expecting to be arrested."

"Quiet!" Both Kelin and Kaleb spat.

"Why? They obviously know that we're here." The drill had stopped and retreated, and someone below pushed a flag of paper up through the hole. Carefully, she reached out and unwrapped it. "Look Below. What does that —"

Wood screamed and exploded as all around them and the edges of several axes broke through from underneath the ceiling. Just as suddenly as they appeared, they were yanked back and the ceiling fell through with the trio scrambling to hold on for the ride.

Kelin coughed amid the dust. Der had landed on her shoulder to protect her injured arm. Kaleb landed on his feet, knife ready. But, those axes that cut the wood were angled toward him, and the dwarves holding them were obviously not alarmed by the tiny blade.

"Up, now, young ones," a gruff voice ordered. A bearded dwarven warrior stepped forward out of the ranks.

"Master Gnirun Heavyaxe?" Derora hazarded. She couldn't have picked him out from any of the others.

He squatted and touched his helmet. "Aye, lass, 'tis."

Kaleb slowly put the knife back into his belt. "Are you helping us, master dwarf?"

Gnirun laughed. "Of course! We saw what happened."

"What happened?" Kelin repeated. "You mean the fight?"

He nodded. "Aye, aye!"

"Then why are you helping us, sir?" Kaleb asked, hand still on his weapon.

"Because you felled a priest of one of the dark ones. 'Tis a good deed in a naughty world and ye don't deserve to be arrested for that."

"Oh." The young man readjusted his green cap. "I'm sorry for being defensive."

Gnirun may have smiled beneath the beard. He waved his hand. "Bah, no need." He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward.

Kaleb backed up. "Is something wrong, sir?"

The dwarf grunted.

Kaleb spoke before the dwarf had a chance. "My friend here is wounded, and she needs to be seen." He turned to her. "Der, I think after a few hours that I am acquiring your personality, so please, do not argue."

She shrugged and held out her arm. The makeshift bandage had bled through.

Gnirun barked some directions and some more dwarves entered. Der couldn't tell them apart for the life of her, but she put that down to dizziness. They had busy long beards and hair underneath an assemblage of fiercely dented armor.

"Let's get out of the weather," the master dwarf gestured toward the gaping dark doorway.

Kaleb didn't move. "Where are we going, sir?"

Gnirun glanced over his shoulder and grunted again. He marched into the next room, reached down and hauled on a large metal ring. Ponderously, a trap door opened to reveal a brightly lit stairwell. He looked up at the young man. "We're going to supper."

"Oh."

The dwarf may have again grinned beneath the beard and started down the steps. "Bah. Come on."

Der leaned against the wall as they descended. The warm air felt steamy as it kissed her skin, and it was spiced with salt and smoke.

Kelin looked up at the torches, and exhaled loudly. "I always thought that dwarves had magical lights or perhaps some sort of glowing animals." He shrugged uselessly.

Gnirun chuckled like gravel rolling together. "Perhaps we might have our ways, but torches work, so why not?"

Kaleb frowned slightly. "However, torches require much air, and then it would be almost impossible to breathe."

"Oooh, aren't you the wisearse of the company?"

"Well, I'm just observing that it would fill with smoke." He glanced around. "This does not seem to be the apparent case."

"We," for the first time the dwarf paused and narrowed his bushy eyebrows, "Not quite sure on the right words. We exchange the air from the outside."

"Ventilation?" Kaleb suggested.

"Vent. Wind. Aye, vent."

A few feet behind them, Der stumbled into the wall. Kelin caught her shoulders. She forced a ghost of a smile. "I'm alright."

"Yeah, and you said that you were alright the time you broke your leg falling off the log over the creek and tried to *walk* home." He pushed her good arm around his shoulder.

She blinked a couple times. "Well –"

"Do not say whatever it is you're thinking, or so help me, I will drop you."

"I was just going to say –"

Kaleb turned around. "Der, please. Save your strength. You're wounded. It was an honorable fight."

She bit her lower lip. "I guess when you put it that way..."

Kelin rolled his eyes and took most of her weight.

Gnirun's expression was impossible to tell beneath the ferocious hair and the helmet. "In here." He pushed open a door that everyone else had to duck beneath into a room as bright as a bonfire. Dozens of wall scones were anchored to the wall, and each one had a glass case around it. The casing had large holes in the bottom and became a bulb around the flame, but then it slimmed down into a tube that disappeared into the ceiling. The air was surprisingly sweet with just the merest tang of smoke.

Kaleb scraped his head on the ceiling and ducked as if someone had thrown something at him. He readjusted the green cap he wore and swore under his breath. The dwarf walked forward under the low height and pointed to the nearest of many tables.

The tables and benches were wooden, but were mostly barely sanded logs, hammered together. When everyone sat down, Kelin noticed that though the wood was just there for its purpose, every head of a nail displayed an individual stylized picture on it. He had to smile.

His knees came up too high for any comfort, but the table could certainly take the weight. Across the table, Kaleb poked something sticky. Gnirun, meanwhile, stomped off to a door on the other side of the dining hall and yelled into it.

"Our surgeon's coming – as soon as someone finds him. Also, I figured ye were hungry, so they're gonna bring up food too." He sat down next to Kaleb and nudged the slender man so hard with an elbow that Kaleb wheezed.

The young man coughed as politely as he could. "Your generosity is overwhelming, master dwarf."

Gnirun shook his head. "Of course not! Anyone who strikes down a fell priest should be rewarded with a hot meal." He paused and stroked his beard. "Instead of being arrested. Ye know, before this outlaw business began, ye wouldn't have been in trouble with the law – in fact, there used to be a reward if ye got one. And the story does not make sense as well."

"What do you mean?"

"Why they want to arrest the outlaw. They say he is a murderer, fair enough, ye can't let murderers go, but they say he's wanted for the murder of some high ranking elves."

Kelin shrugged. "Makes sense to me, spread the word, get this man caught."

The dwarf shook his head. "No, it can't. He wouldn't have made it this far if that were the case. Look, it's never yer business, but the other story we heard from out west does not agree. But, never ye mind." He looked across the room. "Ah, here's our surgeon."

Another dwarf staggered through the far door as if he'd been pushed. Unlike the couple other dwarves they had seen, this one wore a leather jacket and was sans armor and helmet. But, most of all, he was not bristling. He was tidy. His long black hair was braided neatly, and so was his beard.

He barked something that the others couldn't understand, to which Gnirun shrugged and held up his hands.

Der shrank away from the surgeon. "He looks angry."

Gnirun shook his head. "Bah. It's just his little rule, no blood on the table."

"Good rule," Kelin said as politely as he dared.

"Bah," the dwarf said again. "It washes off along with everything else."

Kaleb raised an eyebrow at the sticky spot in front of him, and quietly pulled his hands into his lap. He looked across the table. "How are you doing, Derora?"

"I'm alright." She was holding out her arm to the neat dwarf. It didn't really hurt, but it didn't really feel like her arm was there either; it should have been floating about six inches above where she saw it. She thought she felt a vague throbbing, but she wasn't certain.

The dwarf looked up at her. "Hurt, but no more bleed." Then, he shrugged apologetically and used what looked like a paint brush to vigorously rub in an orange, noisome paste.

The pain began as a sizzling, swelling sensation and rapidly shot up her arm and through her body. She had never been in so much pain before! She felt the hot tears draining from her eyes and she banged on the table with her other arm.

"Let it out, lass, yelling lets the pain out," Gnirun said softly.

She roared, and let it out until she was out of all the air in her lungs. She pushed the pain into anger and screamed it out.

Kaleb clapped his hands over his ears.

When Der had calmed back down into fighting back sobs, Gnirun nodded to the surgeon, who dropped a small glass vial on the table, picked up his bag and departed. "See? That wasn't so bad. That will form a barrier, so there's no more need for bandages. Just don't peel it off – it will fall off when your skin's healed. Understand?"

She nodded. Kelin patted her back. "You'll be fine."

"A glue?" Kaleb asked.

The dwarf shook his head. "Don't know that word, lad. Shell?" he tried.

Kaleb frowned. "Not exactly. Adhesive."

"Sticky?"

He visibly fought from looking at the spot on the table. "Yes, and it gets hard when it dries."

"Aye, this stuff." He rolled the vial over toward her. "Mix a small draught of that in with your drink until it is gone. 'Tis to ward off infection. It won't dull the pain none though. Don't use it all at once."

She feebly gripped the vial in her offhand.

Through the far door, several more dwarfs entered, carrying several black cast iron pots between them. Without a word, they set them on the table lining one of the walls and walked out.

"Go get ye some food." Gnirun pointed to the table.

Kelin eyed the table, but didn't rise. "Uh, we usually serve our guests."

The dwarf shrugged. "Different ways, lad."

He nodded. "Hey, Der, I'll get you a plate."

She nodded and gasped. "Thanks."

He and Kaleb approached the table, which already had a stack of hammered metal plates and a pile of two-pronged forks. On the other side of the pots of food were mugs, some barrels supposedly full of ale and a trough of water. Kelin filled two plates with steaming meat, and some green gooey substance he hoped was just the afterlife of mashed peas.

Kaleb set his plate down on the table. "What kind of meat are we enjoying, master dwarf?"

Gnirun grinned. "Cooked."

"Ah." There was only a hint of a grimace. "I understand."

Der fumbled the fork in her left hand, but scooped up a forkful. "I'm hungry enough to eat a horse and cart."

"There's a good chance of that," Kaleb muttered.

Kelin nearly dropped his fork. "What?"

The dwarf probably shrugged underneath all the hair and clothing. "And how is a horse different from a cow?" Gnirun asked. "Or a dog or rat? It's all meat."

Der shrugged and continued chewing. "He's got a point." She swallowed. She ate away while Kelin tasted whatever that mushy green stuff was. Kaleb just poked his plate with his fork.

Gnirun nodded. "Aye, let's talk about the fight. Now, my people who saw this ruckus say that the group was following you. Why?"

Kelin shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. I didn't even think about that." He glanced meaningfully at Der. "Some other trouble had my full attention."

But, the dwarf was staring at Kaleb. "You have the picture that everyone's been hunting."

Kaleb very delicately placed his fork beside the plate. "Plenty do, master dwarf, it is a vague description at best. I am not a rogue, nor a scoundrel nor villain, and it would be best to leave this subject where it falls."

Kelin snapped his fingers. "Perhaps that's why they would have been following us. They thought the same thing."

Der frowned. "But, why would bastards like that follow him? I mean, he's a villain too."

Kaleb shrugged stiffly.

"No, honestly, if this outlaw's so bad, why are evil men hunting him too? Shouldn't they be helping him too or something?"

Gnirun drummed his fingers on the table. "Perhaps they are seeking his bounty as well. Villains are not usually unified, lass. They squabble amongst themselves most of the time."

"Oh." She briefly dropped her eyes. "I just thought that they were all out there, always trying to attack us."

"Who knows? Maybe they are and they could be trying to find and protect him," Kelin suggested.

Kaleb scowled. "Or it's a fiendishly clever plot to destroy an innocent man on the run." He looked up.

"Sorry, I know that sarcasm does not become me." He exhaled. "This is not the first time that I've been accused of having the same features as this wanted man, and it certainly was not entertaining the first time."

Kelin picked his fork up in silence.

"Is that why you wear that ridiculous hat?" Der asked. She smiled uncertainly. "Not funny?"

He shook his head.

"Sorry."

"It's fine, Der."

She trawled her fork through her food. "Master Gnirun, you said something about the elves."

But, the dwarf was watching Kaleb. "Nothing you need to worry ye minds about. This is far from yer trouble or mine."

Chapter Six

The Outlaw Found

"I hope you're not planning on wearing that to meet the Count," Kaleb said suddenly.

Der looked up from picking at the dwarven glue-bandage. "What?"

He grinned. "Well, besides the bloodstains, they're a little ripped."

She started picking at her clothes instead. "But, they're the only clothes I have." She leaned heavily on her crude walking staff they had made for her, and her face was easily pale enough to see the veins beneath her skin. The men had split most of the weight of her backpack, but she refused to relinquish her sword, even to the point of using it on them if they tried to take it away from her again.

Kelin bunched his hands over some of his own stains. "Master Heavyaxe did give us some money. We could probably buy some."

"No," Der said. "We don't know the next time we're going to have money." She blinked her bloodshot eyes.

"Derora," Kaleb chuckled. "We need to make a good impression. It may be the only time in your life you do something like this. Perhaps we should find a healer or at least a few days rest."

"That may have been the only time in our lives that we meet dwarves, either," Kelin chimed. "But, that was amazing! And those tunnels!" The dwarves had led them out of the city in secret. They had promised to keep their lips sealed about the tunnels, but Kelin rather suspected that a few other humans knew too.

Kaleb sighed elegantly. "They're dwarves. They always dig, and it certainly came in handy for us as well as them. However, back to what I was originally saying, I have some money. Der, you simply can't wear that to meet the Count. Trust me, please."

She shrugged. "Why not? We can wash them."

Kaleb raised both eyebrows at the mess of stains. "Perhaps, but if you managed to get the stains out, I think you'd be out of clothes."

Kelin rolled his eyes. "I've dealt with this before. Now, Der, do you remember when you went to visit your brother and you hadn't washed your clothes after the pig fiasco and the guard wouldn't let you in?"

"What's this?" Kaleb asked.

"My clothes were still decent, just a little dirty." She coughed and took a long moment to recover her breath while leaning heavily on the staff.

"Right," Kelin agreed after she finished wheezing. "And the same thing will happen here, only your brother will not be around to save you from being tossed into a cell."

Kaleb laughed. "Alright, what happened?"

Der shrugged. "I kicked the guard in the knee and went in anyway. I still don't understand why everyone was so upset. It's not like I was going to invade the castle or anything."

Kelin put his head in his hands briefly. "I know you don't, Der." He glanced pityingly at Kaleb. "I've tried to explain this – honestly, in every way."

He nodded, trying to swallow a smile. "I think I understand. What happened with the pigs?"

And then an arrow kicked up the dirt inches away from his foot.

He stared. They all stared for an endless second. Then, Kelin swallowed and tried to force himself to believe that the arrow really was there. Kaleb shoved him. "Off the road!"

He swore as he glanced ahead, seeing the marauders stumbling out from the foliage and trees on the road ahead. He counted five, and thankfully, only one bow. All of them had swords, however, and all of their eyes burned with that deranged fire like those cultists they had killed in Duelingar.

Der stumbled forward a step, trying to both grab the sword's hilt and sort out of her feet. She felt the wind from another arrow tug at her hair. She gasped and her vision exploded in bright colors. Then, she fainted.

"Der!" Kelin hollered.

Kaleb ripped off his backpack and rolled it in front of Der's head and yanked his sword free with his other hand. An arrow thudded down into the pack, right in front of her head. "Kelin, move!"

"But, Der!" He yelled.

"Kelin!" He sidestepped to avoid staying in the same spot, and another arrow flew past him. "This is the only way! Now, *run!*" He turned and charged the archer.

His sword swiped another arrow out of the air as he sprinted and he never missed a stride. The archer was speedier than he'd thought, or maybe it was fear quickening his fingers. He cut down another flying toward his face. The cultists yelled in surprise, and in the next pounding heartbeat, his blade struck home through the archer's cheap leather armor. The bow sagged against the archer's suddenly slack hands.

For Kelin, the distance between him and their attackers suddenly seemed painfully far. He was not certain if he was going to make it, or even if he wanted to make it. Thoughts of Der being helpless shouldered his fear and pumped his legs faster. In one hand, he held the ornate, curved sword and his hammer in the other.

Meanwhile, Kaleb kicked out to his side as another man tried to flank him. His foot landed squarely on his face. The cultist swung his blade wildly, but only cut through air. Kaleb had dropped to one knee and stuck his sword in the man's gut.

Kelin had finally closed the distance, and with the momentum of an angry thunderstorm. He bowled over his first opponent, cutting him open as the man reeled backward, his sword whistling uselessly through the air like a scythe.

A few feet away, Kaleb's blade fiercely clashed against the fourth attacker's blade. The cultist's sword flicked across the blond's shoulder. Kaleb hissed, but managed to not drop his sword's point. He retreated a few steps, and the man rushed forward. Kaleb disentangled his blade and fainted high. The man tried to parry it, and exposed his hip. The younger man didn't miss.

The last assailant rose up behind him. Kelin gasped and hurled his hammer. It flew through the air in a breathless moment. Then, the handle bounced harmlessly off of the man's ear. Luckily for him, it stole enough of the cultist's attention for Kaleb to thrust his sword home.

The fight was over in the time it had taken Kelin to close the distance. He leaned forward, trying to recover his breath. He stared at his friend. Kaleb had been so fast! Kelin felt like he had missed half the fight when he'd blinked. This felt so much faster than their first fight. "Where in the corners of hell did you learn that? You're amazing!"

Kaleb waved his bloody sword and pointed. "It doesn't matter! Get Der!" He spun on his heel and dashed into the trees. He was quickly rewarded with anxious whinnies. Five horses struggled against the hasty knots that leashed them to the trees. The blond cursed as he fumbled with the clumsy knots. He freed two mounts and whispered soothing phrases as they fought his pull. Minutes later, hooves pounded away from the scene like restless drums.

Derora leaned against the wall, staring blankly through her plate of food. Nearby, a couple candles flickered uncertainly against the twilight seeping through the window. She bit her lower lip. "I didn't faint. I just tripped and hit my head on a rock – or something."

Kelin shook his head. "You have no idea how much blood you lost, do you?" He kicked off his boots and sat on the bed beside her. They'd found a decent enough inn. It was average for inns everywhere with plain wooden walls and one candle lamp sitting in the glassless windowsill. At least this time, they'd paid for a private room. It only contained one bed.

She shrugged. "Not enough, apparently."

He frowned. "You look about as pale as the moon, Der. This is me, alright? You can pretend that you're invincible to yourself all you want, but don't lie to me about it."

She half smiled.

"I'm serious, Der."

"You always are. Especially since we're getting into real fights now."

"Yeah." He dropped his eyes. "Kaleb saved your life. He's an incredible fighter, and he knew what to do. I don't think I could have." He twisted his fingers together. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged again. "It's fine. You're still more of a friend to me."

He sighed. "Aye, thanks."

"I'm sure you would have saved me on your own. Where is Kaleb anyway?"

Kelin glanced toward the door. "Out getting clothes. He says we'll leave the inn as soon as possible. I think he wanted to go directly to the Count's, but with our torn and bloodstained clothes, and your wound we would've attracted the wrong kind of attention before we ever got to the court, so he said. Hence, he's out buying new clothes, and I desperately hope that the tailor here already had some made or this could take a couple days."

She nodded dumbly.

He looked at her for a long moment. "You know, I wish I could be angry at you right now, but I can't. I know you, and I was a fool to think that you wouldn't get me into some sort of frantic trouble. I should have stayed home."

Der rested her head against the wall. "And what? Took over Sigard's forge?"

He ran a hand through his dark, curly hair. "Something like that."

"Home." She chuckled. "And don't think that I didn't see the way you looked at Avice."

He laughed. "Oh, I know, and I'm thankful that you didn't say anything to her."

She chuckled. "That's not what I would've done. Although, I was about to poke you in the back with a sword to make you go do it yourself."

"Aye, that's you indeed." He stole a small piece of bread from her platter. "Did I ever tell you that my mother thought that you and I should... Well, you can guess."

Der blinked, tilted her head to the side, and blinked again. "Oh." She leaned away from him. "But, you're my friend! Besides, why would I want to get married anyway? Especially with all these great and awesome

adventures before us?"

He made a steeple of his fingers. "How do I put this politely? You're more of a drinking partner. And you know that I want to settle down somewhere with my own forge, a small garden, and make a life for a family."

"What? You mean like children?" She gave him a look as if he started speaking another language.

"Yes, Der, this may come as surprise to you, but that's what most people do."

"I know that! I mean, at least I've seen that."

Kelin dipped his head into his hands. "You see! This is why I say you're more of a drinking partner, because after talking with you I want a drink."

She frowned for just a moment. "Speaking of..." She raised an empty mug. "Is there any more?"

"There's water, and I checked, it's actually clean in this city."

"Good."

There was a soft knocking on the door, and then it swung inward. Kaleb entered, holding a small pile of neatly folded clothes in one hand. "Oh, good, you're awake. How are you feeling?"

"Well, tired and dizzy."

He set the clothes on the bed. "It's an honest answer."

Kelin grinned. "With her, it always is."

She dug her shoulder blades into the wall in an effort to find a position where her head wasn't spinning.

"Do you think that we'll be attacked again here? Like we were in Duelingar?"

Kaleb exhaled slowly. "I hope not."

"I've been thinking," Kelin said, "Those men were waiting for us on the road, weren't they?"

The other man closed his eyes. "Yes, I think so too. Someone from Duelingar must have gotten together some more of that devil-worshipping scum and ran ahead and waited for us. They are bastards like that, but there are bigger bastards out there."

"Like the outlaw?" Der tried to sit up straighter. "I'm just asking, why would they even bother hunting us when he's obviously such a bigger prize?"

Kaleb gently sat at the corner of the bed and sagged. "Because they're after me."

She frowned. "But, I thought they were hunting the outlaw."

He looked directly at her and raised an eyebrow.

Kelin glanced down. "Oh."

It still took Der a moment. "Oh."

Kelin grunted. "So, Der, are you going to try to arrest him?"

Der shook her head. "No-o. Not if those evil men are hunting him too."

"They lied," Kaleb said acridly, staring intensely at nothing. "They sold such a convincing untruth to the spies and the nobles."

"So, the cultists lied and set up this bounty?"

He shook his head angrily. "No, not them. Those cultists have just bought into the lie too, or I fear that they are working for a greater evil."

"Oh, you mean their god," she said.

Kaleb shook his head. "No, something a bit more tangible."

"Wait, wait," Kelin held out his hands. "Gnirun said that this involved the elves somehow."

Slowly, Kaleb removed the green cap, and pushed back his platinum blond hair to reveal pointed ears. They were the same size as a human's, but came to a simple point. The two villagers stared speechlessly at the elf.

He hung his head. "Yes, I'm hiding...running... and I'm terrified. And, I fear for you too now, and that's my fault, but I couldn't have made it alone. I'm so very weary, I was getting clumsy. Hell, I dropped my dagger into a river. My fingers couldn't hold on and it just fell. I wasn't in any peril at the moment or anything."

"You mean those cultists?" Kelin asked.

"No, worse." He shook his head. "I'm sure those cultists have drawn their attention. We need to be extremely careful." He pressed the cap against his face, as if to hide his extraordinary features. "I've lost some people dear to me and I can't take it anymore! I can't take hiding! I can't take death and I can't take living in fear! I can't take the thought that I will never, *never* see my parents again!" He stared at the hat in his hand as if he'd never seen it before. His voice dropped to a fragile whisper, "How do you live with death? How can you go on when your loved ones are forever gone? I just can't..."

Kelin struggled to get his jaw working. "Uh, it just takes awhile."

Der glanced around and twisted her fingers together. "It helps to talk about the good things, what they did for us, and how our lives are better for knowing them."

"Um," Kelin played for time. He blew out his breath. "Eventually, you just accept it with time and carry on. You have to realize that life didn't end for the rest of the world, and that's worth living for."

"My dad said at my grandmother's funeral that we know that they were good people because you're a good person," Der said gently. "It also shows us that you loved them. My mother told me that there will always be a little corner of your soul dedicated to the people you've lost. You'll always miss them, as you should, but there's something left."

"What?" Kaleb said.

Kelin took the reins of the conversation. "Your love, it's left. That's what my mum told me. You'll always love them, but it becomes bittersweet. Sad but happy."

"But, the best remedy is to just keep on living," Der shrugged.

"I'll try," the elf whispered. "It's just too confusing." His face sunk in on itself and he stared down at the wooden floor. The boards were thick and scraped and stained by many years of use. He may have studied every crack in the floor.

Der licked her lips. "Uh, you'd brought up something about meeting someone. Who is it?"

"The..." He petered out and looked away. "I have to meet someone inside Count Calloway's manor. Do not ask me anything more."

"Why not?" Der immediately asked.

Kelin threw his boot at her head. "Shut up, Der! This is serious!"

It bounced off her shoulder and thudded against the wall. She glared but she wasn't surprised; he'd thrown worse things at her before. "I didn't ask *what* was going on, did I?"

Kaleb reinstated his cap. "Quiet, please, both of you." He picked up the errant boot and gently rolled it back onto the floor. "And, Kelin, throw the pillow next time, please!"

Kelin glared with thunderheads in his eyes at his best friend. "We are beyond pillows."

Der nodded. "Yeah, ever since that time I hid the toads in his."

Kaleb opened his mouth, "Wh..." But, instead, he looked away and shook his head. "If you two are friends, I really don't want to meet your enemies. Now, let's shut up and get some sleep before someone finds us again. You may use a boot in place of a pillow if you wish."

Second Acron had been built to parade what extravagance the kingdom possessed, and it contained only a silhouette of the dwarven practicality in Duelingar. The stone walls reached higher, and blocked out much of the morning sun, but they were thinner. The buildings were taller than the other city, and painted in many bright, blinding colors. However, even they were all shadowed by the great gray castle of the king squatting on the highest point of the city.

The party walked carefully along the edges of the curving avenues. They had left the horses at the inn in case a cultist in the city happened to recognize one of them. They had also completely changed the styles of their clothing into the more refined city going fashions. These clothes fit much tighter and didn't have any pockets. They were also much brighter than what the villagers were used to. Kaleb had also changed hats into a simple black hat with a single feather. Der wondered why they bothered. The city was so amazingly huge and busy she was sure that they would have gone unnoticed. Some of these buildings even had five stories!

Kaleb brushed his chin while staring ahead at the city. His chin was as smooth as ever without even a hint at whiskers. "A kingdom can only have cities when they have a surplus of food."

"What?" Kelin asked. "What does that mean?"

"Just a passing thought. Would you like to share it?"

Kelin and Der exchanged a glance. Kelin nodded. "Sure, passing thoughts can be amusing."

The blond smiled. "Indeed. Alright, you both know that most people are farmers."

Der gave him a look normally given when someone asks what color is the sky. "Obviously."

"It's very simple. It's so simple that you probably don't even think about it." He nodded. "Right, everyone needs to eat."

"Again, obviously." Der frowned. She looked at him while thinking of a traveling theater's magician. If she stared hard enough, she might see the sleight of hand.

"Just take a deep breath, Der, I will get to the explanation, I promise. Let's see, when we get to the city we need to find a tailor, and making clothes is all he does for a living. Thus, he needs to purchase his food instead of provide it for himself."

Kelin frowned thoughtfully. "I don't see your point, that's just what people do if they don't farm."

"Exactly! However, if there wasn't a surplus of food, they would have to farm for themselves in order to live. Now, apply that thought to every profession a city can offer. You understand? Everyone here relies on the farmers around the city to provide them with food."

Kelin looked back to the distant gray walls. "Yeah... Makes sense, I suppose. The city. We're finally here. This is it. Der's going to join the army, I've got to find work, and, well, you're going to go wherever you go, Kaleb."

"I can't tell you, sorry. In fact, I'm not even sure of that myself." He stopped walking. "I mean this. Thank you. We've become friends, and that's something that I desperately needed right now – more than I can express."

I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been there when those bastards attacked us. What if I had been alone?"

"Run away," Kelin chuckled.

"Indeed." Instead of smiling, Kaleb sighed and hung his shoulders.

"Hey, look!" Der waved with her unwounded arm. "That's the right crest, we're here." Following her gaze, they saw a black stone mansion, alight with torches and creeping ivy. Der frowned, this was not the castle that her father had described. But, apparently, that one was elsewhere and the Count only lived in the city for part of the year.

Kelin shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "We could try to get an audience quicker. Der is nobility after all."

Kaleb blinked. "Pardon me?"

Der shook her hands frantically. "It's not my fault!"

The blond raised his eyebrow and then grinned. "Most people don't considerate that a bad thing, Derora."

"Well, alright, but it's not like we have any power or money or anything. I'm ordinary, I promise!"

He shook his head. "You're not ordinary."

Kelin said, "I've been trying to get that through her skull for years."

"However," Kaleb placed a hand on his shoulder, "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves, so I think, for all our sakes, it's best just to be patient. Besides, I think she'd melt if we announced her."

"Very true," Kelin replied. "There's no crowd, just a couple of guards and people."

"Right," the elf agreed. "I won't be going out there with you. You'll have to speak your behalf alone."

"Why not?" the blacksmith asked.

"I don't want that attention." He sighed and ran a hand over his face. "As I've said, you've both been friends to me, when I needed friends, but I've got to depart. I hope that someday, maybe, we can meet again." He glanced up at the mansion. "This may very well be a trap for me."

Der straightened up. "Really?"

Kaleb sighed. "Yes, really, and no, not one we can fight our way out of again."

She kicked a loose cobblestone. "I know, I know."

Kelin said, "It would be easy for them to assume that we were on the road to the capital – it's the only place on the way."

"Right," Kaleb agreed. "I'm not so worried about the cultists – they wouldn't know we're coming here."

However, those who may have been listening to them might have guessed."

"Unless these people already knew where your contact is," Der stated. "Or, at the very least, had an idea that there was one in this city. We are the closest kingdom to the elven lands, despite the Wild Lands between us, and this is the biggest city. It's just logical. If they are spying on the cultists, then they know that you're here. And right now, it would not take much effort to watch the probable locations instead of sweeping the city with an obvious manhunt." She held out her hands. "Well, you know, that's what I would do."

Kaleb stared and bit his lower lip.

Kelin rolled his eyes. "I hate it when you suddenly talk like that, Der. Since when are you the mistress of international intrigue?"

"What does that mean, Kelin?" She shrugged. "It's all just common sense, honestly."

"She does have a point," Kaleb muttered. He looked as if someone kicked him squarely in the stomach, and he withdrew into the shadows of the buildings. He stared up at the manor.

Der snapped her fingers, and Kaleb flinched. "Why don't we go and meet your contact for you? The cultists may have our descriptions, but not whoever it is that you're actually running from."

Kelin's face paled too. "Oh, I don't like this plan, Der."

Kaleb slouched against the wall. "I don't either. There's too much that we don't know."

"Well, we'll learn as we go," Der said.

He twisted against the wall. "I don't know. I'm not even sure if I can trust you entirely."

Kelin punched Der in the ribs before she could say anything. Kaleb ran his fingers over his face. "Oh, gods, you're right though." He banged his head against the stone. "How could I have been so stupid? I should've thought of that!"

"Can you sneak back to the inn? The street still looks crowded."

He nodded. "You want to find the head chef, and he's beneath a glamour so he will look absolutely human."

"And you still can't tell us who you are?" she asked.

He shook his head resolutely. "I'm sorry. Tell him that – tell him that – *damn!* I can't think of anything to say that isn't obvious. Wait!" He scrambled to unwind a chain with a golden necklace that had been neatly tucked beneath his tunic. "Give him this – tell him he dropped it or something. And – and – Der, give me your letter."

She freed the rolled up letter from her backpack.

"Thank you." He ripped off a corner.

"Hey!"

"Not so loud!" Kelin barked. But, the rushing people on the street didn't deign to give them a single glance.

"I'm sorry, but I need parchment." He pulled out a tiny stylus from the folds of his pack. "What was I told? Always have pen and parchment." He penciled the name of the inn on the scrap of paper and then carefully rolled it up tightly. He stuck the paper through one of the necklace's chain links.

Gently, he handed the necklace to Der. "Please, be careful."

She couldn't hide her smile. "I've always wanted to do something like this."

Kelin elbowed her in the ribs. "I know. And this is why I say that sanity has passed you by."

She rolled her eyes. "You always worry too much."

He banged his fist against his own leg. "I am not worrying too much. This is dangerous!"

"Don't draw attention!" Kaleb snapped, drawing further back into the overhanging shadows. "If you don't want to do this, just say so, but please, decide."

"We'll go," Der replied instantly. She all but saluted.

Kelin glared. "Fine, damn you, we'll go."

She grinned. "Thank you for your trust. I hope that we can meet again." She turned to Kelin. "Ready?"

"Right now?"

She nodded and started walking toward the mansion. Kelin cursed and chased after her.

At the entrance, the guards waved them through without hassle. As they walked through a tunnel-like corridor, Der didn't feel excitement as she realized that she was about to complete her father's mission. Yes, it was important, but now she was involved with the elves!

The tunnel ended and they emerged into a courtyard. Above them, sitting in a high backed chair on the walkway where the two staircases connected was Count Calloway. He was a large, dark man, once a fighter who lost a siege to years of good cooking. He was decorated in a saffron cloak and golden armbands.

Now, Der understood why they hadn't been made to check their swords. Nothing but a bow could reach him. Both the staircases were crowded with armed guards and the people that made castle life possible.

They were in line behind a couple currently speaking with the Count. Der glanced over her shoulder and saw some people shuffle in behind them. Sooner than she was ready for, the people in front of them bowed and turned to walk back down the corridor.

Der stumbled a little as she bowed. She looked to the high backed chair up above. "My lord, uh, I'm delivering a letter from an old squire of yours, Riodan Saxen."

The man high up on the tall chair stirred. "I haven't heard that name in awhile. He moved out to the country, didn't he?"

Der hesitantly rose. "Yes, my lord, he's my father."

"Is that old blacksmith still with him?"

"Yes, my lord," Kelin answered through stiff lips.

The Count chuckled. "So, girl, you're his daughter, eh? I remember your parents, I think." He hummed tunelessly to himself "Yes, yes, your mother was a maid here, and —" he paused to laugh, "Oh yes, she wouldn't give him a breadcrumb."

Der's forehead wrinkled. She'd known her parents had met somehow in the Count's service, but she'd never asked.

"Yes, until one night he was incredibly inebriated and was sauntering around naked as the day he was born and went to the window where the maids slept and threw rocks through it. Then, he sang the Song of Mendelin and Tara. Extremely off key, I may add, woke up the entire castle."

Der's jaw dropped.

"So, child, what news do you bring? Let's have this letter."

A small man, with ink stains splashed across his fingers stepped forward, but Der was still staring directly ahead. She looked back up to the Count. "Naked? Are you sure?" Absently, she let the letter slip from her fingers to the scribe. In her heart, she knew this moment was important. She'd completed the quest she'd been given. However, all she could actually think were images she was trying desperately to get her imagination to burn away.

"Indeed." His tone changed and his suddenly imperious voice drifted down, "What is this missive regarding?"

Der blinked, trying to get her mouth to say something other than 'naked' again.

"Security, my lord," Kelin cut in. "Our lands are unprotected. There is no lord or men at arms to defend us if anything happens."

The Count nodded. "I am not surprised, although I believed our western provinces to be more at peace. Still, dark times are unfolding. We have border raids to the east, devil worshipping muck in the cities and now this outlaw."

"Aye, lord, we have heard about that."

"And now he's apparently connected with the cult of Sennha. Damn scum."

Der coughed into her hand. "But, what if he's an innocent man who has just been framed for whatever murders have happened?"

The Count snorted. "You're young, lass. An innocent man need not fear, but this outlaw obviously feels like he has something to hide. This is not the action of an innocent man."

Kelin bowed, and completely accidentally trod on Der's foot just as she was inhaling for another sentence. "Your wisdom is, uh, very wise, my lord. I wonder if we could, in your mercy, beg some food from your kitchens. We've come a long way to deliver this letter and we're very hungry."

The Count nodded once. "Very well." He looked beyond them back at the front door. "Bring in the next one." A guard broke away from those standing around the room to walk with them.

Kelin breathed a sigh of relief as they ducked forward into the folds of the manor. The guard led them to the kitchens without as much as a word. When they asked for food, they were handed leftover mutton without ceremony. The guard departed and they were left alone at a large table.

Der shook her head and whispered. "I – I'm too nervous to eat."

Kelin's stomach grumbled. "Me too." He rose and headed back toward the kitchen. Der followed shortly behind him. He grabbed the first person, who he assumed was some sort of under-cook because of the man's apron. "I need to speak with the chef, please. Right now."

The cook eyed them with severe doubt, but shrugged. "This way, but he won't be happy to see you. He's not been the most patient man as of late."

"Let me guess, about the time the news of the outlaw started," Der said.

The cook fired her a look. "Yeah, I guess. There he is." He pointed and then walked away from them.

The chef was a short, round man who Der would not have picked out to be any sort of spy or even an elf. He was not even attractive by human standards, and the stains across his apron made him look like even more of a beggar. His scowl deepened when he saw the pair approaching him, and he crossed his arms, leaning a large, wooden spoon against his shoulder. "Well?" He started tapping one foot.

Der fumbled her pocket. "Uh, I..."

Kelin said hastily, "We just wanted to compliment you on the food, the leftovers we had were excellent. My mouth is still watering."

The chef sneered. "I have things to do." He spun on his heel.

Der let the gold necklace slip to the floor. "Wait! You dropped something." She dropped to a knee and scooped the necklace up with the paper cunningly folded onto it.

He eyed her with unashamed suspicion, but plucked the shimmering jewelry from her hand. He cupped his own hands as he read the note, and held his breath. His head snapped up toward them.

Kelin suddenly clasped his arms against his chest. "It gets cold here fast."

Der ran her tongue across her teeth, and all around her she felt cold, damp air flowing in. The lights seemed to be getting dimmer too, and the world was fading to shades of gray.

"Run!" the chef yelled, and he vanished down the corridor.

Der yanked on Kelin's arm. "Come on!" Around them, tendrils of fog began to climb the walls. She smashed through the growing mist right into a wall. She staggered back and cursed. Already the fog was to their knees and rising. The last thing she saw was Kelin's terrified face before the world suddenly went black.

Chapter Seven

Acerbic Machinations

Derora awoke in darkness. She blinked just to be certain that her eyes were open, but she remained blind. The darkness curled itself around her skin. It was thick and heavy, and she couldn't shake it off. After a long moment, she realized that her wrists and neck were weighted down by chains. She tasted metal in her mouth as fear leaked inside it.

Her breathing amplified, matching the pace with her suddenly furious heart. She heard a ringing in her ears. A spurt of pain shouted through her injured arm and she yelped. The chains tightened their coils like a python. They moved all on their own.

In reflex, she jerked her arm. The chains wound tighter and she started to choke. Her already injured arm *burned*. She fought against terror rising in her throat, but panic washed over her like a tidal wave. She yanked against her restraints, and tugged and pulled and thrashed and kicked. The chains kept constricting, kept squeezing the cold metal tighter into her skin.

The collar tightened against her neck and she began to choke. She heaved against it. It tightened even more. She fought for a single breath, and opened her mouth to yell with all the air she had left.

Then, her scream cut off like a knife. She bit her tongue so sharply that it began to bleed. She held her breath too, and suddenly could not dare to move even enough to breathe. How tight would the chains cinch? Would it kill her?

Straining to control her fright and every individual muscle, she forced herself to stay absolutely still. Slowly, carefully, she inhaled what little air she could.

Slowly, carefully, she exhaled. She was too afraid to inhale again. She could very well die the next time she moved. She forced herself to remain motionless when all she wanted to do was kick and scream. Her lips worked in soundless pleadings. It was torture.

As she tried to breathe ever so slightly, despair slowly sank through her fright, just as the coldness seeped through her skin. Why did this happen to her? More importantly, who had chained her here?

Silent tears tread down her cheeks, but she didn't sob. She didn't dare.

Across the tiny room, the door gently eased open, and then shut almost immediately. Der flinched at the sound, and then mentally scolded herself for doing so. She was tough in the face of danger. She wasn't going to show fear even if she was so afraid. She could stand pain, she'd worked on a farm her whole life after all. She didn't attempt to crane her neck to look at whoever may have entered. She'd heard no footsteps in the brief moment of light.

A deathly stern voice shattered the silence, "Do not move. Answer my questions and I will grant you a quick death."

Der swallowed, afraid to speak, but the chains hadn't moved at her motion this time. "I don't want to die. Who –"

"Did the prince escape?"

She coughed, and winced against the squeezing chain. "Prince? What prince?"

There was no reply.

"Oh... he was a prince. An elven prince." She tried to picture it. She tried to imagine it again, but she just didn't have the energy to do so, and the gravity of Kaleb's identity remained blurry and distant in her mind's eye. She swallowed again and summoned her strength. "Well, unless you bastards – whoever you are – have him, then yes, I'd say he did. That was a stupid question."

There was the wind of a sharply indrawn breath. "I do not think that you understand what hell has swallowed you."

"Apparently not! I don't even know who you are."

"Shut up, fool human. Now, I can save you from pain beyond your imagination or you can continue with this stultifying bravado and I will leave you to burn."

Finally, she felt her mouth begin to dry.

"What, if anything, do you know about the elf with whom you traveled?"

She parted her lips to say something sharp, but realized that she didn't know how to say anything but the bedrock truth. She'd never even tried to learn the art of lying; in fact, she had even hesitated to compliment her brother's atrocious cooking, let alone attempt to deceive an enemy that had her chained to the floor. She tried not to move as she spoke. "Just that he was the outlaw framed, and going to meet someone at the Count's. I didn't even know that he was an elf for most of it, and I didn't even know he was a prince at all!"

The voice sucked in his breath through his teeth. "That is everything."

She sighed. "Yeah." She flinched as she imagined hearing the whispery rasp of steel sliding free of a scabbard. In truth, there was no sound from across the room. She slammed her eyes shut and squeezed them

tightly, readying her good arm to swing with the heavy weight of the chain. She didn't even know the chain's length.

As she tensed her arm, lifting it against the painful constriction of the chain, the door shoved inward. Two men whisked through the opening. She squinted and saw the shape of the voice stand at attention next to the doorframe. For the first time, she saw the speaker. He was just a shape, though, no different from the two that had just entered. She squinted to see some marker or defining shape.

Then, she forgot completely about everything in the world as she heard Kelin's tortured screams fly through the open door. She knew his voice down in her bones, and she began to tremble at the pain squeezed out of his wails. The scream was intense and loud and terrified. She felt her own blood began to steam.

The two newcomers turned to the speaker. There were some snapping words in a language that Der did not comprehend. She'd never even heard sounds like it before. The speaker then saluted, bowed and quit the room.

She barely observed – Kelin was the only thing in her mind. The screaming stopped when the door slammed shut.

"He's alive!" she breathed through her constricted throat.

A candle flared into life. "For perhaps the next hour." This man pushed his words through a much heavier accent than the other. She almost couldn't understand him.

She forced herself to look at them. They were taller than most people she had ever encountered, and very thin, but they looked human. Both of them had their dark hair styled in the same glued to their heads appearance. The one holding the candle leaned over her. She blinked when she saw his eyes, she had never seen such bright, absolutely orange eyes before.

She recoiled. "Who are you?"

He smiled slowly. "We are chemmen."

"But – but, the chemmen don't exist," she breathed. Fear singed the back of her throat.

"Yes, it's been an excellent trick that we've perpetuated as of late. It's been so long that I suppose we've stopped being in your short memories." His grin became crooked as his face hovered over hers.

Der bunched up her good arm and heaved with all her strength. The chemman didn't have time to move. Inches away from his face the chain physically snapped her wrist back to the wall. The collar tightened just a little more and there was suddenly too little precious air to breathe, but that was alright because now Der was too afraid to even try. The chemmen didn't exist!

Old campfire stories loomed up in her mind.

But, here they were, and those unimaginable horrors of the ancient stories were now all too easy to imagine. She rolled on the floor, choking and heaving for gasps that gathered no air. She saw the blackness tickling the edges of her vision.

An evil chuckle stung the air. The chemman filliped, and the collar unlocked itself and fell from her neck. She crashed forward to her knees, hacking and gasping. Spit sprayed from her mouth.

The chemmen stood back and waited with the air of infinite patience. The one who had spoken snapped his fingers again, and the chains pulled her upright and against the wall. Still, struggling against her ugly hacking, she didn't struggle.

The speaker floated in front of her. "Where is the prince?" he asked in a voice laced with honey and vinegar.

Der retched, hanging her head. "Told... you..." She tried to control her breathing. "Don't know anything."

He swept closer. "I believe that you may know more than you think you do. Tell us, and do not try our wrath."

She swallowed her spit, and had never considered how such a small, usual thing could hurt so much. She glared up at the chemman, and realized she'd be damned if this slick bastard was going to best her so easily. She bit down on another cough. "Why not? I'm going to get it anyway because I've never heard of a nice torturer."

His sweet smile vanished. He growled something to the other chemman in the other language and the second chemman stepped forward with a large tray. He set it on the floor.

Der heard the thunder starting in her heart as she stared at the tray. There was only a small razor, but even more frightening were the lengths of glass tubes and a large glass cylinder full of clear liquid. She didn't understand what those could be for.

The first chemman gently lifted the razor between his thumb and forefinger and regained his smile. "I have been told that fear drives people to say things before torment. Like, the fear of disfiguration, the loss of every one of your fingers one at a time, losing your nose, your ears... However, I believe that people need to feel just a little pain first to truly fear it. You can't appreciate the fear of what you truly don't understand."

Deftly, he pressed the knife through her skin across her arms, collarbones, ribs and legs. She barely felt the knife itself, just a cold shiver where it touched. The cuts, however, blazed as if her blood was simmering in a

skillet. He was quick and silent. Der was confused; she felt her own hot blood leaking down her skin but it wasn't hurting badly, so how could this be torture?

The chemmen – if that's what they truly were – gently lifted the little glass tubes. They were very wide on one end and needle thin on the other. Der wasn't sure exactly what they were doing, but her mouth dried out all the same.

Into the dozen or so small cuts they quickly inserted the thin, open ends of the tubes and poured the liquid into her body, and whatever it was began to *burn*.

The chemman who had not spoken seized her chin and tipped up what was left in the jar into her mouth. She swallowed reflexively and pain flamed up inside her chest.

Der tried to will herself to vomit, and wrenched wildly against the chains. She tried to yell, but found that she couldn't. Feeling the inferno within, her body went into spasms. She knocked most of the glass tubes out of her skin in her thrashing.

The first chemman stepped back with malicious enthusiasm etched across his face. "This is acid, girl, do you know what acid is? No, I do not suppose that you would."

She tried to kick, but the chains held her against the wall firmly. She couldn't extinguish the burning and it roared louder throughout her body with every heartbeat.

He chuckled, and continued in a singsong voice, "Acid causes solid things to melt, even metal and stone, and you are experiencing what it can do to a mortal coil. This is too weak to kill you quickly, but do not think that you will be spared."

She coughed again, and was dully surprised to see blood splash across the floor. The pain continued to rip through her body with the fury of a tornado. She felt nothing in her mouth anymore, or where they had cut her. Everywhere else more than made up for that.

"Imagination failing? The acid is burning holes through your body and they're spreading, boiling away your bones and muscles from the inside. Now," his voice was suddenly coaxing, "I can stop this pain. Can you still hear me? I can make it all stop with one quick stroke of my knife. Please, tell me, did the prince travel east, west, north or south?"

Der opened her mouth, but couldn't say anything even if she wanted. She flopped against the wall like a dying fish. The small part of her mind that was not raging in anguish looked him directly in the face and coughed blood onto him.

"This is torment!" Kaleb stopped running long enough to slam his fist against a tree. "I left them. I left people to die, again!" A couple of dead leaves plummeted onto his blond hair from above.

"But, my prince," the elf from Count Calloway's court pleaded, "You survived."

Kaleb rounded on him. "They were my friends, Soheir! They were my friends!"

The dark-haired elf named Soheir faltered to a stop. "Of course, my prince, but –"

"But, what? I betrayed them! I betrayed my friends to a horrible death! And... my parents..." He sank to his knees. All of this was too much too fast. Part of him desperately denied the reality of it all and demanded that he wake up. Yet, every morning he did wake up, and it was all still real.

The other elf stepped lightly beside him. He had dropped his chef's disguise before he had ever left the Count's castle. He was tall and thin now. "You survived. We had feared the worst."

Kaleb stared hard at the ground, and willed away his tears. "Yes, I'm sure you did. Do you know what it's like to have your worst fear be realized?"

Soheir remained silent.

The prince coughed and doubled forward. His face had paled to green. "I left them. I knew it had to be a trap, and I let them go!" He held his trembling hands out in front of him and vomited into them. Coughing, he wiped his face on his sleeve. "Don't you know what will become of them? They could be in Darkreign right now!"

Soheir knelt beside him. "This is a trying time for all of us, and we do not have the time to spare. Let them go, then. Let them go from your mind. No one returns from Darkreign."

Kaleb stared at his hands. "No one. No one at all. Not even those who were banished there?" Tears bled from his eyes. "I left them behind – in those bloody hands! I'm wicked – just awful!"

"No, of course not," Soheir whispered.

"Yes, I am. They helped to save me from cultists that were hunting me and I didn't even try to save them."

"Yes, my prince," the other elf said stoically. "However, you could have only been captured yourself. Your life is precious."

Kaleb snorted. "No more than anyone else's." He punched the forest floor. "All I've done is run away and left good people to die. I haven't even tried to fight for them, and you tell me that my life is more precious than those who have perished for it!"

The other elf stuttered. "Of course I didn't imply... of course..." He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, my prince, like you, I am unaccustomed to understanding death. I fear that we have long forgotten how to

consider it." He took a deep breath and stared up at the sky. "But, make their deaths be not vanity. You will take on the mantle of king."

Kaleb shook his head. "I don't want that."

Soheir pulled the younger man up by his shoulders. "You are your father's legacy," he said with echoes of thunder in his voice. "Do something to bring their souls justice! And, what about those who still live? What about your brother?"

"Get away from me!" Kaleb stumbled away from his grasp, staring wildly at anything except the man in front of him. He grabbed his temples. People had died. The only time that he had come across death before was an injured dog he'd taken in as a child. The brown hound's leg was not a challenge to heal, and the dog slept with him in the bed every night and woke him up every morning. He remembered the way the dog also looked exactly like he was smiling after he'd been running or playing. Kaleb had been told that it was just the dog breathing harder, but he swore that dog laughed.

Then, one day, the brown hound wasn't around anymore. His father had cancelled his court that afternoon and just the two of them had a long conversation. The only thing Kaleb knew was that his dog wasn't going to be around anymore, like it had decided just to leave them to live elsewhere. Until these tragedies, that was all he understood of death. Elves didn't die from age, healed much easier than the other races, and had learned not to chance death.

Could he ever get used to this numbing sensation of irrevocable loss? He glanced around the forest. The sun was distantly beginning to slide beneath the horizon. Winter pressed closer toward them. Before, he had always seen the world falling asleep, resting for next year's bounties and blooms. But now, all he could see was the world growing colder and slowly dying. He wasn't sure if spring would ever come.

Soheir beckoned him forward. "Come, we must hurry for I have no illusion that they are far away."

Closer than Soheir would like to have hazarded, the two most powerful chemmen met in discussion about the prince. At least, for a given value of discussion.

"You had him! You had the prince!" The chemmen king's hand knocked the candle off the armrest of the throne in an angry sweep. "And you brought me two humans instead!" He slouched back into his obsidian throne. It wasn't *the* obsidian throne that rested in the heart of Darkreign, but instead a shrunken similarity of the magnificent construction. Behind it was the obsidian mirror, and that was not a replica. The jet black mirror was one of the most important pieces of treasure the chemmen owned. The king wasn't sure why, but he was never far away from it.

King Dis's fingernail flicked the spreading pile of hot wax that as it melted on to the armrest. His narrow features were outlined by sharply groomed dark hair, all of which brought forth his orange eyes. With those eyes, he glared at Vlade, the commander of the chemmen legions.

Vlade shrugged. "He is an intelligent prey." He was just as tall as the king, but dressed like a soldier instead of the other's regalia.

Dis dug his shoulders back against the obsidian. "So, did the humans know anything?"

The other chemman closed his eyes and exhaled. "Of course not, as I said, our prey is intelligent. However, we know through our spies that he sought out his contact within that mortal count's court, and that is was those humans who actually interfered with our trap."

Dis leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that they showed up instead of our quarry."

"He is intelligent then, to throw the humans at us."

The king snorted. "Well, what did you learn from them after all? Did you kill them?" He drummed his fingernails on the throne's armrest.

Vlade shook his head. "Not yet." He glanced down to find that he too had been drumming his fingernails against the table. He scowled.

"Why?"

The chemman shrugged. "I never waste a life when there is more to possibly learn about our quarry."

"And, yet, you learned nothing truly useful, oh master of torture."

Vlade's reply was as smooth as a knife's edge. "Of course not. There was nothing to learn."

The king ground his teeth and slammed his shoulders back into his throne. "So, two humans who know *nothing*, and yet the two princes are free! Both of them! Both have escaped your grasp. You, the elite, you, our hero who has planned this assault for now three and a half thousand years? You losing your discipline."

Vlade sighed elegantly, and let the waves of the king's spittle wash past him. He sighed again. "We lost nothing. This was merely an opportunity that we can recover in short time."

"You lost the prince the first time!"

"We have other plans!" Vlade snapped. "The harder the fight, the better the victory."

Dis snarled. "A sentiment shared by those who enjoy the hunt, not the meal. I prefer to know where and when the next meal is! When will you have the crown prince?"

Vlade brushed some of dust from this makeshift hideout from his sleeve absently. "I wasn't aware that you were planning to consume him."

"You know what I meant." Dis leaned forward. "How are you even our hero? That makes you a dangerous thing, Vlade, because you are too different from us, I fear."

The commander merely raised an eyebrow and folded his arms. "As king, you are different too."

"Not like you." Dis growled, "You and I should never disagree. The chemmen have only one voice."

"Yours, I assume?" Vlade drawled in his same, low key monotone.

"No, we are one voice."

"And yet, you are king. You've never tried to put yourself apart, but your words are our words."

Dis glowered. "You spent too much time among chasing other races, Vlade, you've picked up disobedience from them."

Vlade gave him the dry look of a man who knows exactly from whom the army takes its commands. "I do not suffer disobedience."

"No, I just suffer you."

"Why?" Vlade shrugged.

Dis smiled coldly. "Because you are our hero."

The other chemman nodded. "And what else? You know."

Now, Dis's expression dropped to a scowl. "There is nothing else. We do not keep secrets."

Vlade took a single, deliberate step forward. "Because I get your will done. I may not follow your orders, but because you don't know how to accomplish your dreams. I do."

"You don't dream, Vlade, you told me. This is what you wanted too."

"No," his reply was even, "I don't dream but I do know what I want. My victory."

Dis relaxed back into the throne. "Our plans were sailing so well too. We did it. We slew the king and queen!" A wistful, playful smile appeared for just a fraction of a heartbeat. "And, after what those two did to us... Yes, now we need to hurry and kill their offspring and the elven witch."

Vlade shook his head. "We need not hurry as much. The elves are suffering in disrepair and despair. I never imagined that they could crumble so easily, and they never imagined our return."

Dis rolled his orange eyes. "Well, why not? They did this to us."

The commander's voice was sudden thunder. "Because they feared us! Because they were not capable of imagining what horrors we are visiting upon them! They never foresaw our return. They are not unified, they don't know how to focus their efforts, and now they scatter and hide, and we will come after them like a flood across all their lands!"

"Yes, I agree, of course, but we need the princes, Vlade, such was our plan." He smirked. "As we used to say, to win the war today, kill tomorrow. Kill the heirs."

Vlade rolled his hand out in front of him. "Yes, yes, that used to mean destroy the crops and water and livestock and children. Used to, Dis, used to."

"It still does." His smile spread. "And, it meant hope, Vlade, because tomorrow is always about hope. I will not leave them hope."

"And leave it to me to do." Vlade sighed loudly, and waited a long moment before inhaling again. "I have other duties to attend, Dis." He turned and started to walk, but then glanced behind his shoulder. "One odd thing, why did you find it necessary to post guard in the girl's chamber? Did you truly think she was capable of suicide?"

Dis frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The torturer told me that the guard said that it was your orders that made him make certain she didn't try to kill herself."

"But," the king licked his lips, "They used the chains. The magic doesn't allow them to do that. It only brings them to the edge of death."

"Those weren't your orders?" Vlade raised his eyebrow again.

The king shook his head. "No."

The commander shrugged. "You know that she wasn't entirely human, either." He clicked his heel against the stone floor. "Perhaps the guard just misunderstood an order."

Dis shook his head. "Yes, probably. Odd, though."

Chapter Eight

Der's Defiance

Kelin waited in the damp darkness for Der to rescue him. She had always sprung him from trouble before. Admittedly, it was usually her fault why they were in said situations. But, she was always there for him; he'd never imagined that she wouldn't be. He refused to see a difference in this predicament.

She'd saved his life before, too, so he wasn't worried. He had just started apprenticing to Sigard, and somehow, the forge had caught fire. It was an ever present danger of making a life out of a forge with wooden walls and a thatched roof. He'd been trapped between a burning wall and the forge, which roared like a beast and spit fire and molten metal. There had been burning timber everywhere and he'd spun around and round and round and found no way through. Sweating tears and heat, he remembered coughing and slowly folding forward on to the ground.

Der had defied the heat and the flames, charging in like a rearing warhorse. There was no path through the chaotic firestorm. She made one by bashing apart the burning wreckage with a small log.

And, she'd reached down and yanked him to his feet. He weighed at least twice what she did, but she had never seemed to notice as she pulled him outside. He vaguely recalled the outside air had stung because it felt so cold.

Then, in the cold air, there had been the concerned faces of Avice and Donley and Sigard and his parents. It'd been alright. They'd rebuilt. It'd been alright.

He sighed, while wincing against the pain, and let the memory pass. He leaned heavily against the absolute knowledge that she would come for him.

But, maybe this was too much for her, he thought, and the tendrils of doubt edged closer.

He fought against tears. It wasn't because of the pain or the humiliation, but he missed home. He missed the smells from the forge, his brothers' and sisters' laughter, Avice's face, and he just wanted to go back there and shut the door and never come out.

There, in a few years, he'd be the town blacksmith. Sigard could join the other old men sipping beer and telling each other heartfelt lies. He'd build a new home behind the forge that didn't flood every other year unlike the mill and his father's house. Of course, it was necessary to have the mill on the river for the waterwheel, but it wasn't for a blacksmith. That way, he wouldn't raise his own children with their ankles always wet.

He was never going to see that. He was never even going to again see those people he already cherished. He knew that as much as he knew that his blood was red. After all, he'd been shown quite a bit of it.

He was going to die here. At the strangely comforting idea, he felt himself slip a little closer to that eternal darkness. It would be such a relief. No, Der was going to come, so he'd better be here.

Of course, he wanted to be furious with her, in fact, he begged himself to give into that rage. Of course, he stubbornly refused himself. If he was angry at her, she might not rescue him.

He wound himself into a little tighter of a ball on the icy stone floor. His eyes rolled back in his head. Here we go, he thought, it's happening again...

He knew it was useless as they dragged him into the chamber. He was a large man, and yet, these two almost stick-thin guards had carried him without apparent effort. Kelin tried to steel himself against whatever horrors he knew in his trembling heart to be waiting for him.

The one already in the room turned around and smiled. "You almost get to make history."

Kelin swallowed and tried to glare. "What?"

"You almost got to be the one to tell the world that the chemmen exist after all."

"What?" He stared ahead blankly. Chemmen? They were from the stories about the Centum Wars, but that's all they were, stories. He dropped his gaze. He was just too exhausted to make an effort to deny it.

The chemman's smiled broadened. "Of course, they'll know soon enough, anyway. Let's begin, shall we?"

He moved so quickly that Kelin barely had time to inhale. The chemman plunged a thin knife right through his chest and retracted it all in one smooth motion. Kelin gasped for air. He gasped again and again, but suddenly he couldn't get enough air.

"Humans need both lungs, don't they? Well, for the moment, you'll have to live with one."

The pain took over from there. While he was still gasping, they forced his mouth open and with a huge file and began to grind. His flesh and teeth broke away in horrible blossoms of agony. They ground away his molars into chunks of bone, and again his hindered lung exploded in pain when he couldn't gasp.

His teeth were just pieces and they didn't even fit back together.

He knew what happened next, but he was never truly sure of it. It wasn't anything like a dream. He heard stories of how these horrible things were like dreams, but it most certainly was not. He felt and knew every horrible second.

Then, they dropped heated gravel into his exposed mouth. It felt cold, hot, searing, even like liquid fire. He reflexively tried to chew the gravel with teeth and gums that he no longer had. Smoke slowly wafted from his

mouth.

The anguish was beyond belief. Never taking a break, they slid from one torment into another. Next, they began to peel away tiny layers of his skin from all over his body. And through it all he couldn't breathe. That's what truly broke him. He doubted he could withstand the other torments, but every time he tried to breathe it was another nail hammered into the coffin lid. So, weeping, he gave in and told them what little he knew. He spat and blubbered it through tooth shards and bloody gums. He told them everything, and they still tortured him.

Meanwhile, Der tortured herself. With meticulous care, she flicked at the gray lumps of flesh that were falling off her body. She fumbled controlling the swollen sticks that were her fingers. They hadn't bothered to chain her again.

She knew she was dying. A person wasn't meant to survive that. She exhaled and lay back on the stone floor, drifting in and out to total consciousness and pain. She'd never imagined that it would end like this. She hadn't planned on dying at all, at least, not until she'd seen more years and adventures than this. So soon, too soon. Part of her absolutely refused to believe it. Then, the pain cut in and made this fate all too real.

She was ashamed of herself too, and couldn't explain why. But that shameful rage burned underneath her skin just as much as the acid. She was going to have to be greater than this. Smarter too next time. Smart enough to avoid falling into such an obvious trap. She *knew* it was a trap and that's why she went in Kaleb's stead. Next time, she vowed, she wouldn't be caught.

At least he had the wisdom to be silent about himself. She clawed at that logic, because it was practical and probably saved his life too, but she found herself angry at him for it. Here, she and Kelin were dying horribly, and she didn't have a single good reason why.

Pity slowly replaced the anger for the supposed outlaw, and then, agony drowned everything else.

She sat up and swayed while watching the colors dance across her vision. She wasn't going to die like this.

She yanked herself to her feet and growled against the endless pain. And, immediately, she stumbled forward and collapsed against the door. She flailed against the wood in order to keep herself from sliding back down to the floor.

After scrabbling for an endless moment, she gained her balance. She heaved one shoulder against the door and tried to find the handle. Distantly, she watched the lump of her hand fumble with the latch. She couldn't control her digits and just bashed her hand against the cold metal and split fresh cuts across her skin.

It wouldn't open. No matter how long she thrashed she could not manage the latch. Grunting, she leaned back against the door and wheezed.

As lightly as she could, she pushed herself away from the door and glared through the haze that permeated her vision. She faltered a bit as she tried to maintain her balance. In her experience, she hadn't encountered too many problems that couldn't be solved with a meaningful, well placed kick.

Der wasn't too sure if she could feel her feet or not. She braced herself anyway to line her foot up nonetheless.

It just wasn't fair. She sagged and lowered her foot. It was suddenly amazingly hard to remember all of her heroic dreams. She felt robbed because *those* were supposed to have happened, not this! They couldn't end here, not before they'd even began.

Not this... she felt herself start to tumble forward. Anything but this. It wasn't fair that it was going to end this way. She swallowed and felt the weight sink all the way through her stomach.

Tears stung her eyes. It wasn't supposed to be this way! But, the agony of the acid anchored her inside this cell. She couldn't escape it. There was nothing more real than this pain.

It wasn't fair! It wasn't even her fault! She hadn't done anything to deserve this – and neither had Kelin! He had never even wanted to be any sort of serious fighter. He should still be in Riversbridge helping out at the forge. She felt the heat flowing to her face and began growling beneath her whimpers. She hated this predicament, Kaleb, the chemmen and fate in a white hot flash. Her anger started to burn hotter than the acid.

Growling and wheezing, she raised her foot toward the door when it swung open to reveal a chemman stepping inside. She kicked just as his eyes began to widen. She couldn't discern if this was her original torturer or not, but she kicked him with all the fury she had for her tormentor.

He reeled back and into the tray the second chemman was carrying behind him. Der hissed as she saw the clear liquid crackling in its jar. She thrust out and swiped the jar off the tray with the flat of her hand.

It smashed against the still surprised face of the first chemmen. The glass shattered and the acid splashed over his face like a tidal wave. A scream erupted from the torturer's mouth. It began as a roar but as soon as the acid dripped into his mouth, the scream became a squeal.

She kept kicking as he went down, clawing at his face.

Then, the second chemmen tackled her. She kicked uselessly against him and tried to push out with her hands but they were sluggish to respond.

Despite her struggles, the chemman rolled her on her back and pounded his fist against her face. It felt like his fist was made of fire and her skin burned where his fist touched. She yelped and batted at him with her arms and tried to shake him off.

The fists soon faded, and the chemman, breathing heavily leaned down over her face. "You –"

He probably meant to say something horrific, but Der never learned what he almost said. She heaved upward and bit his throat. Her teeth lanced his windpipe and she chewed and tugged until she heard her teeth grinding against each other.

The chemman tried to gasp but had nothing left with which to inhale. His hands struggled and tried in vain to stem the tide of his life's liquid. He jerked away and staggered back and within a few frantic seconds, was dead on the floor.

Meanwhile, Der stared at the ceiling and heard herself gasping and coughing. Slowly, she tried to pick herself up off the floor and collapsed again.

The heat of rage melted and she was suddenly too weary to be angry. Still coughing, she curled up on the floor. What was she doing?

It didn't matter now anyway because she was already dying. What more could the chemmen do to her? She cringed as several more terrible ideas flashed across her mind.

But, what about Kelin? She pulled herself to her elbows. This wasn't his fault either, and she'd be damned if he was going to perish down in this dungeon too. She pulled herself to her feet again by crawling up the wall. She made it on the seventh attempt. She lurched to the door and would have screamed if she had enough energy left.

A third chemman leaned against the door frame nonchalantly. She hadn't heard him approach. Unlike the other two, he carried a long sword at his side in a plain sheath. His orange eyes were wider than she'd expected, and she realized that he was staring at her. And, not just staring, but watching her with the disbelieving surprise of seeing of fish walking on land.

She crouched for a lunge, but the chemman held up a hand. "I don't believe you." His Common was remarkably unaccented.

Der rested most of her weight against the wall. She coughed out some more blood. "Yes, aren't you going to kill me?" She tried to recreate that red rage, but she felt the anger sliding away from her grasp and instead just felt dizzy. She tried to square her shoulders.

The chemman cocked his head. "Well, what was your next move?"

"Rescue my friend," she growled.

He snorted and folded his arms in a single, swift motion.

"Listen!" she snapped, spitting out more blood. "I'm dying, and – and my friend won't die down here too..." She slipped against the wall and sank almost a foot.

The chemman arched an eyebrow imperially.

"So... if you're not going to kill me, I will be on my way." She shoved herself toward him with all the momentum she could summon.

He moved to the side of the doorway as she stumbled past him. "I do not think that you understand what hell has swallowed you."

She staggered to a halt. She wasn't entirely sure about when things had happened since she'd been down here, but she'd been very, very certain about the events. There was the voice in the darkness asking questions. As far as she knew, the speaker hadn't hurt her. "That was you?"

He nodded. Then, faster than a striking snake, he grabbed her ear and pulled. Outside in the corridor, the air tasted differently, and it didn't stink nearly as much. Then again, everything smelled acrid after her torture.

She tossed her hands against his arm to absolutely no avail. She dragged her feet, again, in vain. She coughed and her tongue limped against the side of her mouth as she tried to form sounds. On the second attempt, she managed, "Why didn't you help me?"

"Your life is not as important as this war."

She batted at his hold on her ear again. "Of course not! I'm bloody dying because of you!"

He stopped and Der swore she heard some sort of chuckling underneath his breath. "Because of me?"

"Yes, because you're one of them..." She heard her voice peter out.

His bright orange eyes turned on her with an intelligence she instantly knew outmatched her own.

She ground her teeth. "You – you *knew*. And, you didn't do anything!"

The chemman shrugged. "Your life is not as important as the information you may have had."

Der opened her mouth wide, and the chemman moved faster than her words. He deftly slipped two fingers into the back of her throat. She gagged and tumbled backward, but he tugged her back upright.

"Now, if you speak another word, I will leave you to die." He led her down the hall while she tripped and stumbled to keep up. Shortly, he spun her around by her ear and she found herself facing an unremarkable wooden door. The chemman opened it.

He pushed her through. Der lurched to remain upright, but stumbled over something heavy and heaving. She crumpled over it and split her chin on the stone floor. She realized that the lump she'd fallen on was breathing.

Not very well, it dawned on her. His breaths were shallow and the air rattled through the victim's mouth. What did they do to him? In the meager light, she couldn't see too much external damage. As best as she could without the full use of her fingers, she pushed the dark, curly hair from her best friend's face.

He shuddered and squeezed in a tighter ball. She leaned against him. "No, no, no, it's me, it's Derora. Now, open your eyes."

He mumbled something and tried to avert his gaze.

She looked up at the chemman in the door, who had his eyes trained down the hallway. "We have to go, now." Her voice sounded as if it was being strangled before she spoke. Now, that she had a few moments to think, she was amazed she could form sounds.

Her friend didn't respond.

"Kelin..." She pushed herself back. "Kelin, listen to me, Kelin."

When he failed to respond again, she slapped him. Forming every word hurt, but that chord of pain went unnoticed in the orchestra of agony. "Kelin Miller! Get on your feet now! If I can be walking, so can you, now get up!"

His eyelids fluttered. "Ur...?"

His speech was so mangled, she didn't recognize the sound. She just guessed it was her name. "Yeah, it's me."

"Come." The chemman in the door wasn't even looking at them, but instead watched the corridor.

Der tried to lift Kelin up but could not even get her fingers to grasp anything. "Get up, please, we have to go."

"Now," said the chemman.

"A moment!"

"No."

Kelin mumbled something incoherent.

Der looked up. "I can't carry him."

The chemman shrugged. "Leave him."

"No!"

"Then, I'm leaving you." He turned his shoulder.

"Why did you even help me in the first place?" Der snapped. Her head was spinning so quickly she thought she would fall over if she wasn't already on the floor. She paused for a large breath and forced herself to concentrate. "You're a traitor."

His face remained entirely passive. "No. I am only a traitor if you're chemmen. To you, I'm the hero."

"You're not a hero," Der snarled, and was surprised by the venom in her own voice. In her heart, she'd convinced herself of heroes, and they were absolutely nothing like this taciturn warrior.

"Only if we abscond. Otherwise, I may have to kill you and I say I stumbled across your escape."

"Bo," Kelin moaned.

"No?" Der shook her head. "He's not making fun."

The chemman nodded and stepped inside. With a single motion, he hauled the large Kelin off the floor. The motion should not have been that easy, as Kelin was easily one and a half times heavier. Der began to wonder what other differences the chemmen had from humanity other than eye color. He shoved him into her arms.

The mysterious stranger's hunting-cat like movements stalked down the corridor ahead of them. But, Kelin weighed down Der and she only made it a few steps before the both of them fell.

He wheezed, "On't make it."

Der tugged on his shoulder. "Better to die trying."

He sagged further and she did not have the strength to hold him up. "No."

She sighed. "I know. We won't." She licked her lips with a dry tongue. "Kelin, I'm dying." She looked at him, and noticed that he still had some color left on his face. "I'll make sure you get out, though."

He shook his head. Der, staring deeply into his face, could not read if he understood. Using her wrists, she hauled him along as best she could. The chemman moved ahead of them with a silent grace.

Kelin dropped most of his weight on her and Der, trembling all over, lost her fragile grip. He fell. She leaned over him, idly watching the sweat fly off her nose. "Up. Get up." She tried to lift his shoulder. "Help..." she trailed off when she looked up and saw she was speaking to nothing but the air.

"Where?"

Silence answered. They were alone. Then again, this had been farther than she'd secretly expected to get. She tried to look around, but had no idea where to go. She felt the pain closing back in. Distantly, but not as

far away as she first thought, she heard a cacophony of roars and whinnies. She didn't waste too much effort with concern for whatever that was. She decided only to worry about it if it got louder.

The chemman rounded the corner into the hall, his heels clicking against the stone floor. Der's shoulders relaxed. "Help him up."

But, the chemman just stared.

"I can't carry him, please!"

The chemman's hand slowly inched toward his belt. His orange eyes were the widest she'd ever seen.

Slowly, bile began to sting the back of her throat.

This time, the chemman went for a knife on his belt, and she saw that there wasn't a sword there at all.

Sudden, icy terror shook her by the shoulders. She tried to pull Kelin back down the hall. She also tried to make herself breathe and told herself that their new ally was silent and a predator and in the shadows. She watched the chemman's knife reflect the meager light on the naked blade as he pulled it free.

Any second now, he would collapse. Any moment now.

She waited for several desperate heartbeats, just waiting for the chemman to collapse with a wound in his back. She'd never believed in stabbing in the back, but with Kelin's and her lives in immediate jeopardy, she suddenly could find nothing wrong with it. This was survival in its purest meaning.

It was survival, so she eased herself in front of Kelin and crouched. The chemman took a swipe at her head, but she fell to the floor and grabbed the chemman's calves and lunged with her shoulders.

The chemman went down and Der was squished underneath his weight. She shook like she was having a seizure.

The chemman jumped to his feet like a cat. Der went for his knees this time. He stepped out of her reach and caught her with a small cut on the back of her head.

However, he had stepped back within reach of Kelin, who summoned all his strength and kicked out.

The chemman turned to slash at Kelin, and Der jumped. With just the palms of her hands, she tried to wrestle for control of the knife. She saw the blade cut into her hands several times and she couldn't get her fingers to work enough to get a grip.

So, she kicked. The chemman stumbled forward and Der shoved him forward. He bounced off the far wall.

She tensed, waiting for him to spin around. Instead, he slumped forward, his own knife protruding from his chest.

It took a long moment for her to fathom the blind luck. She let herself slip back to the floor, breathing out slowly.

"You aren't useless," an imperious voice drifted down around her ears.

Der slowly, painfully raised her head enough to seek the chemman with the long sword on his hip. Her lips framed a question.

He shook his head. "Your answer is that I can't be found – by anyone." He leaned down and hauled Kelin to his feet by one hand. Without another word, he dragged the large blacksmith down the corridor, leaving Der to limp and stumble along on her own.

Soon, they quit the well lit corridors and tiptoed into murky, darker paths. She tried to let her fingers glide along the rough stone walls, but she couldn't feel them through her swollen and useless digits. Here, there was only enough light left to reveal more darkness ahead. The walls looked more like those of a cave than a castle here.

"How much..." Kelin muttered and didn't finish.

The chemman nodded ahead and stopped. He gestured with his hand and then turned away.

"Thank you." Der was surprised to find herself urging against any appreciation to this man, who wasn't even human, and couldn't explain why not. He nodded and then, he disappeared into the darkness.

Der leaned against the wall, too tired to move. Kelin rolled on his back and sighed. Der sighed, "Can't stay here." But, she felt her bones sagging and the physical weight of pain pinning her to the floor.

Kelin grunted. "Can't move." He slowed his speech enough that she could make sense of it. Then, he coughed. "Der, up!"

"Wha?"

"Look." He coughed. "Up."

Above, a puncture in the rock let in moonlight as thick as water. It was too high for them to reach. "Help me." She pushed herself up on the wall, wondering where in the world she mustered this strength.

He shook his head. "Can't."

Her already scraped and swollen hands scrabbled for purchase on the rock. With just a small jump, she wedged her hands against the stone and pulled herself up, doing the most impossible pull-up that she could ever have imagined. She and the lads practiced pull-ups in the old barn all the time, but then, at least she had the use of her hands. She never had to pull herself up using mostly her wrists before.

She was rewarded. The sweet tasting breeze brushed her cheeks. The moonlight was blinding.

She couldn't remember how, but she just kept pulling and wriggling until she was free of the crack. Damp grass rubbed her ankles and legs and it was softer than any blanket. She breathed out. Just maybe things might turn out alright.

She turned and thrust down her arm. "Kelin, please."

He thumped his head back against the wall. "Won't fit."

"Then, you're going to lose some weight really fast."

Reluctantly, he rolled forward from the wall, pulled himself up and grabbed her hand. She heaved, but wasn't meant to lift a man of his stature. She grunted and gritted her teeth and did not let go, and by now, the pain in her tortured muscles was so great it was almost numb.

Kelin tried gasping, but his damaged lungs wouldn't bear it. His feet were off the floor, and hanging. He couldn't fit. Panicking, he started kicking wildly.

"Exhale, Kelin, exhale!" she hissed, straining against her pain and his weight.

His mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

Der braced both of her feet on either side of the crack. Since she couldn't grab Kelin's arms, she made certain he grabbed her around her neck and she pushed back with her feet. She pushed and pulled so hard she thought she heard one of her knees crack. She couldn't feel it anyway – the pain was all over, everywhere. Desperation gave them the extra edge they needed to get out, and she wrenched him free.

She fell down onto the grass and stared up. It was just an unremarkable abandoned castle, half rotted away "Made it..." Then, there was darkness in her vision. It wasn't a tunnel, it was a wall, and she hit it.

Chapter Nine

Campfire Legends

Derora awoke to the merry dance of a campfire. She stared for a long moment and figured that she must be dreaming or dead. But, she felt the soothing warmth of the flames and as the minutes passed, she didn't wake back up into the nightmare. The fire blurred in her vision, and she couldn't decide if that was because the flames weren't solid or because her eyes weren't working.

This was too soft. This couldn't be real. She had no idea how she even got here, so she must be dreaming or worse. She also didn't know how long she'd been here – wherever here was – but she knew that she was hungry. Funny that, she mused, because she had absolutely no idea how long it had been since she'd last eaten.

A shadow eclipsed the firelight, and a small face hovered over her like a moon. Der flinched when she saw orange eyes, and then she stared helplessly at the face. He was just a child, and he couldn't be more than six years old! His head was topped with light brown hair instead of the black hair she'd come to expect. When he saw that her eyes had focused on him, he grinned and waved excitedly.

Der jumped again. The child stuck both his hands out as far as he could reach and waved both hands and she felt a small breeze across her face. She observed that he also had two long knives hanging off his belt, bouncing with the rhythm of his arms. They came to rest below his knees. She decided that she must be dreaming.

"Hey, lady, wake up! You'll feel a lot better once you have some of Mother's cooking. It's the best in the world!" He never stopped waving.

Der opened her mouth, but couldn't even make strangled sounds any more. Now, she couldn't imagine how she had been able to speak. Maybe that had been the dream instead.

"Hush, little one," ordered a sweet, breathy voice. A small, slender woman gently pulled the boy aside by his shoulder. She sat down beside Der and her silky, red hair was so long it flowed down her back and onto the grass. "Can you understand me?" She brushed some hair from Der's pallid forehead. "Good. We are not safe here, so we'll have to move soon. I can heal your friend, although he will be without most of his teeth. I can take the pain away from you." She sighed and dropped her face. "However, your damage is beyond my skill. 'Tis the worst of news in the morning, and for that I am sorry, but we do not have the time to pretend."

Der closed her eyes and let her head sink through the grass. She heard the woman rise and leave. She'd never believed in the chemmen; never really considered that they'd existed. Now, she was dying because of them. She tried to tell herself that she'd done her duty and that Kelin was free and alive. The pain resurged, slowly burning her body from the inside.

The next time she awoke the night birds were singing. Surprisingly, she felt much stronger and objects aligned in focus after she blinked her eyes. She stared at the campfire. It could have been the same one as before, but she wasn't sure.

She didn't see the boy, but then again, she may have just dreamed him or just imagined his eyes. The long haired woman knelt around the fire, stirring a small pot to the side of the flames. It was a beautiful silver, engraved cooking pot that Der mused should be hanging on a wall in a castle somewhere instead of turning black in a campfire in the wilderness.

After the distraction of the pot had faded, she saw that the woman's ears also curved up to tiny tips. So, another elf.

On the other side of the woman, Kelin sat up next to the flames. His face was pale and pinched, but he was breathing steadily.

"Got you!" Someone grabbed the backs of her shoulders with a strong grip. Der felt every muscle in her body tense so tightly that she thought they were going to explode.

The woman snapped something in another language and the boy's shoulders dropped. He stepped toward her, but she snapped her fingers and pointed back at Der. Scowling at the ground, he recited, "I'm sorry."

Der opened her mouth to speak and then remember that she couldn't. She was shocked when an audible, although one incomprehensible sound wheezed through. She settled for nodding.

He pointed to himself. "I'm Thalon."

"Yes, you are," said the silky voice as the elf stepped over to them, "And, now it's your turn to tend the pot." She pushed him along.

Der swallowed. "Thought," she swallowed again, "Thought not safe...here." First she eyed the darkness beyond the firelight, and then the child.

"Of course it isn't."

She bullied her slipping strength and growled. "Who are you? How...?"

The red-haired lady's face softened as Der watched. She realized that those features about the elf's face

and movements that were just slightly foreign that Kaleb strove to blur that this woman wore as a badge of her heritage. There was no mistaking her, she was an elf, and didn't attempt to obscure that fact. Der could not imagine this woman ever being mistaken for a human like he had been. She must have been much older too, though no scars of age marred her features. She patted Der's arm. "All in good time. We're safe enough for the moment in this place. The forest is hiding us tonight. Tomorrow, though, we must leave because the forest isn't strong enough here to protect us for long. The chemmen are near and they are angry. So, do not leave the reach of the firelight."

Der nodded, too tired to try to refute anything she'd heard. "Why do I feel better?"

The woman glanced to the ground for the moment. "I did the best that I could, for the both of you, but you're injuries are too severe for my songs of healing."

She nodded again. Wasn't that what life was anyway? Always staving off death until you couldn't.

"You would have passed away in great pain by now, otherwise."

She snorted, and flinched to find herself thinking that at least she wouldn't be in pain right now.

"I understand, child, but you need to show bravery to your friend because I fear that he will not survive either if he sees your weakness. Fear can stop a beating heart." She sat back on her knees. "You may call me Laurel. You've met my son, Thalor."

Der glanced over at the boy, and this time noticed that while his ears were still rounded, they arched upward into almost tips, and a very nasty idea crystallized in her mind.

"And, you've met my husband, although he will remain without name to you." She pushed her hands together. "Don't ask questions. We have prepared some soup for our meal, and you need it, whether you feel like you can stomach it or not. Your friend needs to see you eat."

"Alright." Der tried to pull herself upright, but her muscles barely responded and it felt like she hadn't used them in months. Every movement had to be wrenched from deep within and individually forced. The distance of a couple meager feet felt like a ten mile run through sand.

She felt herself trying to push herself away from the elf. The elves and the chemmen were enemies! And she'd had a child with him, there was no denying that. Der discovered that her trust of this serendipitous savior had bottomed out. Mutely, she heaved herself beside Kelin.

He looked at her from underneath his heavy, sweat soaked curls and began to cry. She sat there too stunned to even reach out to him. She felt as though she should cry too, but she just didn't have the energy.

She swallowed and stuttered, "We...we made it out. You'll be alright."

"They tortured me!" His voice sounded thick and slurred through his sobs. "I was going to die! And – and – and we didn't know anything. We're not a part of this!"

"They...tortured me too."

He grabbed his heart. "My chest hurts. They did something to me and – and I couldn't breathe, so I panicked, and – and – and I still couldn't breathe." His tears drowned out his voice.

Der put a hand on his shoulder and timorously flexed a finger. Its movement surprised her greatly, and then she tried to massage his massive shoulder. She thought she understood what Laurel had said about showing strength. Inside, she felt her heart begin to shrivel.

"They took my teeth, Der, my teeth!"

She nodded. "I know."

He turned to face her for the first time. His brown eyes were wide and seemed to bounce around uncontrollably. "I – I don't know if I want to thank you for saving me after what they did."

She wanted to hide from his gaze, but made herself meet it. "Hey," she whispered, "You still got all your fingers and toes – and your life. You'll make it."

"I don't know if I want to."

She was helpless. She stared back down at her own hands, and wondered how by the Amieri's Wandering Staff, Ahtome's Seed, or anything else holy, they were still alive. Of course, it wasn't to last, not for her. She didn't know what to say to him. Luckily, Laurel came to the rescue with a bowl of soup. It wafted of tomatoes. The bowl was silver like the pot, and so was the spoon leaning over the rim. Der stared perplexedly at the bowl, but maybe this was how elves always ate. It definitely fit with the stories she'd heard growing up.

Kelin accepted a warm bowl too. He pressed it against his cracked lips and let the liquid fall through. The sweet scent delivered on its promise and the soup danced across his torn mouth. He still winced as it sliced across his open wounds, but it tasted so divine that he couldn't stop. He felt the warmth all the way down through his stomach, and feel its soothing fingers spread.

Der pushed the spoon around the side of the bowl. She knew she was hungry, but why did it matter? She was going to fade away soon anyway.

Kelin held the bowl out in front of him. It was already empty. A smile ghosted his face for the briefest of instances. "You know, they say that the poorest man in Pallens eats on silver," he quoted under his breath. "And we're horribly poor right now."

She let the bowl fall from her fingers and nodded dumbly.

Laurel picked up Der's bowl. "The Empire of Pallens has been gone a long time now, Kelin." She sighed. "Your spirits have seemed to have risen."

Der snapped, "How did you know his name?"

She met Der's gaze evenly. "Because my husband knows." She sighed elegantly. "What happened then is ancient history to you, but it isn't for the elves and the chemmen since both races are immortal."

"The chemmen are immortal?" This time, Kelin did drop his bowl. "Never heard that."

She nodded gracefully. "Yes, but like the elves it is limited. We don't age, and although we elves heal more extensive injuries than they do, both of us can perish." She pushed some her red mane behind her shoulder. "What do you know about the chemmen, if anything?"

Kelin shrugged. "Just campfire stories, really."

Der said, "We never believed in them. And, the stories we knew, they were something like spider people."

He concentrated, trying to snare old memories of late night ghost stories. "They were...they were also called storm-readers."

Laurel raised her eyebrows. "Yes, indeed. Well done."

"Because they could cause storms..." he petered out.

She shook her head. "No, that is just a fantasy." She gently placed some thin branches on the fire. "Thalon," she called softly. "Please entertain the fire."

"Alright," he chirped and sat cross legged on the other side. He poked the flames with a stick.

She faced the two humans. "I feel that I should start with the history that you wouldn't know. Then perhaps you may understand what terrible season has found you." She tucked her legs underneath her, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply. When she opened her eyes, they were focused on a time long past. "They used to be human, the chemmen. They used to have a powerful nation and it ran like a machine."

Der squirmed. "I don't understand what that means, my lady."

Laurel pursed her lips. "Then, let us begin with birth. Chemmen infants, at least, those born sans defects, were kept with all nursing mothers. No mother had a child, and no child had a mother. Once the children were weaned, they were separated by sex and sent to communal housing."

Kelin frowned. "I don't understand either. Isn't everyone raised by their parents unless something has happened to them?"

Laurel shook her head. "Not with them. You saw that they all dressed the same, yes?"

Der and Kelin nodded.

"That's not because they want to dress the same, it's because they don't. They cannot imagine dressing differently. They couldn't comprehend it."

Der still shook her head.

"What if I told you that you could fly? Right here, this very moment."

"What?" Der nearly toppled over backward.

"A chemman would have that reaction if you asked them to not dress exactly the same."

"I think I'm starting to understand," Kelin said slowly.

"Yes, and they grew up in this society, never being alone and always being watched by other chemmen. Their elders, or superiors as they used to say, would learn what a person could do best, like magic, war, or darker skills and the chemman are assigned by the areas in which they excel. They didn't get to choose what they did with their lives, like when you, Kelin, babbled about being a blacksmith to them. And, you, Derora Saxen, choosing to try to become a warrior. Questions are not thought to ask, they are told what to do."

"That's why your husband can move around so freely!" Der blurted. "He's one of them, so they wouldn't even think to suspect him, but he's different – obviously."

Kelin glanced over at his friend. "How do you go from being so stupid to so smart all the time? I don't understand it."

She shrugged. "I know that my skull may be thick, but I'm not stupid."

"Unless you want to be," he snorted. He turned back to the elf. "I don't know what you did, my lady, but I certainly do feel better."

"It was not all me. I'm sure freedom feels better." Laurel quietly nodded. "Yes, my husband is different, but this is not his tale. The chemmen were still only human, and still only capable of what humans can do. They were fervent and resolute in their beliefs that they were chemmen. If a person wasn't one of them, even looked different, or if a chemman did raise a question about their lifestyle, they died horribly."

Der fidgeted. "But, why are they here, now?"

"Vengeance." She closed her eyes. "We are not to that part of the story, yet. The chemmen themselves, being from a secluded nation looked similar, but they didn't look exactly the same. So, they found ways of making everyone have the same hair, the same nose."

"And their eyes?" Kelin interrupted. "Did they change those too? To be only chemmen?"

"Actually, their eyes were natural – as far as I know, at least. But, only the chemmen humans had them because they were so secluded. I'm sure they killed anyone else who did who wasn't one of their own, so that only they might have them." She went silent for a long moment as her eyes fell back in the fire. "They came to prominence during the Centum Wars. How much do you know of these wars?"

Der said, "Fall of Pallens."

Kelin added, "War of Hell on Earth, where the gate to hell was actually open."

Laurel nodded slowly. "This was a prior war, in histories long forgotten to you. The War of Hell on Earth combined with the fall of the Empire did so very much to destroy all knowledge of the previous Centum Wars. Have you ever heard of the Pallens Front War?"

They shook their heads together.

"That was the war between the elves and Pallens against the chemmen. They only rose to power because the weaknesses exposed by the wars until then. The chemmen slaughtered millions – humans, gnomes, dwarves and many more."

Der's eyes widened. "Those must have been such battles."

Laurel paused. "No. Not in battle, child. The storm-readers rounded them up and made them build supplies for their armies. Then, they butchered them like caged animals and fed them to their soldiers."

"Wait. What?" Kelin stumbled over the words. "That's – that's impossible."

Derora looked ready to vomit.

"Eventually, Pallens and we elves claimed victory, but I am not certain if the people of Pallens felt like they achieved victory when it was done."

Der asked, "Why did the chemmen even fight Pallens? Weren't there weaker targets?"

"Pallens was their insult. They were everything that the chemmen weren't. They were the artists, poets and philosophers. A civilization that blossomed on the differences of the many peoples living there. Many races, including some elves, lived together – mostly harmoniously." Laurel paused for a long moment. "At first, the chemmen were leaving the Empire alone, but the people of Pallens could not stand aside while this slaughter was being perpetuated and they demanded war. The chemmen, and their so-called allies which they had managed to subdue, were hungry to oblige."

"Please understand that the Empire had been a democracy for quite some time then – and the chemmen absolutely loathed it because they couldn't understand it. The chemmen rise to be elders because of how well they perform their assigned duties and not by getting people 'beneath' them to decide."

Der inched up a finger. "What's a democracy?"

Kelin frowned. "Sigard and I used to talk about these things. I think it's where the people get to pick their king or something." He shrugged.

"But, but, what about succession – do the people have to pick the king's son or daughter then? It wouldn't work. What about the vassals, do you have to choose them too? But, then, they may not be loyal to the king because he sure didn't pick them, and..." She exhaled and stared into the flames with the same expression of a dog staring at a door-latch. "I mean, what, does some good-looking man ride into town on a horse and say 'make me your king, I'll give you free pigs for it'?"

Laurel hid a small smile beneath her hand. "Perhaps you might not have fared too badly in Pallens, Derora."

"Where are you going to get the pigs, Der?" Kelin poked her shoulder. "Your family doesn't own any pigs."

The elf raised her hand. "It's not the pigs, children, it's the promise of pigs."

Once again, the dogs stared at the door-latch. Der said, "I still don't understand. If you promise people pigs, you have to give them pigs or else you're just a liar."

"Yes, Derora. Alas, democracy is something that perished with the Empire, but it didn't fall to the chemmen, of course. However, during the Front War the people of Pallens could not fathom why a whole nation could support these atrocities. The chemmen could not fathom why an entire empire could be so diverse and yet still so unified. It's like coming across someone who speaks a language that you've never heard before – there is no comprehension. Your language makes sense to you, but it doesn't to the other person. His language makes sense to him, but yours does not. Do you follow?"

The humans nodded.

"Good. The storm-readers never made it into Pallens properly, but they did manage to conquer many surrounding territories. They'd learned much outside their domain, which may have been more dangerous than leaving them alone. They'd learned the Pallenian legend of the water of life."

"So, that's how they got their immortality," Der said excitedly, "They found the fountain of youth! Everyone knows that legend."

Laurel shook her head. "No, that's not accurate to what happened. They learned of the fountain of youth, but what is more accurate is to say that they made their own."

"How do you do that?" Kelin asked.

She inhaled deeply, glanced at her son who played with the fire in apparent obliviousness to the conversation, and then back to them. "Well, you might as well know. The fountain of youth is actually in elvish tradition called the water of life. In every life, there is a drop of that water, so that we may breathe and our hearts may beat. Anything with this drop of water is alive, and nothing is without it. An infant, a forest, a bird – everything has this drop of life. Even living creatures that are too small for you to see have a tiny whisper of this water. And yes, if you find its natural spring, it can grant one freedom from aging and great health."

Kelin shook his head. "They found the fountain, didn't they? And, then, somehow they made it themselves – they copied it. Their whole race..."

"The chemmen never found the spring. Also, one cannot create life from nothing. The water of life cannot be and is not made or unmade. It is part of the cycles of life. Simply put, the water, when something expires, passes on to a new life being born." She turned her face into the shadows.

"So, how does this tie in with the chemmen?" Der inquired. "I don't understand."

"Do you remember what I said about the chemmen taking millions of people and forcing them to work until death?"

"Yeah," Kelin said. "And feeding them as food! That's unbelievable!"

Laurel pursed her lips. "Yes, and those innocent peoples were ground up and their bodies defiled in order to grasp that one, single drop of life. They collected those drops. One drop from one person, and they needed millions of drops."

"I don't understand." Der held up her hands helplessly.

"They acquired enough water to make one drink large enough to grant every chemmen immortality."

"But," Kelin stumbled, "But, how many people would they have to kill? No, that can't be right, because for an entire race, it'd be too much. It couldn't be done."

"Regardless of your protests, it was." Laurel sighed. "The world's population still has not recovered to what it was before this war."

Der bowed her head under the coalescing weight of Laurel's story. Millions of people, she couldn't fathom it. She tried to picture bodies, piled high, rotting in the sun. However, she couldn't fathom millions of people being alive, let alone being slain for a selfish desire. She tried to picture what millions of people looked like, all lined up on a field, but her mental picture faltered because she had no idea how big of a crowd that was. She could hear the words and she could repeat the numbers, but she still could not understand them. She let her head fall forward into her hands, and watched her vision spin. Millions of people butchered. She felt ill.

"Now, consider this from the elves' perspective. We, as a rule, do not involve ourselves in the affairs of the mortal races. Yes, we often do break that rule. That's why the rule is there, so we consider the implications before we break it. So, save those of us elves who made a home in Pallens, we did not participate overtly in the Pallens Front War."

"Did you used to live in Pallens?" Der asked.

Laurel watched her under a heavy gaze before nodding. "Yes, and my home was destroyed. Arborn, the elvish kingdom, was Pallens's greatest ally. They didn't send troops, but they sent their spies and saboteurs. So, too came the dragoon armies, and they helped to train the armies of the Empire."

"Dragoons!" Der squeaked. "I always wanted to meet them!"

Laurel silenced her with a deathly stern look. "However, when the storm-readers achieved immortality, it didn't matter that they'd lost the war; that'd they lost most of their armies and lands because now they had time."

Kelin grunted. "That's too much for the elves, isn't it? To have another immortal race, and one that's so wicked."

"It was. There are other immortal races besides the elves, you know, but not one so cruel. The war showed the world what evils the chemmen could produce and now they had immortality to design new tribulations." She rested her head on the side of her hand. "Arborn should have done something sooner, but they wouldn't dare interfere whilst the storm-readers were among mortals."

"What did the elves do?" Der asked, frowning.

"Elves, and the Empire of Pallens beat back their supposedly unbeatable army in a long, vicious campaign. Then, they banished the chemmen. The entire race, or so we thought."

"Where were they banished?" Kelin stared at the sky instead of Laurel's darkened face.

"Darkreign. They were thrown into what we call Darkreign by a very mighty elven sorceress."

"Where is that?" Der looked directly at the red headed elf, instead of the sky.

"The question isn't where it is, but what it is. It isn't on any map of the entire world, nor accessible by any road."

Kelin and Der exchanged a glance. He cleared his throat. "We don't understand."

Laurel breathed in deeply. "Yes. I will just simply it for you. It is not on this earth, not in the world."

"Oh." The humans nodded.

"It is a place where no one leaves. That's the rule. It'd been used as a prison for hundreds of years prior

for those few individuals who had committed the worst of crimes. Not much else was ever known." She left them in silence for the moment. Eventually, she appeared to reach a decision. "I will tell you more. What the elves didn't know is that the chemmen found a way to force paths to reopen and now, they've returned. What the elves do not know is that the chemmen have made Darkreign their new kingdom over the millennia. They are now its masters."

"I feel for the king and queen, I surely do, but it was their decision to banish the chemmen. They left them alive, and now they've returned, and I believe, to win the war elvish history remembers them losing."

Der and Kelin squirmed, and refused eye contact.

"'Tis not their sons' deeds though, but the chemmen do believe in tearing down forests – trees, roots, animals, everything and everyone. If they succeed in destroying the elves, they won't return to Darkreign. They'll start a new campaign against the world."

"But, first, apparently, they want to destroy the elves," Kelin repeated slowly. "Because you banished them from the earth."

She nodded once. "Yes. Now that you know the history, do you know why they captured you?"

"I think we met the prince." Der raised both eyebrows.

"Which one? There are two."

She paused. "The blond one. Are they both blond?"

"The heir. If he survives, he will be king. Was he on his own?"

"Yes."

She covered her mouth with her fingers. "Oh, no. Something terrible must have happened."

Der shrugged. "He's alive. The chemmen missed him."

Kelin scowled. "Only because we took his place."

Der ignored him and leaned backward and sighed. Kaleb was a prince, and not just a prince, an elvish prince; and not just an elvish prince, the next elvish king. She'd heard that he was the prince before and forgotten it. She exhaled and let the fascination out with the air; she was still simply too exhausted and injured to be properly mesmerized. The elf's stories of history had stolen whatever energy her healing had restored. She found that she could only focus on what was practical. "Where are you in this story, Laurel? You know much, and..." She let her gaze slip over to young Thalon.

The child, seemingly oblivious to the weight of words around the campfire, was hopping around through the firelight like a frog. He came crashing down on any bugs he could find with one of the long knives, laughing like an ordinary playful child.

"He's going to cut himself." Kelin pushed himself toward Thalon. "Here, son, hand me that blade."

Thalon's head shot toward him. "Uh." His eyes shot to his mother.

Laurel shrugged. "If he does, he'll learn an important lesson. They were a gift from his father when he learned to walk."

Kelin crawled back with no blade in hand.

Der stared at the blade's fiery reflection. "Why?"

"Why do you think?" she snapped back. "A child, hated by both races of his heritage, needs to be able to defend himself." She turned to stare directly at Kelin, letting her eyes drift past Der. "If you survive, you must make no mention of my husband or my son to anyone. I will not threaten you, but I will be honest, I fear for your survival. My husband and I have a duty – what we can say will save innocent lives. Yes, some of them not as innocent as others, but many elves had no hand in that deed long ago. The chemmen do not understand an individual's acts. They don't see how some of them could be free of guilt and others not. To them, all are one, and the same as the next. No chemman would dare suspect my husband as being a traitor because he is one of them, just as how they do not understand how the king and queen's sons are different from their parents."

"Which side are you on?" Der demanded.

"No one's side, child. I weep for the king and queen, but it was their decision long ago that led them down this ill fated path. I understand it is a harsh thing for me to say, but these are bitter times, far more so than most will admit." She pressed her hands together. "That doesn't matter to you; you should see to yourselves for the moment."

"Why?" Der snarled. "Because I'm dying and Kelin's too weak to fight?"

"Der," he shook his head, "Please don't say such things."

Laurel pursed her lips. "Yes, Derora, I'm afraid that you are just another casualty of a war that began millennia before you were born. I am sorry."

She stared down at her pale, peeling hands. "It's not supposed to be like this! I wanted to be a hero, and now I'll be dead before I'm ever a soldier."

The elf snapped her fingers. "You saved your friend, dear child. Most men, who have trained as warriors, would have already surrendered to the bliss of death after suffering the same torture as you. Yet, you found the strength to save your friend."

Kelin rested a hand on her shoulder. "I won't believe it, Der. You'll be fine." He forced a grin. "You always are."

She pulled away from his hand. "Stop it, Kelin! Saying that may make you feel better, but I'm going to die!" She stole a look over her shoulder into the darkness, daring it to come for her.

Laurel ran her hands through her hair. "Perhaps you will meet a miracle. But, for now, we should rest and tomorrow's day may bring more life than death. For tonight, many rove these forests: the storm-readers hunt you, there are many packs of people searching for the prince – most of whom still believe he is an outlaw, the elves and others. I've heard a rumor of even cultists after him because of some altercation in Duelingar."

Kelin rolled his eyes. "Yes, that was Der's doing. She is a lodestone, no, a lightning rod, for trouble." He smiled weakly for her.

But, she wasn't listening any more. What was the point? She was done for. She silently wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, and wondered if she'd just wiped away her drop of life.

Chapter Ten

Lost and Found

She was supposed to be sleeping, but Der had too little time left to waste it asleep. Kelin snored gently, and she guessed he was only passed out because he'd literally had no more strength to stay awake. She couldn't fault him for that. Slowly, she rolled on her shoulder and whuffed under her breath. Pain was her constant companion, and she'd gotten used to it as if it was just another annoying sibling.

The normally comforting sounds of the night, like the chirping insects and the swishing breezes, could, at this very moment, mask the predators that hunted them. The firelight was not giving enough light to show what was hiding in the shadows. Even if their tiny party was hidden so very well by the forest as the elf had claimed, Der still saw those bright orange eyes every time she closed her own eyes. Perhaps they really were out there, hunting them. Sleep could simply not overtake her.

She listened to the thunder cackle. It didn't sound too far away.

"If you cannot rest than don't lose your precious time pretending," a sweet voice wafted down from above.

Der tried to speak, but again, could produce no sound. Her fingers scratched the ground, but that was the most control she could exert over her hands. She could move only her eyes. She gulped down her panic and mentally screamed at her hands and feet. They just sat there like lumps of dead flesh. She tried to kick, but nothing happened, so she tried to kick harder in her desperation.

"Shh, child," Laurel whispered. "Concentrate on breathing. Slowly, slowly. Inhale slowly."

She tried her best, and could hear the air pumping in and out of her mouth. After a very short eternity, Der felt her heart begin to rest between beats.

The elf knelt beside her, and Der felt something cold and harsh and wet rub against her skin. She tried to jerk away. Laurel grabbed her and pressed the damp cloth into her skin. "Don't struggle. It's a healing salve." She dragged the cloth over the girl's throat.

Der's eyebrows creased. "Don't —"

"You'll die without it. These cuts on your skin are too open. The damage is too deep."

"But, dangerous..."

She heard an elegant snort. "Less dangerous than trying to avoid an infection without it, and far less dangerous than not being able to control your muscles when trouble calls."

Der tried to push one more protest through her lips, but the icy hot stinging sensation drained her strength. There had always been healing potions and salves, even before the Centum Wars, but no physician or surgeon or mage had ever perfected the formula. There was always an insignificant chance that the thing would kill the person. The body wasn't meant to heal that quickly, and when that healing was forced, there was the small reality that the body wouldn't handle the strain.

She closed her eyes, and it felt like she was levitating. The pain faded to a humming in the background by the heartbeat. When she came back down, she coughed a few times. "Where are we going?"

Laurel sighed. "Toward Arborn."

"The elf kingdom!" Der tried to sit up straight, and failed. She winced on the way down. She didn't care, and tried to sit right back up. "We're going to the elf kingdom!"

"No," the elf retorted. "We're going toward Arborn." She brushed some hair from her face. "There is an outpost of the kingdom hidden in the Riverfall Mountains."

"But, where?" She coughed, and brushed away whatever came out with care not to look at it because she did not want to know.

"An outpost. We can't go to Arborn, child, because you, your friend, my son, and most certainly my husband cannot go there."

"Well, why not?"

The elf shook her red head. "Because none of you would be able to find it. One must be invited to find the borders of my original motherland or you will wander without aim throughout the Altice Domain, or the Wild Lands, as you say." She tossed a couple of sticks on the embers. "We shall go toward Arborn, because my husband and I have learned information that can save many lives, but only I can —"

An arrow landed in the fire. Der stared. There was an arrow in the fire. Flames sprouted up along its shaft, and still Der couldn't look away. More arrows bit deeply into the soft soil around her, like deadly rain, and yet, Der stared at the burning shaft.

She heard a harsh gasp, and Der suddenly didn't want to look away from the arrow. She didn't want to hear the sound of the body falling.

Laurel's red hair blended with the flames as she passed the fire on the way down.

The elf was dead. There was no light in her wide eyes. It was a lucky shot, directly through her throat. Der watched her final breath fall out of her lips, and a single tear slid from her eye as it closed and dripped into the soil.

She pushed the lump past her throat. They were found! The chemmen had found them! She wished she could have been surprised. She pushed herself away from the ground and tried to shake off the ensuing dizziness. She rolled toward the sleeping forms of Kelin and Thalon.

She thrashed Kelin's shoulder. "We gotta go! We gotta go!"

Thalon raised his head. "What's going – Yow!" An arrow landed two inches in front of his hand.

"She's dead and we gotta leave now!" Der jerked his arm so hard that she felt something pop.

"Ma? Where's my mother?" Thalon cried. He stumbled across the campsite to his mother's body.

Kelin snatched at the boy's clothing, but the child was too fast. What he later remembered was that the boy never begged her to wake up and never pleaded to know what was wrong. He still cried, though, and Kelin realized that the child knew about death.

Der's hand groped for a sword that wasn't there. She didn't have her sword. She'd lost her father's sword! She finally reached the realization that this wasn't a dream or a game or a combat drill that she'd created for the youth of Riversbridge in the meadow. It'd seemed ten years gone. This was real. The enemy was here to kill her and her friend, and she had no weapon. She looked around wildly, and felt every bone in her body tremble and every muscle hurt like they were going to tear themselves off her bones.

Curses stained the air around her. Several times she found her hand groping for her sword. When she looked to see if more arrows were hailing, she saw figures moving through the trees. "They," she faltered and tried to find her voice again, "They're human!"

She stumbled forward.

Kelin gaped. "What the *hell* are you going to do?" He grabbed for her arm.

She threw off his hand. "Get Thalon to safety!" Without listening to his reply, she ran at them. There were only three of them, but they were armed and two had their swords ready. The third dropped his bow and went for his sword. That was stupid, she thought. On the other hand, he was armored and she wasn't. She sprinted at the nearest one and never hesitated. He stepped back and dropped into a crouch, but from the upward angle of his sword he was waiting for her to stop. She didn't.

He swung crazily. She ducked under the blade, and sprung up with her shoulder straight into the man's groin. He dropped his weapon, staggering backward.

Der dove for the prize. As her fingers curled around the handle, she was suddenly very thankful for the healing salve or she wouldn't even be able to hold the weapon.

The man grabbed her shoulder and she felt herself being dragged toward him. She didn't care because she had the sword. She stabbed at an awkward angle. He fell away, but was cursing when he hit the ground.

The second thundered toward her, and she saw the third going after Kelin and Thalon. The second was already swinging his sword at her well before he was close enough. "You're dead, little girl!" he roared.

She found herself grinning. "Oh, I know, and you are going to be my witness to say that my last act was to rid the world of scum like you."

The man's face went rigid behind his scowl. His feet carried him forward mechanically and his face didn't move. She heaved the sword forward and he collapsed around it.

Meanwhile, Kelin shoved the child behind him and started to back away. Thalon reached up and handed him one of his knives. "Here!"

His fingers snatched up the blade, but it looked far too short against the sword bearing down on them.

Thalon's hands dug into the back of his belt. "Move to the side," he hissed. "Wait for him to swing and move to the side!"

"How do you know –" But, there was no more time. They ran backward away from the whistling weapon.

Kelin glanced down at the boy's face. It was wide open and pale. For a flash, he felt like Der. It was an overriding imperative to protect and defend and above all, fight. In this white hot moment, he wasn't a person, he was the weapon, and weapons had no concept of fear. He stepped forward, and the man thrust his sword.

Kelin twisted his entire body around the blade, and suddenly, he was inside the sword's reach. He didn't stop moving and rammed the knife home. The man went limp against his hand, and sure enough, a double headed snake medallion slithered out his robes.

"Damn! These bastards again!"

Der staggered over and Kelin forgot completely about the cultists. He waved the bloody knife in her face. "Do you even realize how insane you are?"

"Uh..." She looked around. "We need to salvage what we can from our camp."

"This is beyond us, Derora Saxen! The elf's dead now!"

"Salvage!" she commanded. She sagged against the trunk of a tree, but she didn't relinquish the sword. She dropped to her knees and fought against vomiting, but she didn't let her grip on the weapon slide.

Kelin knelt beside her. "Are you even strong enough to carry that?"

Her voice was low and even, which surprised her. "I'm dying, Kelin, and I'd rather die standing."

His mouth hung open. "Der, this isn't the meadow! This is real!"

"Yes, it is!" She pulled herself to her feet and forced her way toward him and Thalon. "And, right now, we have to run. We aren't free yet." She looked back to where her first attacker was still rolling on the ground, still spiritedly cussing. For the first time, she actually looked at the man. He wore cheap leather armor over his torso, which hadn't helped much against the sword at all. She also saw that he had such a large, flat nose that must have been broken many times. Her face hardened and she bit her lip. "I don't know what we should –"

Hoof beats broke through the sudden stillness. They sounded like pounding heartbeats. No one moved for a frozen second.

She looked around wildly. There! Behind them was a creek down a steep bank. With her free hand, Der grabbed Kelin, who pulled Thalon over the lip of the bank and toward the water below. They rolled against the dirt and grass.

Thalon struggled against the big man's hand, even though it wrapped completely around his arm. "But, my mother! They killed my mother!"

"Sorry," he panted. "I'm sorry, but we have to go!"

Der let go of her friend's arm and lost her balance. She rolled down the slope and splashed down into the creek. Icy water seized her and she gasped for air, even though it only went as high as her knees. She found herself blinking stupidly as the weak current slurped by her, and it surprised her to find that it subdued the fiery pain.

We're in the wild lands, she thought. The Wild Lands. No one comes here.

The domain was not a frontier. Not many entered, and none supposedly remained. On the other side of this great forest that stretched for thousands of miles in any direction was the elven kingdom, and that was on another side of a massive mountain range, so the stories claimed. No race had settlements that survived in the thick dark heart of the continent.

It was said that dragons lived comfortably here without fear of questing heroes. Der wasn't certain about that, even though she really wanted to believe it, but she had no doubts that lesser beasts thrived. It was also said that animals had no fear of humanity because they never had known humans.

She splashed cold water on her face and stared upward at the trees. She could see as plainly as seeing that the sky was blue that these were ancient and alive. The branches held aloft the very fabric of time.

Der growled. So, why if the Wild Lands were such an unconquered and uninhabited domain were the chemmen, cultists and now cultists on horseback doing here? *Why was it so bleeding crowded?*

She pounded her fist into the water.

Kelin and Thalon slid down into the water behind her.

She wobbled to her feet. "We need to go."

The child grabbed her arm and shook his head violently.

She looked around wildly. "What?"

"No! Hide!" He let go and pressed his small body next to the cut bank. His hair tangled with the roots hanging freely from above.

"We should run." Kelin kept glancing over his shoulder.

Der opened her mouth but hoof beats sounded like trumpets and they threw themselves forward against the dirt wall.

Above, the sounds of stamping of horses, voices and thunder from the clouds drifted down the slope. They pushed themselves closer against the dirt wall.

Der shook her head. "That one's still alive and those bodies are still warm." She kept shaking her head. "They're going to figure we ain't far. We've got to move, quiet-like."

Kelin held her eyes and sighed. He chewed his lip and then, finally nodded. He knelt to face the child.

"Der and me, we promise to keep you safe."

The boy's entire face trembled. "But, my dad, he'll..."

"We have to go, Thalon, we're in too much danger if we stay here."

Tears tumbled down his face. "But, but..."

He forced a smile. "Come on, we'll help you find your father."

Der nodded in agreement. Her eyes scanned the surrounding forest. She picked a random direction and they begun to slink away.

The day toiled into the night. Fortunately, they didn't encounter another soul. Although Der knew that was a good thing, it still left her feeling even more lost. Her fears began to loom with the rising shadows as the sun faded. The massively tall trees tossed around the wind and the thunder. It hadn't stormed, but the angry sky hadn't let go of its grudge.

Der, Kelin and Thalon hunched together in the exposed roots of a tree. Kelin's dark cloak stretched out above them. It was silly, honestly, how much security the thin cloth of the cloak rendered.

The wall of silence that sat between them was dissected by the sounds of the forest. Those usually

frightening night sounds in the distant background were suddenly comforting. Even at a death, they were reassured life still existed.

Der stared helplessly into the night. Her hands felt as heavy as rocks and the pain was returning. Healing salves could fix bones and mortal wounds, so, she wondered, what was so wrong with her that she couldn't be saved? She continued to stare ahead.

Thalon's whole body shuddered. "She never hurt anyone!" He beat his fists against Kelin's chest and sobbed. "She was a good person! Why did she have to be killed?" His body rocked back and forth, almost overbalancing.

Kelin banged his head against a large root in an effort to put a hand on Thalon's shoulder. "I know. She was kind to us. It – it was just bad luck."

The boy howled louder.

The shock of their experiences was wearing thin since they fled. Neither human could do much but sit and stare. Kelin found himself feeling incredibly tired and hollow.

Thalon kicked and thrashed. "She didn't do anything wrong! She was kind to *everybody*!" He tried to wipe his eyes with his fists. "She was the nicest person in the whole world. I mean, there was this one time when this man tried to rob us and dad was going to kill him and she wouldn't let him and she made the man dinner and he became our friend." He sniffed. "Why did she have to die? She wasn't a fighter or nothing! She didn't do anything wrong! She was the most kindest person in the whole world!"

"We know, we know," Kelin soothed.

"None of this is fair," Der said in a low voice. "None of it. It's not right that we should live and she should have perished." She looked down. "It should have been me."

Kelin grabbed her shoulder and shook his head firmly.

Thalon struggled against Kelin's other arm. "The bow should have broken! The arrow should have missed! *She didn't do anything wrong!*"

"We know," Kelin whispered. "We know. She helped us when we had nothing to give to her for such aid. She was the sweetest, most generous person we've ever met."

The boy wailed against his chest while the wind screamed around them. His tiny chest heaved with more strength that Kelin would have thought possible, but he could feel the child's heart fluttering wildly.

Outside, the wind flew faster than a flash flood.

Der glanced around the cloak. "I wish it would either storm or pass."

Kelin nodded, trying not to disturb the whimpering boy. He had quieted, much quicker than Kelin assumed. He cried until slumber took him away. Slowly, Kelin gently lifted him with his strong arms and pushed him into Der's lap. "You take him."

"Why me?" she demanded, almost pushing the boy back at him.

"You're a girl!"

"I don't know what to do with children! You know this." She scrambled backward, and dug her back into the trunk of the tree. "My first reaction with a baby was to put my hand under its nose so it could smell me like a dog!" She shrugged. "I mean, I've raised puppies, and they're like babies. Baby dogs."

Kelin pushed Thalon into her arms anyway. Then he smiled. "You did that, didn't you?"

She nodded. "When Mother dragged me to see Ashine's baby, you know, Avice's older sister. After that, I wasn't allowed to go near it again."

Kelin chuckled, and then glanced down at Thalon again. "I feel for him. He's lost his mother, we don't know where his father is, and he's half chemmen. Nobody's going to want to do anything to do with him."

"Why not? He's just a child. He didn't choose it."

"Think about it!" Kelin snapped. "If he were older, would you want anything to do with him? Honestly. Remember our first reactions to him, barely a day old. You've changed your mind."

She appeared uneasy. "He's not a bad lad."

"Most beings out there, including the true elves, are not going to accept him."

"But he's just a child."

Kelin stared at nothing. "He is."

"We must find his father." Der held up her hands. "I have no idea how, but we need to. It'll pay him back for saving us."

He sighed and gave her a long-practiced glare.

She shrugged. "I really, really, honestly wish his mother were still alive. I have no idea what we're going to do. I have no idea how much longer I'm going to be alive myself." She sighed. Laurel had been their tether, holding them while they dangled over the edge of the cliff. Now, they were freefalling.

She looked back outside and wondered if the weather were reflecting how she felt. The winds howled, the thunder cracked, but it wasn't raining. It couldn't decide what to do either.

As she stared, she had the strangest sensation that the forest stared back. But, forests were just trees

and plants and animals! Here, the feeling was staggering, and she remembered what Laurel had said about the forest, and now, she thought glumly, they had no ally to mitigate its temper. Surely with this ominous weather the forest was angry. But, that was just another question that would have to go unanswered.

She shivered, and drew her arms around her. Her hands were sluggish to respond, and she wondered how much longer she would have use of them.

She was dying. It had seemed so impossible a week ago, they were younger and laughing on the road. Now, it was a reality she was going to fight all the way down. "It's unfair," she whispered. "Anything but this."

Kelin opened his mouth. "Uh... maybe there's another miracle out there, Der."

She looked at him. Fear had hollowed out her eyes. She shook her head.

"Please don't die," he asked softly, his voice taking on several layers of pleading. "Please, I won't survive out here on my own, and I can't care for Thalon either."

She turned her face away. "Let's just try to sleep. Maybe things will be better in the morning." Above the cloak, the thunder rumbled on.

Kelin stumbled awake to someone's fist repeatedly jabbing his shoulder. "Wha —"

"Riders!" Thalon hissed.

He blinked and tried to push himself backward into the tree. "What?"

Der was pulling the cloak down from the exposed roots. "Lucky they came that way! Hide already!" She yanked it down and then squeezed up beside him.

"Oh, great, so they'll see us when they pass by."

Then, there was nothing to do but wait. They stopped breathing. The hoof beats grew louder and then suddenly stopped. They heard the stamping of the feet, but no voices. Der frowned and rolled her head to the side to try to catch a glimpse. Through the roots, she saw several magnificent beasts.

"They're not riders," she whispered. "They're unicorns." Slowly, she rose to her feet, still hugging the tree. The other two crawled up beside her.

Three amazingly white unicorns looked up from their play. Their coats were so brilliant that Der had to squint to see them. The golden and silver horns made the cloudy light of morning dance like it was a bright noon. Der forgot all about her pain and impending doom for just a few heartbeats.

Kelin frowned. "And a black horse. A really, really enormous black horse."

Der blinked, and sure enough, there was a massive, midnight black horse standing behind the delicate unicorns. It was hard to focus on both at once. The horse definitely had no horn, and was everything that the unicorns weren't. It was huge. It was muscular. Its hooves were larger than her face, and suddenly, she couldn't get that measurement out of her mind because that horse looked angry. Its ears were flat and it stamped the ground.

The unicorns cantered off into the forest, moving as fluidly as water, but the black horse stayed and glared.

Der slid her hand toward the sword. "There's got to be a tree around here at least Thalon could be safe in."

Kelin shook his head. "Do you see how big that thing is? You have to crane your neck just to see its shoulders! It'd knock trees down."

The horse snorted and flipped its head. The ears lifted. It looked after where the unicorns had gone, and then back at them. It stuck out his nose, lifted its tail and tiptoeing as daintily as an equine can, it disappeared back into the forest by the route it and the unicorns had arrived.

Der left her fingers relax on the pommel. "Well, that may have been one the strangest things I've ever seen."

Kelin grumbled, rolling up his cloak. "We should go." He kicked a root. "Thank the gods that we're not burdened down with supplies, like food or a tent."

"We'll find berries. Remember, red ones are only poisonous half the time. Blue and black ones are usually alright."

"Then, you're eating them first, Der."

She shrugged, and picked up the weapon while hiding a grimace. She forced a tight grin. "Thalon, do you have any idea where your father is?"

The boy's eyes widened and he held up his empty hands.

She opened her mouth, but instead of a reply, she threw up whatever was left in her stomach. She lost her grip on the sword and fell to her knees. The pain! She grabbed her chest. The pain surged through her body like an angry army.

"There's blood in this, Der. You're vomiting blood." Kelin couldn't hide his expression of dismay.

She tried to push herself up, and stumbled forward. "I'm alright."

"No, you're not!" He threw his cloak down on the ground. "You're dying. We're out in the middle of the

Wild Lands, and you're dying! We've got no supplies, we don't know where we are, we don't know where we're going, everyone's going to think we kidnapped a half-elf, half-chemman child, whose father is very lethal and probably insanely angry right now, and we're being hunted by cultists!" Kelin gasped. He'd gotten all that out in one breath.

Finally, after a day and a half of rumbling, it started to rain. The whole day and a half of rain's worth came flooding down in that single moment.

Kelin stuck his hand out in the curtain of water and laughed shrilly. "Oh, and now it's raining!"

Der rested her head against the tree. "Oh, we know where we need to go. There's an elven outpost in the Riverfall Mountains, but apparently, you can't find it without an express elven invitation. Not that we know where to go, anyway." She shrugged. "But, it's an idea."

He glared daggers. "I can't tell if you're being optimistic or sardonic. Besides, the boy's father is much closer."

She glanced at Thalon. "Yeah. The clues we'd need are at the outpost we escaped – and we can't go there... Not that we know where that is either. There's only more danger for everyone if we're caught there." She hung her head. "Our best idea is to find and remain at our camp. Bury the elf. I think the good chemman could find us there."

"Who couldn't?" Kelin snapped. He sighed. "It's probably our best chance, however."

"Riders!" Thalon squeaked. "Again!"

"What? Are the unicorns coming back?" the blacksmith asked, stepping away from the tree.

"No," the boy replied. "It's the black horse...with...shit."

The black horse led the way, but this time, he wasn't alone. This time, he carried a rider in red armor bareback. Other horses with riders followed closely. Their armor didn't shine, but instead seemed to dully mirror the colors of the forest around them. But, their drawn swords, those shone, even through the rain.

The shock finally caught up with them with the rushed stench of sweaty horses and rain. The riders fanned out around them. Everyone had a helmet with the visor drawn so they could see none of their faces.

Thalon ducked behind Kelin, and clutched his belt.

The black horse stepped in front of them and glared with uncanny intelligence. The bareback rider's size was to a man what the horse was to other horses. He couldn't have ridden a normal horse. He was also wearing blood red plate mail. He lowered a lance at them and the rain ran off its sharpened point. At least it was just rain, Der told herself, instead of something much more precious. He cleared his throat. "We've seen many people out here who don't belong. Chemmen, cultists and now you, so I'm only going to ask once for surrender."

Kelin looked at Der, and then down at Thalon, the child with the brilliantly orange chemmen eyes. "Uh, this isn't what it looks like."

Der started swaying and groaned. She leaned forward. "Oh no..." With a tremendous heave, she vomited right on the black horse's massive hooves.

Chapter Eleven

Trial

"Are you putting me on trial?" Vlade roared.

The chemmen king leaned away from the spittle and rage. He glanced to see himself in the obsidian mirror, nothing there had changed. "No, not as such, but something unimaginable happened on your watch, and so you must be made accountable."

Vlade paced in tight circles. "I was overseeing the re-capture of the calvar. Someone let loose a pen! Damn fool!" Absently, he rubbed some gray scars on his arm. He always did. They reminded him of a time when he still scarred. That made him rub all the harder.

"Nevertheless, the guards were under your command at the time, regardless of where you were." He tapped his chin. "What fool let loose those beasts?"

"I don't know," the commander snapped. He stopped pacing. "It was very fortunate timing, however, and those humans ran unseen through our sentries because none of them were at their posts. Every last one was needed." He tried not to pick at the wound he'd received from a calvar.

The king frowned. "They couldn't have... could they?"

The other shook his head. "No. They'd have been devoured. Messily."

The ruler rubbed his forehead. "How could this have happened?"

"The calvar? Neither of the cage locks were damaged. Surely no guard would be foolish enough to try to feed them by opening the door."

The king hesitated. "...Could it have been intentional?"

Vlade's booming expression melted into confusion. "A diversion, perhaps? No, it couldn't be. There was no one to aid them, except perhaps a ghost."

The king leaned forward. "How else could two tortured and dying humans slaughter seven of our guards and escape? None of them raised alarm." He found that he was rapidly drumming his fingers. "All the guards have been questioned and punished?"

Vlade looked down to find that he too was drumming his fingers. "Duly."

"And seven guards are dead. Seven. That shouldn't be possible." He glanced at the mirror again and watched his face for just a moment, as if reassuring himself that he was still here. He knew that chemmen would perish again, but not so close to him as this! It didn't matter, his reflection told him, they had more than enough bodies. Darkreign only had so much space after all.

The commander shrugged. "There was evidence that the girl may have killed the guards sent to torture her again. She may have taken a weapon..."

"And, what? What could a dying human girl do?"

Vlade's face remained expressionless. "I observed that she did demonstrate a powerful will."

"Seven, Vlade, seven of us. She's *human*. Well, mostly."

All the thunder rumbled back onto the commander's face. "We were too once, Dis!" He absently rubbed his forearm again. It never rubbed off.

The king gasped. "We make no mention of that!"

"It doesn't change it! We are in a true crisis here. If you do not remember so well, it was I who planned and studied and orchestrated this war!"

Dis breathed out. He looked at the mirror again, it was alright. He turned back to the commander. "Yes, and your brilliant strategy seems to involve many people escaping us. First, *both* the princes. Then, you lost the crown prince in the human city. Now, you've lost two humans from *inside* our well hidden and guarded stronghold. I'm surprised you did kill the king and queen."

"None of that damaged my plan! It is merely delayed!"

"What?" The king pressed his hands together. "You don't think that the elves won't use this time you've give them? They outwitted us once."

"You cannot stab a ghost!" Vlade began pacing again. "They know nothing of our machinations or our whereabouts. We are eating their hope by taking their leadership. First, their rulers, next their sons and then that damned baroness. They run in panic while our armies gather. They can do nothing and soon they will realize how helpless they are. That is the moment I will savor."

Dis frowned. "Yes, I realize. However, there are still two princes and two humans running away! Your patrols tell me that they haven't found any of them."

Vlade snarled. "Of course not. These abandoned forests are full of those useless cultists bastards, and elves, and everyone else hunting the bounty on the outlaw prince. Of course none of my patrols have been successful because they can't be seen!"

"Oh, good, I cannot wait until one of these groups finds this ancient relic of a castle," Dis mocked in a sing-song voice.

"They'll think exactly what we want – that is just an abandoned castle – and that's all they find because they won't think to dig underneath it. It's happened before and we've not been found." He clicked his tongue against his teeth.

"So, if we're safe here, go and find me those people. Even as we speak, those two mortals are running toward freedom."

"There's more than two," Vlade replied dryly while scratching his chin. "They're like insects. But, there are none who have escaped from me." He clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace again. "Perhaps – that is to say – it would have been impossible. It's the only logical – perhaps, they had," he swallowed, "Aid."

Dis's frown deepened. "Someone sneaked in here?" His face darkened into a full blown scowl. There was something nagging his hindbrain, and he felt that slowly tightening curl in his gut, and yet, he couldn't form the thought that he was trying to think.

Vlade cleared his throat. His voice was much smaller than usual, "No. Someone already present."

The king's shoulders snapped back. "What? A spy? Hidden? *Here?*"

"No." Now, the commander whispered. He swallowed again, and this time, gazed off at the distant wall. "One of us."

Every muscle in Dis's body went rigid, and he felt the blood draining from his face. He held up his hands in front of his face. "No, no. It must have been a wizard or something or even a ghost. Maybe one of them knew magic!"

Vlade dropped his eyes and shook his head. Dis stared. Here was his general who knew no mercy, who knew sacrifice, at least to make others sacrifice. This was a man made from Dis's own nightmares. And, this was the first time the king had ever seen him glance down.

The commander raised a hand, where his index finger was shaking. "The timeliness of the calvar escape, the dead guards and we would never suspect..."

Dis was shaking his head. "That's impossible. You're creating evidence." His hands splayed limply on the armrest.

Vlade ground his teeth. "It's...obvious." He cursed these old fashioned thoughts! He would've never thought like this in Darkreign! Out here, his mind was being slowly poisoned by other races.

The king's mouth slid open. He suddenly found that he couldn't trust his loyal ranks. If he gave an order, would it be heeded? A shiver tickled his spine.

But, the chemmen could always rely on one another. It was their race against the entire world – it always had been. Their unity was the one thing that staved away extinction after what the elves had done to them. It had brought them life, then peace and now they ruled Darkreign and could at last have their vengeance. Even despite how much Vlade left a nasty taste in his mouth, he knew he could trust him with his life. His fingers slid across his own identical calvar bite. However, they carried the same purpose – they'd been linked by an ancient magic. No chemman had stood against another chemman since – he fought hard to think about those memories from so long past – since they were human. That's it, his mind raged, they were human then. No *chemman* had ever, not once, been disloyal to another chemman. There were no chemmen traitors.

He stared at his feet, half expecting to see that there was no ground left beneath them.

Vlade tapped his foot. "We must find him and know who he is!"

"What if he's still here?" the king breathed. Sweat prickled on his forehead.

"It's just a hypothesis. It may not even be true at all. We haven't proven it."

The king nodded. "Yes. Let the humans go. They know nothing. If there is a traitor, who is willing to help mortals out, he must be found immediately. Then, we will make such a decree that if any chemman *ever* –"

Vlade shook his head. "No. Tell no one. This will be between just we three."

Dis flashed a scowl, but then nodded. "Then, kill him in such a way that he wishes he were human again so that he could die faster."

Once again, Vlade shook his head. "No, quickly. Quickly and quietly. Then, let us never speak of this again. If even the *rumor* –"

"Yes," the king snapped. "Then, find him and kill him, now!"

"Use your own spies, Dis! Use them on our people for just this one time. Tell them... ask them if they witnessed anyone acting out of place. Say that the man you're searching for is another one of your spies and you need his information immediately. It's regarding the escaped crown prince."

The king gasped. "You mean to have me lie to them?"

"Why not? You lied to your human spies about the prince being an outlaw! They think they're working for other humans." Vlade leaned back, having to regain his footing.

"Yes, but they're... not us," Dis said weakly. He avoided looking at the general's face. He coughed, and cleared his throat. "Well, why not you yourself? Did you have other, more important plans? More important this?"

Vlade gritted his teeth. "My experiments continue."

"Are you still trying to enchant that noisemaker? This is far more urgent!"

"It is not a noisemaker! It is the absence of sound!" He pointed at the wall, where above and beyond it, lay the forest. "It will pound fear into their hearts! They remember!"

Dis ran his fingers over his face. "It was lost, Vlade! Do not lose yourself to this when we have so many other troubles."

"This is just another element of my plan." With that, he spat at the king's feet and marched out of the room.

Der stared blankly at the half circle of elves. Every perfectly symmetrical face was etched in stone. Some were wearing bright flowing robes and dresses, whereas only two of them were wearing steel. She sighed and slouched. She had always wanted to meet elvish knights, but now, she found that half of her wished that she could postpone the introduction. The other half was so worn that she didn't care.

She counted five elves in all. None of them were in the slightest bit amused. She couldn't decide on any ages for them, either. They looked young, but every time she tried to think nineteen or twenty years, the number just fell away. It didn't fit.

Among them were two of the most beautiful women that Der and Kelin had ever seen. Der wasn't sure of what cloth their dresses were crafted, but they sparkled and shone like diamonds over a mountain lake. The final elf, seated in the center, wore an emerald embroidered shirt and dark trousers. His collar was turned up, and unlike the others, he glared directly at them with eyes that were burning so brightly that they could have started a fire.

The surrounding trees stood like sentinels. Behind the humans rigidly stood their guards, who out here, really were just a formality.

They weren't bound or chained, but they understood the consequences of trying to escape. Kelin glanced around again while clenching and unclenching his fists, as if waiting to wake from a nightmare.

The red knight rose to his feet. A chilly autumn wind swept through, teasing some leaves across the forest floor and Der felt her throat dry. She stared. The knight was massive. She thought that elves were supposed to be petite, svelte and all those other things. This one wasn't. This one looked like an ancient oak tree. His face was marked by a strong jaw and his very stern features set against short, clipped blond hair. His ears stuck out very much with such a short haircut. His true blue eyes glared down at them.

"I am Sir Jakkobb, knight-captain of the Silver Dawn Dragoons. Since this is a time of war, if you are found guilty of aiding the enemy, your lives will be forfeit. You are going to tell us your tale of how you came to be here, and then this council will tell you what we believe. Then, we shall have a discussion. Introduce yourselves before you speak. I will admit to you right now that this is anything but a proper trial, however, this needs to be done and done quickly. Is all this clear?"

Kelin bobbed his head and stepped forward. He bowed and then stared very intently at the ground. "Lords and ladies, I am Kelin Miller and this is Derora Saxen, of Riversbridge." He licked his lips nervously. "Actually, that should be *Lady* Derora Saxen of Riversbridge of the noble house of Saxen of Thealith."

The elves stared impassively. They did not seem impressed.

Der shrugged and whispered, "I would've completely forgotten to say that."

"I know," Kelin replied through his teeth. "Why do you think I spoke first?"

The neatly dressed elf cleared his throat loudly and deliberately and continued glaring at them. "Shouldn't even be a trial at all."

The knight-captain returned a blank, but stern look to the other elf. "Draagoon law, sir. They have to have a trial because they have no allegiance to speak for them."

Der cocked her head and looked at every individual elf on the council. She frowned. "Where's Thalon? You know, the boy?"

One of the women, the one with radiant dark hair shook her head. "I'm sorry, child, no questions now."

Der shook her head. She growled and marched forward. "No! It's important! I don't have time for this! Where is the child? You didn't..." She swallowed the abrupt metallic taste of fear, and couldn't finish her thought aloud.

"Your life will be ended if you don't obey the rules of this trial," the cleanly dressed elf in the center snapped. He glared with the intensity of a bonfire.

The other woman raised a hand as smoothly as silk flowing in a mountain stream. Her sapphire blue eyes appeared sympathetic. They also shone oddly, even at this distance. She was the most beautiful thing that they had ever seen. Strawberry blond curls caressed her cheeks. Her dress was much simpler than any others, but yet, it seemed to show off her beauty by not drawing attention to the clothes. She was far more beautiful than the other female elf in the fancy gown. If the goddess of grace were ever a person, she would be this woman. "The child is well." Her words in this mundane language were like a symphony of bells.

Der and Kelin just stared. They were helpless. They couldn't have even run for their lives after hearing that voice.

The elf who had cleared his throat now glared at her, but she didn't even seem to notice. She said with a chiming tinkling in her warm voice, "Tell us your story."

Kelin realized he was biting his lip. "Uh..." His mouth was dry.

Der shrugged. "What story?"

The red knight and the blue eyed elf exchanged a glance. She nodded slightly. Sir Jakkobb looked back to the pair. "Think of this from our perspective. We find you out here in the Altice Domain, or Wild Lands, as you say, with a murdered elf not five miles away and with a child of..." he faltered, "Of mixed heritage. One of which is our very enemy's in this war. Why are you here? What events led you to be out here, like this, with this boy?"

"If they're not going to tell us," the elf in the center said, "Then let us not waste our time."

Der glared up at him. "We met them after we escaped from the chemmen's lair."

There was a thundering silence. It echoed throughout the trees. Der really felt like there had been a sudden rumbling, and she just hadn't heard it with her ears. Following it was a small collective gasp – and then no one breathed. Even the birds and the insects were quiet.

The red knight blinked. "Pardon me?"

"They saved our lives," Der continued. She looked down. "But, Laurel – that's the elf who died – said that she couldn't do enough for me – not after what the chemmen did..." And, then, she too lapsed into silence.

An argument in a language Der and Kelin did not understand exploded.

The other man in the muted armor held up his hand. He spoke in Common. "We are agreed. No questions. This is protocol." He looked back at the villagers. "Continue."

Der shrugged. "Well, we met your crown prince. In Duelingar. Um, Kaleb."

Once again, he heard the strain – heard words humming just on the other side of their lips. However, there were no more outbursts. The dark haired woman tilted her head. "There are no princes named Kaleb."

The other knight, sitting next to Sir Jakkobb, chuckled. "He wouldn't have used any name that in which we are familiar."

Kelin said, "He was the outlaw that everyone's looking for, but we knew he wasn't a murderer. We, got into a fight of sorts with some cultists. They were trying to capture him." He finally deflated and dropped his shoulders under the weight of the elves' stares.

Der took up the reigns of the story. "We, uh, we traveled to Second Acron together. He never told us who he was. We called him Kaleb. The chemmen had a trap for him there. They knew that he was going to meet someone in the city, so we thought, so we went instead. They didn't know us, but we were captured. I think Kaleb got away. I don't know." She watched as her hands started to shake as she tried to force herself to think about what had happened. "They tortured us." The words fell limply from her lips.

She gasped and pushed through her tears like a heavy curtain. "It didn't matter. We didn't know who he was or where he was going. But, Laurel, she knew something important. She was searching for elves, an outpost, she said. She tried to heal us, but she still said that I was going to die." She closed her eyes. "That's it. I'm done."

The neatly dressed elf snorted. "Very well. I am Duke Farallon of the Aeolian Plateau, sworn to the royal family of Arbourn." His intense dark eyes glared at them with nothing but disdain. "Firstly, your story is outrageous. I don't believe it."

The other elf in armor, who wasn't nearly as tall as Sir Jakkobb, clapped softly for attention. It was the first time that he had spoken. "I am Sir Amthros, knight of Arbourn, sworn to the royal family. We were passing through the Altice Domain on our return to Arbourn. We were forced to evacuate our nobility and leaders after the murders of the king and queen. During our passage, we heard of the outlaw ruse and suspected that the missing prince may have been nearby.

"We discovered ourselves to be in the path of the worshippers of one of the devils. Apparently, in one of your human cities, there was blood spilled publicly. The guards investigated to see who those men were, and found out too much for the cult. They exposed Sennha. The followers panicked. They ran here into the Wild Lands to avoid execution."

The bejeweled dark haired woman spoke. "I am the Duchess of the Aeolian Plateau, known as Lady Sabille." She nodded quickly to Duke Farallon. "So it seems that they did murder the elf whom you knew. They were executed for their crime, but you, in your haste, escaped us."

Kelin opened his mouth to exclaim, but caught himself in the last instant. So, it hadn't been more cultists on horseback. It had been the elves. He rubbed the back of his neck anxiously, and wondered if they'd been caught then, would it have made any difference now? Certainly not if the duke had his way.

This lady's voice was far shriller than the graceful elf's. "And you claimed to have been tortured, with only light marks on the both of you?"

"No." The duke snapped his fingers like a whip. "It's far more likely that they are in league with our enemy, either the cultists or bought out by the storm-readers. Besides, they're only humans. Let's just be done with them."

Der gasped. Kelin stamped down on her foot before she could say anything. He held up a warning finger. She snorted, but nodded.

The duke sneered at them and leaned forward. "You have been agents all along. You tried to lead the prince to his death, and you actually succeeded with the elf that was slain!"

Der's jaw dropped open. Kelin flinched and then stared.

Sir Amthros raised a hand. "That is not the consensus of this council. Perhaps they were unwitting agents."

Sir Jakkobb nodded. "Yes, and there's the child."

Duke Farallon shook his head. "Surely the poor woman must have been taken against her will."

"The chemmen have never –" Sir Amthros began, and then silenced himself.

Der slowly poked up her hand. "Uh, no."

"You're not allowed to speak," Lady Sabille said sternly. "Your part of the discussion is closed."

She jabbed a finger at the duke. "But, he's getting it all wrong! Look, I listened to the way Laurel spoke about Thalon and she said very well that he had a husband. She loved him. He was away from her side spying for information for you when she was killed!"

"*You're not allowed to speak!*" The duke roared. "Even if you were, good sense does not allow us to trust you."

The graceful woman inclined her head to the duke. "She's not lying." She held his gaze evenly. "I would know, my lord."

He gritted his teeth. "Yes, my lady. It doesn't matter, she doesn't know the truth – she just knows what she believes." He swept his hand out toward the humans. "And she *believes* that this elf and a chemman had a loving partnership! Do I have to explain to you, my lady, how impossible that is?"

"Then how do you explain the child?" Der yelled.

Farallon whirled on her. "You are not allowed to speak! That's enough! We will carry the rest of these proceedings in our language." He curled his upper lip. "Not that it will make much difference."

Sir Amthros shook his head. "That is not tradition. Everyone must hear, especially the accused."

"They'll still understand. She'll just translate."

"Translate what?" Der lifted an eyebrow.

There was murmuring among the elves.

Der leaned back toward Kelin. "You know, I don't think we're reading from the same book anymore, here. I mean, I know elves are supposed to be arrogant, but to expect that we know their *language*. Are they serious?"

He shrugged helplessly.

The second woman said something in elvish, and another heated argument erupted. They bickered for several minutes before finally turning back to the accused with upset faces, and most of them looking expectantly at Der as if waiting for her to speak.

"So, you don't know?" Sir Jakkobb asked after a moment of dumbfounded silence.

She and Kelin exchanged confused looks. He whispered, "I have no idea what they're talking about."

"You don't speak our tongue?" the duchess queried.

Der snorted. "Obviously not, but I'm perplexed why you would expect me to."

"Then you don't know."

"I already said that."

"No." An awkward silence floated in the air. "Do you not know your heritage?"

"Yes, I do. My family's from Riversbridge."

The graceful elf said softly, "You are part elven, one sixteenth, which isn't much at all, but most other people like you still at least know the language. That means one of your great-great grandparents was one of us."

Der's eyes shot wide, and she retreated a step, only to trip over a root and fall hard on her tailbone. She didn't notice. She gaped up at the judges. "That's not amusing."

" 'Tis the truth."

She fired her gaze to Kelin, who was just as shocked as she was. He offered her a hand up.

"Not true," she muttered, reaching for her head. "I have rounded ears."

"With noticeable, well, notches, and you have the cheekbones," Jakkobb said awkwardly. "Push your hair back."

She complied. The back top corner of her ear actually was slightly pointed, but the ear still rounded over it. It wasn't noticeable unless someone knew specifically what to look for. She ran a finger over them, but felt nothing special.

Kelin offered a sympathetic smile. "It's not a bad thing, Der."

"Then why didn't Ka – the prince say anything?"

Sir Amthros shrugged. "Many potential reasons. Possibly because the way your hair is and his recent trauma, that could've clouded his mind."

Duke Farallon threw up his hands. "So much for protocol. I suppose now it is discourse. We are still having a trial here, my lords and ladies."

Sir Jakkobb nodded stiffly. "Yes, we are. Now, I would like to hear the details of how they engineered their escape. That is the most elusive part of their tale for me."

Der still rubbed the tips of her ears. "What? Oh, right."

Kelin glanced down and around. The impact of the question took him back in time. He would have been a journeyman blacksmith. The chemmen would still be a myth. He looked back up to the knight with red-ringed eyes. "They tortured us. We didn't know where the other was, and I don't know how long... and they tortured us. They took my teeth." He grabbed his chest over his lung. Starting to wheeze, he stuttered, "And then, this chemman came and picked me up and then there was Der out in the corridor... and we ran."

"So, the young Saxen met this mysterious chemman savior first?" the red knight mused.

Der nodded. "Aye. My tormentors had returned, and I," she petered out for the moment. She looked back up at the judges. "I killed them. I think I threw a bottle of acid into one's face – I'm not sure. Then, the chemman – the one who helped us – just showed up and saved us. He led us to the outside, and there was Laurel."

"Oh, right, they just escaped!" the duke exclaimed. "Does anyone honestly believe this?"

Sir Jakkobb shrugged. "Is that all? Did he even give you a name? Or did Laurel?"

They muted shook their heads. He had just been the chemman that had aided them. Apparently, that had a bigger impact than they thought.

"Were there any sentry or guards that he instructed you to avoid?"

"Well, there was one. I killed him," Der said.

Kelin held out his hands. "And, then, when we were hiding in the forest."

"Why were you not recaptured by the storm-readers?" the duchess asked.

"I don't know, my lady."

Der frowned. "I remember Laurel saying something about asking the forest to hide us, but I don't fully understand what she meant."

"Forest sanctuary," the strawberry blond elf sang. "If she hadn't been expecting any humans, she would have simply asked the forest to obscure them from chemmen. Not mortals, which would explain how the cultists got through."

"I still don't believe it," Farallon snarled. "They're not even wounded as if they'd been tortured."

"Come now, my lord duke," intoned the duchess, "Healing salves have saved many a mortal wound."

He snorted. "Perhaps, wife, but they do not behave as if they'd been tortured. I've seen the results of what the chemmen have done to men – good, strong, seasoned warriors. People who have survived the chemmen are afraid of their own shadows, and yet, these two mortals walk away smiling!"

"I am not smiling!" Der balled a fist and stepped forward. She tottered. There were dark circles beneath her eyes and she seemed paler than before. "I am in pain and I am dying." She suddenly found herself struggling to stand. Her wounds felt like they had been dipped in acid once again. "And I choose to face it on my feet."

The duke shook his head furiously. "Don't you see it? They were made to escape. They're agents of the chemmen."

Sir Amthros raised his hand. "Perhaps, but they appear not to know. If they are unaware, then, they are innocent as far as this trial is concerned."

"And a chemman would not aid an elf," Farallon snapped. "The story doesn't make sense."

The knight continued, "I agree that elements of their tale don't make sense, but that doesn't mean they are guilty of aiding the enemy."

"But, they're mortals! She didn't even know her heritage!" the duke spat.

"Let us not resort to personal attacks," Sir Amthros said.

"But, it is personal!" Der jerked her thumb at her throat. "It's our necks."

For a very brief instant, she thought she saw the knight-captain's mouth quirk.

"Yes, that is true," the knight of Arborn said. "Where's your evidence of your tale?"

"I'm not lying."

"I never accused you of that."

"Oh," formed on her mouth and she deflated.

Farallon slapped his knee with a loud crack. "The clever *bastards*! Their escape was impossible! They let them go. They could be watching us right now. It's why they didn't capture them in the forest."

"The chemmen have no traitors," the duchess declared softly. "If they met one that helped them, it was only to further their endgame."

"But, they had a child," Der pleaded. "That doesn't make sense either!"

"It doesn't matter!" the duke nearly shouted. He didn't look at the pair, but instead to the rest of the council. "Even if they are unwitting, they still could be a danger to us. This is war, my lords and ladies."

Sir Jakkobb held up his hands. "Their story may or may not be true. They have no one to vouch for them." The knight-captain's face was stern, a perfect physical mirror of his tone of voice.

Der said, "Uh, the prince. Obviously."

Everyone stared at Derora, including Kelin and especially Duke Farallon. She glanced around. "What?" She raised both of her eyebrows. "We met the prince, so he could –"

Farallon coughed. "How dare you say that!"

"Would you stop interrupting me?" She balled her fists and glared. "He was my friend, alright? I'm asking after my friend."

As everyone watched, the duke's face metamorphosed into a very interesting shade of red and then purple. He gasped like he just emerged from drowning. "Do you not understand that you are trial for your miserable life?"

She took a very deliberate step toward him. "Oh? So, you'd execute me because you don't like the way I talk to you? Sounds like to me that you've already decided so it doesn't matter what I say." She felt herself teetering on the edge of a very high cliff. "You call this a trial? Out here in nowhere? I admit that I don't know very much, but maybe that's a good thing, because it seems to me, my lord duke, that you know too much." She had fallen over the cliff and found that she could fly. Perhaps it was due to the fact that she was dying, but she was too busy soaring on the wings of audacity to feel it. "This little theater show of a trial ain't what's important." She looked around to all the judges. "Excuse me? What's important is saving your prince's life! You claim that it's your duty to serve the prince, and you're threatening to execute us." She spat at the duke's feet. "So, if you're in such a rush, just get this trial over with and move along!"

Kelin slammed his hand over his mouth. "Der!"

In the silence that shook the forest around them, Sir Amthros began to applaud. He nodded to her and another intense conversation in elvish shot off like an arrow. An eerie sensation flowed around them as they listened. No one shouted, but everyone spoke urgently and took equal turns in the conversation.

Kelin grabbed her arm. "You just guard that tongue. You may be dying, but the worst can still happen to me!"

Her mouth hung open. "I – you'll be alright."

"They may not decide that, and I don't want to repeat this trial in front of the gods, alright? I want to live!"

The argument stopped. The elves turned back to face them. The knight-captain's tone was tempered patience. "You have not lied. Your tale is strange, and a larger truth may yet be found, but for now your lives will be spared. You both are now prisoners of my order of the Silver Dawn Dragoon Knights."

Kelin sagged with relief and Der managed to exhale. She said, "Laurel was trying to find you. She said she had a message and that she was trying to save innocent lives."

"Perhaps," he said indifferently, "But, that is out of your influence. Take what is given to you."

She shook her head. "This isn't justice."

"You're right," the knight-captain replied. "It's war."

Chapter Twelve

Elvish Internment

"Young Saxen!" She whirled to see Sir Jakkobb standing astride the massive black horse.

She felt herself rise onto the balls of her feet. "Yes, sir – my lord?"

"You look pretty bad there, kid."

She shrugged.

The horse snorted and tossed its mane. The knight shot the mount a sharp look.

"No," he said. "You look bad, child. And, we've seen plenty of bad." He thumped the steed on his shoulder.

She shrugged again while her eyes were drawn to the black warhorse. "So, sir, why does your horse run with unicorns? I wouldn't think they'd..."

He rolled his eyes. "Because he thinks he's a stud." He dodged a heavy hoof that just happened to stamp down right toward his foot. He saw Der's blank expression. "You know, a male horse that mates."

"Oh."

He walked toward her. "I see that look on your face. I see it all the time on the recruits' faces back at the fortress – you're lost."

She retreated a couple steps. "I'm not, I'm just, uh, exploring the camp."

He chuckled and she swore the horse sniggered. "Fine. What are you 'exploring' for?"

"The surgeon's tent. One of the, um, guards told me that I was supposed to go."

"Oh." The knight's face twisted as if he'd eaten too sour a lemon. "Peyna." He glanced at her expression. "Don't worry, he just doesn't like mortals or warriors or, well, everyone."

"Does anyone around here?"

"Thanks," he replied dryly. He put a huge hand on her shoulder and spun her around. "Peyna's tent is that one over there, next to the big spruce. See it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Be careful. If you set off any mental sparks, his head'll catch fire."

"He's hot headed?" she ventured.

"No, just hasn't had an original thought in twelve hundred years, so his mind is like dry firewood. I don't think he'd left Long Range in a few centuries. Hell, only the total desertion of the palace evicted him. He's not happy about it."

"Thank you, sir. I'll be going now." Her pace wasn't quite as self assured anymore. The surgeon's tent was a giant square far larger than the other tents around the camp. Somehow, it wasn't what she expected. The whole camp wasn't what she expected. She honestly didn't know what she had expected, but it wasn't this. Elves weren't supposed to travel like, well, normal people. She wasn't sure if she'd thought they'd have special collapsible buildings or something, but not ordinary-looking tents. They didn't even have decorations on them. They were just tents and campfires and horses. It was too normal.

She looked up at the dark, looming tent in front of her. She took a deep breath. "Sir? Is anyone there? Master surgeon? Master, um, Peyna?"

The tent flap flew open and Der stared up at the tall, stiff-faced elf. He had frozen green eyes and thin black hair. "Use the word physician, please, it exists in the Common language."

She stared. "Uh, yes, sir."

"Well, come in." He turned away, not even holding the flap up for her to step inside.

She pushed through the folds of the cloth. Expecting the interior of the tent to be muggy, she gasped a little to find that she could breathe so easily. Glancing around, she saw netting sewn into the sides of the tent and the breeze flowed through quite seamlessly.

She also saw two cots beside a low table with knives and other various tools neatly arranged on it. She gently lifted up one of the tiny black blades. "Is this..." She ran her finger across the edge. "Is this *glass*?"

"Put that down!" the physician snapped. Startled, she did so. He straightened his shirt as if patting down ruffled feathers. "And yes, they are actually. Obsidian. It's a volcanic glass, and it is and sharper than any steel blade. However," he glared at her, "It is also quite fragile."

"Oh, what's it for?"

He sniffed. "I have to cut away the dead and damaged skin around your wounds. What did you think, child?"

Der had never whimpered in a fight, at least, that's what she wanted to believe, but she felt herself wince right there. She tried to cover her arms. "But, I'm rather attached to my skin."

"It's dying, child, and so are you," Peyna quipped. "So, you will let me get rid of it. I will save your life, and I'd prefer if you didn't argue with me about it. I know what I'm doing."

She slid behind a cot. "But, I don't know what you're doing!" She backed away further, but he followed. The physician thrust a hand atop her head. He spoke a single word and she fainted onto the cot.

"No! No! Are we going to have mushroom patties? I want cooked mushrooms." The cook pulled Kelin back with surprising strength for her slender build. He stumbled away from the fire, nearly tripping over a loose rock.

"Sorry!" He dropped the spatula. She caught it before it fell three inches.

The cook distractedly waved a hand behind her strawberry blond locks. With fingers that danced, the most graceful woman lifted the spatula and pried the mushrooms off the base of the pan. Kelin leaned around her shoulder to see the food she repaired. He had been smashing the mushrooms onto the skillet. She turned toward him and flashed a tired smile. "I've fixed it."

"Sorry..." He blushed and looked down. He ran his tongue over his teeth again. It still amazed him at how it was anything but an elaborate process for them. He had been convinced he'd have to spend the rest of his life speaking slowly and eating only soups. But, the physician had given him something to swish around his mouth and then spit. It tasted horrible, but instantly, he'd felt movement beneath his gums. He'd been handed a miracle by a man who'd passed it off like it was a damp rag. They didn't even hurt now, and it'd only been six hours.

She shook her head and grinned impishly. "I don't know how you survive. Can't even heat mushrooms." Her voice was like velvet and silk with no accent to impede the enunciation of her words.

He wheezed a small smile back. His shoulders dropped and he sighed. He found that his shoulders weren't so tight anymore. Maybe it was because he'd escaped with his life twice in as many days or maybe it was merely the fact that Der wasn't around for the moment. He would kiss the sandals of Ahtome if she could keep out of trouble. "Somebody else usually cooked. And it wasn't fancy food."

She chuckled. "This isn't fancy. This is camp food. We have to feed everyone, not astound them."

"It's fancier than anything I've ever eaten." He sighed again, picking up the spatula and tried to be useful. "I didn't know prisoners had to work."

She shuffled back to work too. "You've obviously never been a prisoner before." Up close, her blue eyes were brighter than before. They were gems, and sparkled like a sapphire's reflection. They weren't round like most people's eyes, instead they were multi-faceted like a diamond. It begged the question of why the camp cook was presiding in his trial with obviously high ranked nobility.

He liked the cook, he couldn't help it. She was the most beautiful face he'd ever seen, intelligent, more graceful than a doe. Yet, here she was, the camp cook.

He didn't know what to think of her. Of course, he never expected to find himself a prisoner of a totally mythological race and then by elves. He didn't dare think about the events of the past few days. He was here. He was alive.

He was also no journeyman blacksmith any more. He'd wanted to be. While his best friend had been dreaming of poems and ballads, he'd quietly imagined, with extensive detail, his own forge. He wondered what his wife would look like and if his children would look like him. Riversbridge would be perfect, but Sigard worked there. However, there were a dozen small villages that the only difference was the name. That was what he always wanted he told himself.

He wasn't certain he'd ever wanted a life where adventure tugged at the corner of his soul. Not like Der, anyway. She never thought about things, she just charged ahead. It was always left to him to think about things and pay –

"Attention to the food!" The cook hurled several leaves of lettuce onto his head.

Kelin blinked stupidly. The mushrooms were burning again.

Sir Jakkobb glanced down at the lettuce ricocheting off his armor. "So, supper will be late then?"

"Ah." Kelin gently put down the spatula. How had such a large man walk up so quietly? That defied reason, he thought.

"What are you doing here, sir knight?" the cook asked, brushing a thick curl from her face.

The knight-captain grinned. "Well, my lady, I just wanted to see what was for dinner."

"Right," she replied. "I was not expecting you, since you haven't taken the time to have a conversation with me on this journey yet."

His grin froze. "Uh. Now, my lady, a knight is always busy."

The cook rolled her sapphire eyes.

Kelin suddenly tried to focus on heating the mushrooms with all his might. But, the dragoon saved him by slapping him on the back. As big as he was, he barely absorbed the blow. "So, how is this prisoner doing?"

He grunted. "I thought prisoners were supposed to be tied up and under guard."

The knight uncorked a huge grin. "Not mine. They work. And, if you want to run away, please, I'm sure some animals in the Altice Domain could use a meal or two." He looked up and down at the boy. "Or maybe a whole week."

"Hey –"

"Speaking of working." He beckoned into the shadows.

From around a tree, Thalon inched toward them. His orange eyes roved nervously. Jakkobb beckoned again, stronger this time. He said proudly, "A dishwasher."

"Thalon!" Kelin dropped down to one knee.

"Kelin!" The boy tried to tackle his knees. "Kelin!"

The bigger man hugged him. "I'm so glad you're safe."

"But, the red knight stuck me inside this tent and it was dark and I couldn't leave."

Jakkobb coughed. "It was for your own good."

"Well, you certainly could have left the child a lantern," the cook chided. She snatched the boy's hands. "Now, let's get you to work. You too, Kelin."

"But –"

"Now." She tapped a spoon against her hand. Her euphonious voice was in stark contrast with her eyes, and Kelin ducked his head, took Thalon's hand and walked him over to the makeshift cooking area.

"Of course, my lady," the knight replied to thinning air as everyone went back to work.

"Here." The cook smiled gently and pushed the child in front of a tub of water. "There's a rag and some soap."

The boy lifted up a very thin wooden plate, and dropped it when it folded in two.

The cook laughed, and it felt like they were standing in a rain of rose petals. She picked up the plate and folded it back out. "They're meant to do that, little one. See? They fold in half so they travel better."

Kelin chuckled. "I always was under the impression that elves ate on silver and gold."

Jakkobb stepped up behind them. "No." He raised an eyebrow. "Where did you get such an idea? Someone would have to be in a very odd situation to be eating on silver on the trail."

Thalon dropped his eyes and snatched the washrag. He began scrubbing furiously.

"Yeah," Kelin replied. His eyes were focused elsewhere. "Out here in the wilderness. It feels like I'm in an entirely different world."

The knight-captain shrugged. "We're not actually too far from your city. Second Acron."

"What? We're not? But, there were unicorns and chemmen and –"

"Oh yes."

He felt cold all over suddenly. "How could the chemmen be so close?"

"They can be as close as they want if you don't believe they exist."

He shivered. "The chemmen have been in the Wild Lands all this time?"

"No," a small voice piped up. Thalon met their eyes. "My dad told me that they were all locked away. Out of this world, so we were safe." Thalon carefully set down a dish.

The cook knelt down astride the child. "Yes, they were. They couldn't hurt you. They couldn't hurt anyone."

"My dad said they couldn't get out!" He threw a plate down into the bin of water.

Jakkobb sighed. "I suppose they found a way. They were always maliciously inventive."

Kelin said, "I thought I knew history very well, and I didn't even know the chemmen were real."

"I'm not surprised," the knight replied. "Much of history, especially to humans, was lost in the fall of the Empire of Pallens – and the chemmen's death marches marched right on into oblivion."

"What happened? Laurel told us some, but..."

"The Centum Wars? Let me guess, you really only know about the War of Hell on Earth and the fall of Pallens?"

Kelin nodded dumbly. The only Centum Wars he'd never heard about were the War of Hell on Earth and the fall of Pallens. He'd never heard of the Pallens Front War before he'd met Laurel. But, that's why they were called the Centum Wars, because there were about one hundred of them. He hung his head, because he only knew the last two. It didn't seem fair that this was all he knew.

"Millions died, especially the humans and the dwarves. You know, the dwarves didn't usually live in the mountains until after the Wars. That may explain why there was that ancient, rotting fortress that you said the chemmen were hidden in." He frowned. "Then again, it may have been human-made, but there weren't too many human kingdoms on this continent until the fall of Pallens." He shrugged. "Perhaps a kingdom tried to expand too far into these lands and the forest is reclaiming it."

"Dad said there were monsters out here," Thalon said.

"That's right, lad. There are monsters out here – not as many as there used to be."

"Like dragons?" Kelin asked.

The knight shook his head. "No, them too – out by the mountains. There used to be raptors everywhere though. But, I haven't seen one of them since before the end of the Wars."

"What were raptors?" Kelin racked his brain, but had never heard of such a beast.

"Um." Jakkobb raised his hand. "My height, hunted in packs. Very ruthless. Very intelligent. Not something you'll ever have to worry about, but there are other monsters in these lands; you're very fortunate not to have encountered them. We won't now, we've got, ah, special protection. Not even the storm-readers can find us."

Kelin sighed in relief. "Why are they called the storm-readers too? I thought that's because they could create storms, but apparently, that's not true."

The cook answered, "Because they see the subtleties lost to the human eye. They see best in the gray light of dawn and dusk, and of course, before a storm."

Thalon sighed and dropped his orange eyes. "My mother always said it was a special talent that I could always see into the shadows." He looked up; his emotion was as bright as the stars in his broken eyes. "I want my mother back!"

This time, Der woke up in a bushel of blankets. It was soft and warm and hugging her, unlike the times before. Outside the bugs were humming. Several flames were burning in the tent, and she smelled the cool night air outside. She inhaled deeply, and then immediately flinched, and gasped when there was no pain. No, she told herself, there was not none, but it was so much less. A headache mostly.

"You are well." The physician sat in the open entrance to the tent, a mug of tea in his hand. His voice was drawn and his skin was pale in the full moonlight. "You've missed much time, child. Events have occurred."

She tried to lift a trembling hand. It felt like an anvil. "Am I...?"

"You are well, child." He took a long draught. "You didn't yet understand what they had done to you. You didn't even feel the pain."

"Hey, I was in pain."

He shook his head. "No, not when you know exactly how you were dying. The acid had actually numbed what could have been pain beyond your imagination. It was... extensive. However, I am extremely competent." He took another sip. "I also removed your scars. All of them."

"Uh, even the one I got when I chased that bear? And when I say chased... well, it was about half and half."

Peyna just rolled his eyes. "I don't understand how you warriors can be so attached to them."

"Uh, because we can't rub them out." Her head was spinning and felt like it had been trod on by a large hoof. It hurt, but it wasn't all over. Everything else just felt heavy.

"Elvish skin doesn't scar – except in very rare circumstances. You're part elf, one sixteenth exactly, so that helped. You shouldn't ever suffer from poor eyesight or pain in your bones until you are very old." He snorted into his tea. "If you live that long."

"Huh?" She rubbed her arms again. "So, this is it? I'm cured?"

"Are you questioning my work?"

She shrugged. "Well, the other elf couldn't do anything."

"The one who had the bastard child?" He snorted. "She was no healer. I am a master. Do you understand the difference?"

She shrugged again. "Alright, I guess that's that. Anything else, oh master?" She rolled her eyes.

He set down the mug. "I also gave you our language. Since it appears that you will be spending time with us it will be invaluable. It will take your mouth some time to learn the correct pronunciation."

"Uh, what?" She blinked, and then blinked again. "I know elvish now?"

"What language do you think you're speaking?" He casually took a sip.

Der was too dumbfounded to respond. Then, she dropped her head in her hands. She felt if she didn't, it was going to roll off. Her skull pounded as if she'd been hit over the head with warhammer. It seemed to hurt worse now that everything else didn't ache. Shakily, she sat up, but almost lost her balance in a rush of dizziness.

"Lie down, girl, you'll still need your rest. I'll have the cook bring up something."

She sat, still clinging to her head. "Wh –" She swallowed and tried again. "Why does it hurt?" Her voice was a croak.

He rose and walked into his tent. "Drink this." He sat a small waterskin on the edge of the cot. "You'll feel better, not well, but better."

"Why does it hurt? Healing's not supposed to hurt." She sipped the cool, sweet water.

"You'll find it often hurts more before you heal." He sat down on the opposite cot. Shadows rimmed his eyes. "Your head feels pain because I had to scour your body, like cleaning rust out of cooking pot. The chemmen are damned thorough when they decide to damage someone." He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Never you mind. Now, I shall send for something for you to eat. Food will help much more than that drink."

"No."

"No?" he snapped, sounding much more like he did when she first met him. "Girl, you have to eat."

"Don't send for it." She managed to swing her legs over the edge of the cot. "I'll go get it."

She didn't answer him, but struggled to snatch her boots.

He threw his hands wide in exasperation. "Don't come back here if you scrape your knees when you fall."

"Thank you," she said as politely as she could and staggered for the tent's exit. Once outside, she leaned against a tree. Her vision wasn't steady and clenched her jaw. Her goal was to make it to the cook's, and that was all that mattered in the world right now. Der moved in a calculated lurch to the next point she could hold onto something for balance. Her feet slipped and squelched in the ankle deep mud, and she nearly fell several times. Her stomach jumped in protest and she was prepared to see lunch again.

The next time she fell, she found herself staring into a murky stream. She dipped her hands in and scrubbed her face. The water still felt fresh and chilly. The cool sensation renewed some of the energy she knew she had lost. When she windmilled into the cooking area, she nearly collapsed over Kelin. She pointed uncoordinatedly to herself. She paused for a long moment to make sure she was speaking Common. "Food."

She thought in elvish and had to translate into Common. She could *think* in another language! She suddenly realized she could read it too. Symbols flashed across her mind. Elvish had a complicated writing system – an alphabet of forty some letters, and then a separate syllabury. She didn't even know what a syllabury was! It made her head pound all the more.

"You looked like the walking dead out there, Der," Kelin said. "Are you alright?"

"Better 'n ever," she mumbled.

"Derora!" Thalor dropped his dish and trotted over her. "You're better?"

She nodded dumbly.

He wrapped his arms around her legs. She ruffled his hair and smiled, feeling oddly comforted by a familiar face. She was surprised by how familiar the boy's face was, especially because she'd met him merely a day before all of the elves. Of course, he would look at her when he spoke. She bent down and returned the hug.

"You look more alive," a sweet voice introduced itself. Der looked up to see the cook gliding toward them with a steaming bowl of creamy soup in her hands.

She proffered the dish. "You and Kelin take your time to eat. You too, Thalor."

Der felt herself flush in sheer wonderment just at the woman's voice. It wasn't just musical, it was a full orchestra with singers. "Great. Uh, thank you." She sagged.

Kelin scooped up the bowl in one hand and Der in the other. He helped her to a seat alongside the trees. "Der, you're not looking better. How do you feel?"

"Bad," she managed.

"Ah." He grinned. "A definite sign of recovery."

She collapsed like a foal with unsure legs. There were a few others already eating in the area, she recognized the captain, the duke and then some other elves. They weren't sitting near them and no one glanced in their direction.

He set himself down beside Derora, and stuck a spoon in his mouth. The meat and spices melted together in his mouth and sweet poems sprang to mind. He wouldn't be upset if the chemmen killed them now as long as he was eating. This simple stew was heaven in a bowl.

Thalor nodded encouragingly and dug greedily into the stew.

Der sighed into her bowl. "Do you think elves believe in an afterlife or reincarnation or anything like that? I mean, they're immortal, but they seem to be dying a lot." She frowned. "Thalor, did your parents ever say anything?"

He shook his head. "No, that's adult stuff."

Kelin felt the joyous taste in his mouth turn to compost. "That's a horrible thing to ponder, Der."

She stirred the spoon absently. "It's a comfort to us, saying that there's a better life after this one? Are we just lying to make ourselves feel less afraid?"

"Um." The big man shrugged.

Thalor dropped his spoon. "Mother never spoke of death. But, I saw... nothing happens. They just lie there."

Kelin gripped the lad's shoulder. "I'm so sorry that you had to see all that."

"But, we never died, Mother said we never would."

Der looked everywhere except the boy. "So, uh, I think Kaleb – the prince – is alright. I think they'd be angrier if he wasn't, so he must be safe somewhere."

Kelin frowned. "Mayhap. But, they're elves, Der. They're not going to act like us."

She shrugged. "Not from what I've seen."

"Of course, it may also explain why you act like such a freak on occasion."

"What?"

He pointed to her ear. "You. They said that you were part elven."

She shook her head. "It's not my fault."

He found himself grinning just a little bit as he closed his eyes. "I can see it too. Your mother. She is the most beautiful woman in Riversbridge – in the whole county."

"Kelin!" Der punched him in the shoulder. Hard.

"Well, you're feeling better. What? Why are you angry at me? I'm not the one who said it first. What? Stop staring at me. It's not like I think about your mother, Der! I'm just supporting what you're saying. Yes, I think your mother is part elf." He rammed another spoonful into his mouth.

"Yeah, maybe, but –"

"But, you'll learn that you won't get sick as easily, you'll heal better and live longer. How is that bad?" a towering, commanding voice passed over their heads. They looked up to see the immense form of the knight-captain.

"Well, I am human. I grew up being human."

"Yeah, tell me about it," he sighed, taking a seat beside them. "Elves are weird."

"Um." All three of them took turns staring at him and then each other.

"Uh," Der marshaled her words first. "You're one of them."

He laughed deeply, the friction rubbing loudly in his throat. "You noticed that all by yourself, didn't you?"

She closed one eye. "You're too normal."

"You may still call me sir."

"That sounds like just like my dad," Thalon said.

"Fine," she replied evenly, still with one eye closed. "You're too normal, sir."

His face lit up in a grin. "I don't know whether to be insulted or not. I'm everything but normal, *especially* by elven standards."

She nodded. "Aye, that's it. So, why are you the outsider too?"

His grin slid into a more cautious expression. "I'm not from around here."

She looked at him like a five year old who knows she's being treated like a child and doesn't want to be.

"Why should I tell you?" he asked.

"I asked."

He blinked.

Kelin coughed into his hand. "She's usually like this, sir."

He chuckled. "I gathered. Alright, since you asked. I was born to the nomadic elves of the north – way north – where we are taller than the southern elves. I joined the army at a young age and not by choice, originally. I was forced to kill people who had done me no wrong."

Her eyes and mouth formed three 'O's on her face. "Oh. Damn."

"Yes, next time, don't ask. You might get an answer."

She grunted.

Kelin took another bite of his stew, and said through a full mouth, "Elves aren't nomadic. I heard that they build cities and huge, legendary palaces, like Long Range Palace!"

He rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Out of the four of us, who do you think knows more about elves?"

"Yes, sir," he ceded.

"Oh, don't let him bully you." The cook smiled softly as she arrived on velvet feet from behind. She took a seat next to Thalon.

"Oh, this food is wonderful, my lady!" Kelin exclaimed.

"Well, you helped make it."

"Yes, well... this is incredible!" He grinned and nearly overturned his plate. "This is absolutely divine!"

Her hand snapped out and corrected his plate. "Then, don't feed it to the ground."

Jakkobb hid a grin behind his hand. "You know, my lady, that's usually the reaction soldiers have to your food."

"Yes, and it was yours too, I recall."

He coughed. "In my defense, it is amazing food." He coughed again. "So, Derora, what do you think?"

She narrowed her eyes, which started to glow brighter than they had in days. "I'm actually wondering why the camp cook was at our trial."

He sighed. "I meant about the food, kid."

"Oh."

Thalon finished off his bowl. He looked up to the cook, who smiled as gracefully as a flight of doves.

"Thank you."

Kelin stared down onto his plate. "Der's not wrong though. No offense, my lady, but why is the cook presiding on our life and death trial?"

"With high ranked nobility, like," Der injected.

"Are you something special?" the boy asked.

"Everyone's special," she replied. "And no, I'm just the cook."

Jakkobb's gaze flickered to the cook and then he quickly smiled. "Because her cooking is worth her being a judge." He leaned in and put a hand up to his mouth. "She might not cook for us if we didn't indulge her a little bit."

Der stared at him with a flat face and one eyebrow raised.

The cook chuckled with the tinkle of bells. "I know that our ways must seem strange to you, and it's difficult to explain. Please, call me Eve."

Der did not relinquish the raised eyebrow. "Yes, my lady."

"It is an honor to know your name." Kelin ducked his head.

"Yes, and now we're becoming friends." Her smile melted their defenses. "I'm curious, is Common the only language you know?"

Kelin was quicker to respond. "Yes, 'tis."

"Times have changed, haven't they?" She nodded to Jakkobb. "I remember when each little kingdom of humans had its own language, not so long ago. I'll say it's easier to speak with them now."

"I remember my grandmother speaking Common," Der said.

The cook laughed and shook her head. "I'm talking about the last of the Centum Wars, dear. That was before your grandmother's time, I'm sure."

"It depends," the knight mused, "One of her grandparents was quarter elven. Not the Wars, of course, but longer than humans live, easily."

"But, the wars ended two thousand years ago," Kelin protested.

"It's because of the Wars that Common was invented, actually," Jakkobb said. "Back then, most petty kingdoms and fragmented states were barely in contact with their neighbors and they each had their own languages. Common was created to give everyone the ability to communicate. Many places still have their own languages, but not Thealith or Alscane, or whatever other kingdom's there now too. Palls is still used a lot too, I think."

"Palls?" Der repeated. "What's Palls?"

"Language of the paladin empire."

"Oh, Pallens. Right, that makes sense."

The cook's eyes faded to focus on a distant destination. "I wonder what the world would've been like today if Pallens hadn't been slain."

Kelin coughed. "You're referring to Pallens and King Midan being killed by the Blackhound, right?"

"Correct," the cook replied.

"So, why do we speak Common instead of something else?" Der asked.

The cook smiled. "Because of the Wars. There was a desperate need for communication between various races and even humans who had no one language."

"You mean there aren't other languages between the elves?" Kelin asked.

Eve shrugged. "There are dialects. I think the captain here actually grew up speaking northern elvish, but it's not too distant from the usual. On the other side of the coin, human languages and a few other races, like halflings, vary incredibly. *Everyone* needed to communicate. All the races, and all the different speakers within them. Palls was used as the medium for a very long time, but along with it was the symbolic power of Pallens, and some people felt in using it they were submitting to the Empire. Thus, Common was created from many various other languages. It hasn't changed much in the past two thousand years either. It has to remain stable because if it changes, we would lose the wide communication path between the all the peoples. Sometimes, like your antecedents, people just kept on speaking it and they lost their original in the end. Common is useful because quite often peoples won't speak for four hundred years, and it's nice to just be able to communicate instantly."

"That's incredible," Kelin said. "And it's so logical too."

"Yes," the cook grinned, standing. "Thank you for listening, it's pleasant to find humans who will hear their own history without argument."

He blushed and stammered his thanks.

Thalon held up his bowl. "More please."

"Of course." She took the child's hand. "Come with me." She paused and looked intently at Derora.

"Why don't we just speak two languages then?" Der frowned.

The cook smiled. "You're more full of questions than you are food, eat." She sighed and pushed some of her curls away from her face. "A cook's duties are never done until the meal is over. Most people think we just have to cook it." She paused, and her sapphire eyes unfocused. She gazed thoughtfully at Der. "I wish you could've met my son. He was just a little older than you when... Well, I'm sure you would've gotten along famously." She took Thalon's hand and retreated back to the cooking fires.

Der sat up straight. "Wha —"

"Sometimes she says things," the knight-captain interrupted quietly. "Even she doesn't know exactly what they mean. Don't worry about it."

Her frown deepened. "I'm sorry, sir, but something about her —"

"Derora." His voice creaked over thin ice.

She sighed and picked up her spoon.

Jakkobb said, "There's a lot more history to it, actually."

"Uh," Kelin said into the sudden stillness. "So, are you a soldier or a scholar, sir?"

"What?" He chuckled slightly. "Do you want war stories?"

"Yes!" Der blurted, a little more enthusiastically than she intended.

"Maybe later." He chuckled.

"Since they want war stories, why not tell them about the one they're in?" a deeper voice slid out of the shadows. Sir Amthros stepped into the light.

Jakkobb dropped into elvish. Der stared at the ground, trying to keep her face blank. He asked, "Where have you been?"

The other knight shrugged. "I had some business to attend."

Jakkobb shrugged before turning back to his two new charges. "Well, what do you know about this war already?"

"Not much," Der replied. "We know the king and queen are dead. Kaleb said his parents were murdered, and if he's the prince..."

Jakkobb nodded and sighed. "Yes. Tragedy that we can't even comprehend. That's why Long Range Palace was emptied and everyone fled."

"Long Range!" Kelin squeaked. "*The Long Range Palace!* I've heard so many legends."

Sir Amthros's eyes darkened. "I'm sure you have, but none of them like this."

"No, except for the song of Mendelin, everyone returns happily to the palace at the end of a war or grand adventure."

Thalon interrupted, "Because, it's like heaven, it's perfect and nothing can go wrong there."

Der swallowed. "I only know the song of Mendelin — that's the one where the prince dies, right?"

Jakkobb nodded. "Yes, but that's more of a story than fact. And, ah, with the way things are happening, let's not talk about dying princes. Yes, Kelin, Long Range was magically guarded and the chemmen invaded it nevertheless. The king and queen murdered. We have nothing to compare. I still can't believe it." He stared at his plate for a long moment. "Evacuating Long Range scattered the elves. Silver Dawn, my order, was called, and so here I am. Now, we are gathering ourselves together to fight."

Not even Der said anything, but her eyes were wide with imagination.

Amthros ducked his head. "That was our most sacred ground, and they defiled it with ease. Do you comprehend how impossible and wicked that is?"

The villagers shook their heads.

He sighed. "It would be hard to explain. Besides, it isn't truly your concern anyway." He rose. "Please excuse me, I have duties to attend." He nodded to them and departed. Without anything to say, they turned back to eating. Behind them, the elvish conversation among the duke and his entourage rose to new levels.

Der looked up at the knight. "So, well, why don't you just attack them back?"

The other conversation froze. A few crickets chirped in the background.

Jakkobb shook his head. "Hush, Derora. You're not running this war." He glanced at the duke across the way. When the others had turned away, he almost whispered, "It's not that simple. I don't think you understand the depth over which you're treading water."

"But —"

The duke snapped off a loud comment in elvish to the people around him. They agreed in loud voices and paused to glare in the direction of the three. Der growled in the back of her throat, and stared right back through narrow slits. "Captain, they're talking about us. What are they saying?" She strained, but they were beyond her hearing.

Jakkobb set down his plate. "They're calling you typical humans — that means ignorant or stupid, depending on their mood. You easily fell for the chemmen ruse, you didn't know you're part elf, and he's calling me a fool for explaining things to you. But, I'm in command of you, so things are going to be done my way."

Der tensed to rise, but a massive hand slammed her shoulder down. Food jumped and sprayed all over her face and shirt. She blinked in surprise, wiping a mushroom off her eye.

He kept looking at his own plate. "Learn to fight better first, and then learn *when* to fight."

Kelin stared glumly at his food, and waited for the inevitable confrontation. But, he didn't hear Der's outburst. Slowly, he looked at his friend. "You're not..."

Der rubbed her shoulder and whispered, "I think he'll break something if I try it again."

Jakkobb snickered into his food.

She leaned over and lowered the whisper to conspiratorial levels. "So, we have to take him out first."

The knight grinned. "Just try it."

"Kelin, you're getting along with the cook, I just need you to give everyone food poi –"

"That's it," Jakkobb interrupted. "Finish up. You've got some camp chores to do."

"We do?" Kelin asked surprised.

"Yes, I just need to go and find out what they are." He didn't move to get up yet, but instead attacked his plate with his fork.

Kelin smacked Der on the arm. "Thanks for that."

She shrugged. "Well, he would've given them to us anyway."

"You know that he is not letting you get away with your tricks."

She stuffed some food into her mouth, and then asked, "What tricks? You know he can hear everything we're saying."

The captain pretended to ignore them.

"Just you – what you do."

She offered what she thought was a helpful grin. "Could you explain it a little more?"

"I don't know," he said bitterly. Then he realized that his was the only voice to be heard. He glanced up nervously, clutching and accidentally tipping his plate. When the duke glanced down his long nose at him, Kelin dropped his gaze away. He shivered. "No one believes us, or our story."

Jakkobb shrugged. "They believe you believe it, at least." He set his fork down. "You've only heard of the chemmen by legend, and don't know the layers of deception involved. There's so much more going on that you don't know about. They think you may be unwitting chemmen agents. You heard this at your trial."

Der stabbed her plate with her fork. "I think –"

"I know what you think, kid." His tone was stern, but lacking a vicious edge.

"Well, how did they set it up? I'm no villain."

"Sir. How did they set it up, sir?" he corrected her.

"Sir."

The knight-captain grinned tightly. "I have no idea." He set his plate down. "Before you open your mouth again, it's time for me to go. Some of us have actual work to do. Don't think that I've forgotten about your extra chores." He nodded farewell to the both of them and left.

Der chewed her meal thoughtfully. "He's interrupted me at least three times."

Kelin grinned. "Sometimes, it's the only way to get a word in. Or, to stop you from saying something the rest of us will regret."

She glared at him for a moment, and then finally looked away. "I'm going to ask the captain if we can have our daggers."

With a slap, the duke struck his plate with his fork. Once again, the range of elvish hearing surprised Der and Kelin. "That's enough," Farallon spat. He stood up and stalked to them. "Get up." He grabbed Der's collar and hauled her to her feet. He pushed her all the way back to their tent, with Kelin dogging along behind his heel. The duke threw Der inside and followed her in. The interior of the tent felt as if it expanded four times the tiny space it was previously.

The duke glared down at the two prisoners. After a long, tense silence he said, "You disgust me." They exchanged glances. "Not him, girl, you. He's just a regular human you dragged along. You didn't even know what you are. Part elf indeed! You were captured aiding a chemman child. Now, you're laughing and making jokes, and asking for a suitable weapon – as if nothing's wrong!"

"A dagger's more of a tool," Der explained conversationally.

His dark eyes flashed like lightning. "You *correct* me? Our – king and queen – *murdered!* And you speak back to me like that! You were tortured by the chemman! *Do you understand nothing?!*"

Der sat there calmly, listening. The tenseness drained away from her. Kelin realized he'd never seen her so calm and quiet before. He'd been scared for her often enough, but this was the first time he was scared of her. Her body was relaxed, and that was somehow even more dangerous to him than his shouting, hot-headed friend. She stared coolly at the duke.

"You understand nothing, child! You're too puerile. I should send you home to your mother." The sneer on Farallon's face almost made him look human. He sat back and flared his nostrils. "You can barely fight off a human, how did you face the chemman and their beasts? You're a mistake, a fluke! I should send you away. Oh, they'll find and kill you horribly, but you won't be my problem anymore. You're just one mortal female, even if I can't call you human. When you're surrounded by our foes and their monsters, what will you do?"

Der punched him in the nose. She didn't hint at her intentions or reveal any indication of tenseness. She just landed a solid strike. Kelin gasped and half-stumbled, half-rolled away from her. The duke yelped, more out of surprise than anything, and grabbed his face. He stumbled backward out of the tent. Der didn't say anything, and remained sitting, but there was a wicked grin in her eyes.

Immediately, the cook with Thalon in tow, and the knight-captain appeared, soaking in the situation with their eyes. Several other watching elves pressed closer. The duke pointed. "She attacked me!" He inspected his

nose with a gentle prod of his finger. "She broke my nose." His voice was dull and simple. He sounded like he didn't believe it actually happened. The captain glanced over at Der, who was sitting cross legged with her hands in her lap. She looked at him with the most incredibly innocent expression.

Farallon hissed to her. "I will throw you to the beasts in the wild for this!"

"Actually, sir," the captain's voice was as stiff as a stone column, "They surrendered to me, and are therefore prisoners of the Order of the Dragoon Knights of the Silver Dawn, and are under my charge, not yours."

The duke whirled his volcanic glare to the knight-captain. "*What!*"

Jakkobb stared straight ahead. "Any punishment to them must go through my Order and as the sole representative that duty is mine." He took a deep breath. "Sir, may I advise you to go see to your nose? I will see fit punishment is delivered here."

Farallon shook with anger. He hurled a fuming glare at Der, and then stormed away. Eve held a hand over her mouth and her shoulders were shaking. Kelin relaxed so much he melted. The rest of the elves either followed the duke or simply vanished from the scene.

Jakkobb turned his stern countenance toward Der and approached. Even she scooted back an inch. He reached out –

– Kelin winced –

– Der's eyes widened –

– Jakkobb's wide hand extended forward –

– And he batted on her nose.

Der went cross-eyed. Stupidly, she managed, "That's it?"

The knight winked. "Just don't do it again."

Kelin scrambled forward. "That's it? She broke his nose!"

Jakkobb grinned, and Eve laughed aloud. "I wish I could've seen it." The other two finally smiled, a tad apprehensively. The captain shook his head, still grinning. Thalon ventured a chuckle.

"Can we have our daggers, sir?" Der asked with her hands in her lap.

Still smiling, he shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Not after this."

Kelin sagged. "I can live with that, but I'm not sure if we can live with the duke."

"You're right about that. I don't know what's going to happen next. But for now, just go to sleep."

"What about those extra chores?"

Jakkobb shook his head. "I think the less of you seen tonight, the better. Thalon, stay here with them. Good night." He ran a hand through his hair and whistled. "I just hope that there aren't any other surprises tonight."

Eve shook her head. "Why, sir knight, I thought you knew better than to say such things."

Two hours later the alarm sounded throughout the camp. The elves ran to the edge of their campfires' light. Der, Kelin and Thalon jumped out of their tent and raced with them. No one glanced at them, much less try to stop them.

Ahead of them, a figure had appeared like a pale ghost out of the blackness into the firelight, and shed the darkness from him. He held up a sword by one hand, but not by the grip. Instead he held it by the crosspiece with the blade hanging down. He dropped it.

"Dad!" Thalon yelled, and Kelin barely scooped him up before he ran out to his father.

Archers and swords surrounded the chemman. The red knight had drawn a massive battleaxe and held it steadily at his target.

The single chemman looked around. He was the same height as the others and had the same dark hair. Der had never witnessed so much thunder and lightning in anyone's eyes than in those orange orbs. "My name is Thistle, and I've come for my son. In exchange, I bring you information. I am not the only traitor in this war. Who do you think sold out your king and queen?"

Chapter Thirteen

Mountain Majesty

Another stick snapped like a breaking spine. The man winced and cursed his heavy foot. His five fellow devil worshippers glared evilly at him. They were experts at that look. The huddle, hunched in dark cloaks, tried to blend into the darkness so much they stood out like shadows at noon. Many of them sported double-headed snake tattoos; one even wore his across his forehead. None of them were worthy to wear the medallion.

Fear whipped them to hunt elves in the middle of the unmapped heavily forested mountains in the night. They knew they were on a fool's errand, but they dare not anger their god. Sennha punished failure. However, trying and failing would be less of a gruesome death than staying indoors. Besides, the king of Thealith purged Second Acron of all devil worshippers. If they stayed, they would have been lynched.

Many members of the party would rather be out of the unholy service at this point. They never would, and those that did dare quit were taught a macabre lesson no one else forgot. They couldn't run to anyone for help either, they would be killed for serving a dark god in the first place. Then, they were most afraid of the worshippers who actually believed.

"We're lost!" the stick-stomping man complained. "And it's cold! And it's rainy!"

"Shut up, man, you've done nothing but whine all this time!" the only female in the group huffed. "You're not the only one who doesn't want to be out here." She stamped her boots into the soft mud angrily.

"I know that. Why did the elves have to murder our priest? And why do we have to avenge him? So people learn fear, I know, but they're elves! We'll never find them! Why the hell did it have to be elves?"

"Because that's what our brethren saw at the ambush, now shut up!"

"We haven't found a single trail to follow! Not a single one! We're probably forty leagues away at the very least."

"We've got to be closer than that," the smallest member said. He was thin and short, and very clumsy, but he was intelligent. He also prayed with fervor. "Our god guides us."

"Does he?" the man snorted, folding his arms.

"How dare you!"

"Never mind, the both of you," the woman ordered sharply. "Has anyone seen Anton?" She turned to find their missing member. Perhaps he just dropped back for his own personal business, but he'd been gone too long for that. She screamed terrifically at a rapidly expanding shadow, and was cut down like a blade of grass. The attackers moved like ghosts. Several tried to run for their lives. They only made it a few feet.

The dragoon knight-captain's axe glinted harshly against the firelight. It was a huge double-headed axe with intricate inlay, and he held it on a short pole without so much as a tremor along his arm. His face matched the seriousness of the blade as he stared at the chemman. His other hand was up, silently ordering everyone to hold their ground. The air seemed to sizzle and steam between him and chemman.

Der pushed Thalor into Kelin's arms. She whispered, "If this doesn't work out, we may have to take the boy and run."

"Der!" Kelin shook his head sternly.

Thalor squirmed against the large man's hold. "Look, they're gonna hurt him!"

"He can't lose both parents, Kelin, no matter what!" Der yelled as quietly as she could.

Meanwhile, merely ten feet away, the chemman slowly raised his hands.

"What's this about a traitor?" Jakkobb asked in a deathly stern voice.

Sir Amthros leveled his sword, its weight solid in his hand. "He's bluffing to buy time. We should kill him."

"He came to us," the captain hissed.

"He's chemmen! He's one of them – whatever he's doing is part of their agenda."

Duke Farallon stormed through the crowd, followed closely by the duchess and the cook. Eve slid in behind Kelin and Der. She lifted Thalor, who was close to tears, into her arms.

"I knew it!" the duke exclaimed. "They're following the humans!" His nose was in one piece, but certainly not one color. The physician had repaired the bone, but apparently had done nothing to hide that purple thunderhead of a bruise.

"Who is this traitor?" the knight-captain asked the chemman directly.

Thistle stared evenly at the dragoon. "If you don't know who it is, you will lose this war. If I tell you, you'll kill me. No, I think I'll wait."

Der could taste the tension tighter than a drawn bow.

"Then, why did you come to us?" Jakkobb's eyes narrowed to slits.

Thistle snorted and glared like the angry stare of a statue of a long dead king. "Because my wife was slain. Because I want my son!" His voice and gaze never flinched, but his words betrayed him. Suddenly, a crack on the un-scalable mountain face shone. "You'd kill me if I just took him."

"We'll kill you regardless," the duke sneered.

Thistle bowed his head. "I am not in league with the other chemmen; my son should be proof enough."

Silence surrounded the wake of his words.

"He's using trickery! Lies!" Duke Farallon roared. Behind him, Lady Sabille clung to his arm in an effort to keep him from charging.

Eve stepped in front of the raving elf, still holding the frightened boy in her arms. "No, my lord. He is this innocent child's father – a child who has just witnessed his mother slain in a horrific manner. Now, you wish to murder his father before his eyes too?"

"He is a chemman!" Farallon growled. "They murdered our king and queen!"

"This one did not."

"He's chemmen! One is the same as another!"

"Would you know that better than me?" Suddenly, her voice, always with laughter brimming just below the surface, had gone cold. She turned to Jakkobb. "Dragoon, take that chemman prisoner. We shall sort out the truth of this chaos."

"Dad..." Thalor reached out, but the cook's grip was steel.

The chemman nodded to his son.

"No!" The duke broke his wife's hold. "I am the highest ranking nobility here! Sir Amthros, you are a knight of Arbora, and you, Sir Jakkobb will –"

"I am not under your charge, my lord," Jakkobb interrupted coolly. "Silver Dawn has never been a part of Arbora."

"Oh, but you'll listen to her," he snarled, jerking his eyes toward Eve.

The knight's mouth opened, but nothing came out. He shook his head. "None of this matters! We need to leave – now. He found us despite our forest sanctuary, how long until other chemmen do? If the forest is too weak, we need to move." He looked directly at Thistle. "And the chemmen would just ambush us, he's acting strangely enough to warrant capture."

"Where would we go now?" Lady Sabille asked.

"Right where we were planning – back to Arbora."

Farallon growled, "We can't use the spirit paths in front of his eyes."

Thistle mildly raised an eyebrow. "Your tree paths? The chemmen have known to use those since before the Banishment."

Sir Amthros glared down the length of his sword. "No, he's witnessed who we are. I advise we terminate him immediately."

Thalor began to wail and Eve's stunning face was set in stone. She turned the boy's face away. "In front of his child? You will do no such thing!"

"Then, perhaps you should remove the child from this audience." Duke Farallon snapped his fingers.

Thalor wailed all the louder. A torrent of an argument exploded. The dam had burst and the ensuing flood was furious. Blades and metallic arrowheads reflected dangerously in the moonlight amongst the howling voices.

One voice expanded above the rest like thunder. "Shut up, the lot of you!" Der marched forward, fists balled at her sides. She was too busy bubbling with ferocity to notice she'd fallen into speaking elvish. "This man saved my life. He's lost his immortal wife's life. Despite that, he's still trying to help you, and possibly even save your sorry skins, and you want to kill him for it."

Jakkobb coughed experimentally. "Derora, did you lie to us when you said that you didn't know this language?"

"Oh." She gasped, and then shrugged. "No, the healer, Master Peyna..." She shook her head and inhaled deeply. "Anyway! In all of the legends that I was raised with, elves were supposed to be wiser and weird and, well, better than humans. But, here you are, arguing about execution like we would. You're making the same mistakes when all the stories say that should be wise and know what to do." She narrowed her eyes. "You truly aren't any better than we are."

The silence that followed was of the kind normally heard only at funerals. A few birds cried distantly.

Der inhaled again. "We –"

Farallon's voice was deep and low, like a wolf's warning growl. "Guard that tongue, child."

She whirled on him. "No, you stop interrupting me or I'll break your nose again."

The duke froze completely. Everyone held their breath. Then, he launched into a cursing tirade that did not need to be translated to be understood.

The next few crowded seconds sprinted past. Der was shoved next to Thistle. When she looked down, she saw that her hands were tied. Through her gag came a muffled, "Damn."

Thistle, also with his hands bound, slowly raised one eyebrow. "Good try."

"Anks," she attempted.

The knight-captain marched up to them. He looked at Der and shook his head. "Now, you are both prisoners of the Silver Dawn Dragoons. From now on, the rule is that you may only speak in order to answer a direct question asked to you. And, you will be kept away from the duke." He leaned in closer. "Of course, I am the only one of my order here, so you have to keep your ears and eyes open too."

Less than an hour later, the party stood before an ancient tree with limbs flying off in wild directions and a trunk larger than Der could reach around. The forest formed a natural ring around this ancient arboreal wonder. Its green leaves glistened brightly, while the standing sentinels around it already were losing yellowing leaves.

The party marched in front of the ancient tree. Duke Farallon led. He bowed low before the tree. When he spoke, Der did not comprehend any of the words. They were deep and guttural and rolling like the winds through an endless forest.

Then, nothing happened.

The duke then knelt and kissed the ground.

Der had been working on her gag for at least the last half hour, and finally managed to spit it out. She leaned toward Thistle. "What are they doing?"

The chemman shook his head and pointed forward.

The ancient tree began to rumble. Slowly, with a sound like the bones of the forest popping, the tree rose. Its gnarled and thick roots thrust up in an explosion of soil. It twisted and bowed and rose until it appeared to be standing on the thinnest roots.

"It's on its tiptoes," Der murmured. "Would you hark at that."

Duke Farallon bowed again, followed by Lady Sabille, and then, one by one all of the elves dipped low.

"Why are they —" Der bit her own tongue when she saw that Thistle had also bowed. Glancing around, she saw that she was the only one left standing. Even Kelin and Thalon had taken the hint.

"Oh." She dropped to one knee.

The wind lifted sharply around them and she heard music flying on the wind and the percussion through the soil under the ground. The drumming under her feet threw back to an ancient time before humans ever saw the sun or dreamt of civilization.

The tree dipped and bent and a huge knot in the wood seemed to become darker and deeper. The knot swelled until it was three times the size of a man.

"It's a tunnel," she breathed.

The duke and duchess stepped into the knothole and instead of running walking into the tree they stepped inside it. Eve, with Thalon in tow, was next. Two by two, the elves entered the tree and disappeared. Next, went the horses.

Der and Thistle were almost last, with two final guards marching sharply behind them. She hesitated, because up close, it wasn't a tunnel. It was a knot. A dark, twisted wooden knot.

Thistle entered the knot and vanished through it. Der stuck one toe forward and watched it pass through the wood with the resistance of smoke. So, she closed her eyes and ran forward. When she opened them, she fully expected to learn what the inside of a tree was like. At the very least, she expected to witness a large earthen tunnel with gnarled roots swinging to and fro overhead. But, with what felt like a stiff breeze, she opened her eyes back to the blue sky.

It was a much deeper, more royal blue here with sundogs at play in the clouds. She choked on the icy, sweet air. When her gaze fell to the horizon she gasped again. And again and again; the air was much harder to breathe up here. The cold air stung as it hit her lungs.

She and Kelin had never seen mountains before. They rose from the ground as if the fist of a god had punched them through the surface. Fresh snow had recently salted the peaks upon layers of ancient snow. They looked purple and blue, and even tiny from a distance. In fact, she squinted, it was hard to tell if some of those distant purple lumps on the horizon were mountains or clouds. Surrounding them was a forest of razor straight green pines with a few light layers of snow already heavy on their branches.

Der turned and behind her there was another pine tree, but it was old and centered a huge, black knot at its base.

"Welcome to the Riverfall Mountains!" Jakkobb grinned, throwing an arm out wide. "We really are on the edge of nowhere now."

It was more beautiful than Der could have imagined. She'd always heard mountains described as hills only bigger. She realized that that was not a true description at all. That was calling a castle only a bigger house.

Then, realization hit her as much as the scenic majesty. "But, if Thistle said the chemmen knew about the tree paths, won't they just follow us?"

Jakkobb's smile dissolved. "Perhaps, but they didn't know where we're going and there are hundreds of tree paths to end up at around this great earth." His eyes shot to the chemman prisoner.

Beside her, Thistle shrugged.

Der frowned thoughtfully. "They'd know you're returning to Arbourn, it's honestly the only place you'd go – even I can see that."

The knight set a massive hand on her shoulder. "You're not the only one who's given this some thought. This is the quickest way, but also not the one they'd expect because there is no way into the kingdom from here and Arbourn is safer than the Altice Domain."

"Yeah, is that what your king and queen thought?"

His face went rigid. "I like that you speak your mind, or forcefully demonstrate it as the case may be, but word of advice: learn when to shut your damn mouth."

"She's not wrong," Thistle said mildly. "There is someone whom you cannot trust."

Sir Amthros, riding his chestnut warhorse, approached. "Some troubles, Sir Jakkobb?"

"No," he called back. "Just gagging the prisoner again."

The other knight chuckled. "Indeed. I bring news that Duke Farallon has decreed we camp as soon as the river."

"Of course." Jakkobb nodded curtly.

The next few hours oscillated between exhilaration and exhaustion. Der had never known her bones to grow so heavy so quickly or her lungs to give out so soon. She couldn't reason why, so maybe the physician messed up and hadn't completely healed her.

The soil crinkled and slid beneath her footsteps. Everything seemed to be in brighter colors. The green on the trees was nearly as crisp as the air, the blue sky was sapphire, and the white was so blinding that it burned to stare at it too long.

Their path took them down and down. The horses slipped on the bare rocks and ice. Many places were almost too narrow and too steep for them to slip through. Soon, they came in sight of a small plain, littered with pines and some other kind of tree that Der didn't recognize. Its bark was white with brown stripes and it looked like a normal tree, with regular leaves and everything, but she'd never seen white bark before.

A straight little stream rushed through this little plain, hurtling its way down the mountain slope. Its edges were already lined with ice, but the water was too quick for the fingers of winter to catch it yet. It couldn't have been more than two feet at its deepest, and massive boulders squatted throughout its path.

"The river is the only way to approach the kingdom from here," Jakkobb said softly.

Der frowned. "I think I see the problem. Uh, maybe if we jump between the rocks..."

He half smiled. "Just don't slip and crash into the water. But, it wouldn't work. Arbourn's borders are more protected than most. Unless you have an invitation to enter, you'd just wind up boulder hopping for the rest of your life. You'd never find your way."

"Oh."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to release the horses."

She sighed. "That's too bad. You've got the most powerful horses I've ever seen. It's such a shame to lose them."

"Lose them? No." He shook his head. "They'll meet us where we're going. My mount knows to lead them there. The chemmen aren't going to bother with a pack of seemingly wild horses."

"Is he right?" Der turned to Thistle.

The chemman shrugged. "I wouldn't."

Across the field, she watched the black horse rear. He released a frightening whinny and started cantering around the little valley. The sunlight glinted off his hooves and hair and shone like a thousand black diamonds. Then, he charged and the other horses followed him, swept up in the wake.

Der watched as they grew smaller and smaller until they seemed to melt into the scenery like a mirage. She smiled. "I guess we can rest for awhile now. I'm aching."

"Rest is for the dead during war, child." She turned to see Sir Amthros standing there. He gestured for her to hold out her hands. She obliged and he cut her bonds. "Come now, we've got to get to work."

She jogged to match pace with his stride. "What are we doing?"

"Building canoes."

She stopped, her feet sliding in the soft dirt. "But, uh, sir, that stream's too small. And, it's full of boulders." She glanced around. She couldn't be the only one who saw this.

"Don't worry about that."

"Alright, but what about the fact that you've had me tied up all this time? You thought I was going to escape."

"Well, maybe we're just hoping that this hard labor will tire you out so you won't have the energy." He grinned.

"But, I don't know how to make a canoe."

"Then, what a great opportunity you have now to learn – and fast."

She followed him up the steep slope where the sounds were already busy with axes adding to the music of water and birds. Kelin was already wielding an axe at the base of a large pine. As he swung the heavy blade, his face didn't bear the usual resentment she had come to know since departing home.

Amthros pointed to a small pile of tools. "Get a small axe."

She picked one up. It was lighter than she'd expected. "What now?"

"We need you to cut off all the branches from the trunks we've felled."

"Yes, sir." She got to work. It wasn't a complex task. Her hands scraped and bled against the rough wood. Soon, the trunks turned into log shapes, which were then whittled down into finer forms. The elves all seemed master craftsmen, turning the hulks of timber into sleek canoes. They took on three-dimensional shape, but remained much narrower than any canoes than Der had ever seen. Some of the larger branches were made into paddles.

When her arms could no longer support their own weight, Der wandered down to the fragile, harmless mountain brook. No one tried to stop her. She knelt down by the water and dipped her hands into the freezing water.

It was music to her tongue, and contained none of the dirt or other sediments that rivers picked up in their meanderings. It far surpassed any ale, cider or wine she had ever tried. She blinked. It was just water. She sat back on her heels and just listened to the stream while her drink continued to cool and soothe.

Further up the stream, she overheard voices speaking in elvish. She pretended not to hear. They carried on as if she weren't there. Then again, she wasn't sure if she could be seen. "Have you heard news of the Windgates?"

After a moment, another male voice answered, "Yes, I have." There was another pause. "You may not wish to hear." There was only the sound of the water rushing down the mountains on its journey of thousands of miles.

"I am afraid to know."

"You should be." Der heard some splashing upstream and then the voices quieted. She leaned closer and even popped her head up, but the boulders obscured any chance of seeing. Then she gasped as the water in front of her glowed golden. She saw the stretched pictures of something, just like a painting, float beyond her. More followed, the images already disintegrating into the water.

She dipped her hand to try to catch the next picture that passed her. She felt herself inescapably dragged into the water. It wasn't wet. She opened her eyes and found herself staring up at a massive pair of blue-white gates in the shape of wings. From behind, the wind howled and smashed against the gates with fury. They held it back and the breeze on this side was barely a passing kiss on the air.

She turned when she heard a shrill scream. An elven woman, fair and slender, fell to the ground with a chemman on her heels.

Der didn't even think. She charged the chemman, bringing up the hatchet. The chemman didn't even look up at her and she brought the hatchet down into the storm-reader's skull. And through the skull. Her hand and the blade had passed directly through the skull with no impact.

She fumbled in her steps. What the hell had happened? She whirled as the chemman brought his sword down through the woman's chest. The elf's horrified face seared itself into Der's memory. She swung the hatchet and it passed through the chemman's body like a ghost.

"No!" She frantically heaved the hatchet again and again with the same result. Meanwhile, the storm-reader turned and ran down the slope toward a city.

Der rubbed her eyes and started to run. The city below had been constructed of the same blue-white stone of the gates – or ceramic finish – she had no idea what it was. It looked like a city in the clouds. Its towers and spires arched and vaulted gracefully, in stark contrast with the fires that burned below those towers.

The chemmen ruled the city. The elves ran in all directions. None of them were in armor, none of them had swords. They were citizens and craftsmen. They were also all victims of their ancient enemy. Der later realized that it was odd that she saw no children.

She chased the first chemman down the hill and through the gate. She backed away from the heat of the flames. A running elf passed right through her as he fled several storm-readers.

She stepped around broken and bloody bodies, and still felt the heat from their skins. She ventured down an avenue, passing a tavern decorated with a live tree. It must have once been beautiful, but now, it burned. More corpses littered the place. Some still sat at the tables where they enjoyed their last meal only minutes before.

So, this was the war she'd been told about. This was war. She clenched her fists. This was war and she could do naught but watch. By what the speaker had said by the stream, this all had already happened. Der still ran the hatchet through several more storm-readers. It didn't do anything, of course, but it made her feel better.

Der opened her eyes again and found that she still sat by the mountain stream's edge. No more golden pictures flowed downstream. She stuck her face in the icy water and then rubbed her face furiously. She yanked herself back and gasped for air.

She shivered as she remembered that woman's face. It wasn't the cold up here at all that caused her to shake. So, that was true fear. At least she had the comfort of the belief of an afterlife, but what would an immortal believe? Did that woman know she was facing oblivion?

She gathered up her hatchet and stumbled back to the canoes and back to work. She tried to get back to work, anyway. She swung the blade against the tree for as long as she could make herself.

Something inside her snapped. She threw the handaxe down into the branch and marched over to where the knight-captain merrily swung an axe. His battleaxe hung on a special sheath slung on his back. She put her hands on her hips. "Alright, why the hell are we building canoes up here?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he set his huge axe into the wood and stretched. "Are you even old enough to curse, Derora?"

The question tipped her off balance. "Uh, yes. Damn straight." She shook her head and pointed to the river. "Look, there is no way we can pilot these things down the river."

"Sir, you forgot sir. This is your final warning."

"Alright, sir, there is no way that we can pilot these things down the river, sir. You, sir, yourself, sir, said that there was no way into Arborn."

He grinned. "We could if the river's higher. The mountains go on for a long ways in the direction we're heading, and the water runs the way we want to go. The rapids and tight turns will be a challenge, but one we can handle." He winked. "The elves have thought of this, don't worry. By the way, make sure your tent won't flood when it rains. It's going to rain quite a bit."

She just stared. At least this drowned out the sights of the Windgates.

He sighed. "Der, we're flooding the river. We ride down on the flood, while the water levels here rapidly drop down to what they were. No one can follow us."

"Right," she managed.

"Oh, if you fall out of the boat into the river, do not try to stand. Just float. If you try to stand, your foot may get caught between stones. It's an easy way to drown."

"What?"

"Just wait for the flood. Stay in your tent if you can, the rain's going to be icy. It's hard to make it just rain when it's time to snow. It's already getting into winter up here."

"It's still impossible."

The captain nodded. "You're absolutely right, but it can and will be done."

Der tapped the ground with her boot. "I don't think we'll need as many canoes as we've got though. I counted a score in our party, and even at two to a canoe, we have five too many."

"Do you pick up every little detail?" He stared down at the girl.

She shrugged.

"Another party is meeting up with us. That's why we have so many." He lifted the axe again. "So, where are all the sentries?"

"There's two on the road we came from the tree path," she answered automatically and then screwed her face up. "Uh, I didn't see the rest."

"Still, you got some noticing done. As for the rest..." He winked. "They're watching over us."

She followed his gaze up into the massive, towering pines. "Oh. Smart."

"Now, if you don't get back to work, you'll be going without a meal."

"Yes, sir."

After hours of labor, they got a break. They got to put up tents for the entire camp for their break. They were simple enough, two poles and a sheet of thin canvas that went up in a triangle.

The knight-captain came round to inspect. He nodded. "Good job. Now, a couple of things. Go bathe your feet. You've got to do that every night. Your feet take care of you so you need to care for your feet. After that, I order you to retire to your tent and stay there." He raised his hands. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Der! Kelin!" A voice pounced out of the darkness. Thalon came racing through the tent flap and landed in between them. The small wooden bowl he had in his hands splashed, sending some of the soup flying for freedom.

"Easy, little one," Eve's melodious voice called. She carried a second bowl. "We brought you supper. It's mostly leftovers in a stew, but that's what we get out here."

"Yeah, a stew a king would die for," Kelin said, snatching the bowl from Thalon. "You know, I think I may actually be too exhausted to eat."

Der accepted the bowl from the lady. "You and Sir Jakkobb and Sir Amthros are about the only people who will even speak with us."

She smiled wanly. "Well, the others may have been more willing if you weren't so confrontational all the time."

Kelin shook his head while shoveling a laden spoon into his mouth. "Can't be done. Believe me, we've tried."

"I don't see the problem!" Der almost wailed. "I'm only saying what I think."

"Oh?" Eve raised an eyebrow. "So, you must think that everyone else is wrong because you're always arguing."

Der felt her face flush. "Well, no, of course not! But –"

"As you're arguing with me now?" the elf interrupted smoothly. She tilted her head. "Although, your last little speech probably saved this little one's father for now."

Thalon's head bobbed up. "I want to see him! I want my dad!"

"He's fine, my child." Eve's soft smile melted the heat away from the moment. "This is a proving ground for the three of you, and all of you have faced horrible trials thus far, and you know that this ordeal is far from over."

Der took another bite and chomped down on the utensil too hard. "Ow!" She started mashing her food. "That is the wisdom I expected from the elves. The others are just pompous. I will say that I am not impressed."

"What you said troubled them because so much of it is true – and they don't want to admit it. Yes, we're immortal and do not share in the tires of age, but we are also living creatures and must make our own choices. We must still learn what is right and what is wrong. We are still tempted to do wicked things. You have also met us when we are unbalanced and off guard due to tragedy and war. We've forgotten how to appreciate these trials that humans must face every day."

Kelin sucked down a spiced mouthful. "You're saying that elves and humans can face the same choices and make the same mistakes?"

She nodded. "Of course. So did the chemmen – who were human once and now immortal. We're older, however, and so we're supposed to have already learned what humans are always learning." She sighed and her sapphire eyes faded into shadow. "To let you know something, I married a human. He perished, long ago."

"Old age?" Der asked.

She shook her head. Her voice sounded much older. "No, he'd found a way to be young for a very long time. We were married in secret, since the elves couldn't know. I actually met him whilst cooking for an army, just like I am now. That was a long time ago, it's just that we were fighting the chemmen then too." She looked back up, her eyes bright again. "However, that is past. Now, I am entrusting Thalon's safety to you. As you know, most of the elves do not approve of his heritage."

"It's not my fault!" he protested, and then bit his lower lip.

"Of course not. You're a gods-sent gift, and now you have new friends to help you through this troubling time."

Der held up her hands. "Oh, no, I don't know a thing about children!"

Eve lifted one regal eyebrow. "This is your reward for being willing to fight on his behalf."

"What?"

"I cannot care for him at this time. Do you trust any of the elves here? They won't allow him back into the care of his father."

"Well, Jakkobb."

"Has other duties at this time as well."

Der pointed. "Kelin."

"Hey!" He glared.

"Good, he is your charge to the both of you. If there is a traitor among us, I know he'll be safe with you."

Thalon snuggled up close to Der, who nearly pushed him away in reflex.

"Do you think that there is?" Kelin asked.

Eve shrugged. "It may just be a lie to sow discord and doubt in our ranks – a remarkable ruse, and as you can see, it's working. Or perhaps a less insidious bluff to purchase another day."

Der stared evenly. "You didn't answer the question."

The elf matched her stare without blinking. Der felt her eyes water against those multi-faceted gems. The elf said, "No, I do not think the chemman is lying, but I also do not think that he can be trusted not to lie." She left, leaving only the lingering scent of spring flowers.

Der frowned, sitting straight backed, holding her bowl, looking both miffed and perplexed.

Kelin sighed and tossed a pebble through the small crack in the tent flap. "So, who wants to tell a story?"

"I just want to hear the story where my mother's alive and my dad's not tied up," Thalon muttered.

"And we were never caught by the elves," the big man replied. "We ran away from the chemmen and lived out our lives in the palace of Pallens."

"Kelin." Der swatted him on the back of the head.

He shrugged.

"On the whole," she pulled her knees up under her chin, "I think I like being the elves' prisoner better."

Outside the thin canvas walls, sudden thunder reverberated around the nearby peaks. None of them had ever heard thunder echo like that. They heard the first raindrop crash into the roof of their tent. Der peeked through the door and saw the rain leaving tiny craters in the dirt. The waning sunlight caught the fat drops and thousands of individual rainbows glistened before they kissed the ground.

Chapter Fourteen

Quiet Sentries

Quietly, several canoes slipped through the rain and onto the swift river. They were almost invisible in the un-navigable maze of millions of raindrops. They disappeared completely in less than the time of a heartbeat.

Only several paces further up the river's edge, but a world away in the blanketing rain, Thistle dodged as nimbly as a dancer. The knife slammed down, whistling through the air and rain, never finding its target. The masked attacker was tall, but armed only with a knife.

The ceaseless rain made both their feet sink into the mud. The thunderstorm roared away, only a few hundred yards above them. But, it sounded like it was ten feet overhead.

The chemman almost smiled through his scowl. His hands were still bound in front of him, but against a knife he had time. Time enough for his guards to arrive with those bright, shiny swords. Winning a knife fight against someone who has survived knife fights before was usually never as fast as that one fatal strike. An attacker would leave himself open for counterattack while diving for that fatal thrust, something a veteran opponent would take as an advantage and possibly even disarm the attacker. So, for now, the attacker played it as safely as he could. After all, he had the only weapon.

Thistle held up his hands to block a facial strike, and the blade licked down his forearms.

Real knife combat was dozens of small cuts – along the arms, hands and sides that bled out an opponent's strength. The attacker would never have to expose himself. Thistle could only keep his attacker away for the moment.

He glanced briefly over the assailant's shoulder. Where in the corners of hell were his guards? Then, the thought stole over him like the icy, rising waters in the river. What if it was a guard? What if it was someone who could have ordered the guards away? This couldn't be a chemman because the chemman would try to rescue him before Thistle gave him a nasty surprise. Yes, the chemmen were corrupted souls, but they wouldn't betray one of their own.

The rain stung his scalp through his dark hair. He barely felt another lick of the knife across his arms. He made certain that his wrists were curled in toward his body. He grunted, but didn't appear to notice the new gash. It burned, but so did everything else these dark days, especially that fire where Laurel had been.

His foot arced out and connected to his attacker's knee with a satiating crack. The attacker slid back in the mud, swinging wildly with the blade. Thistle leaned back, and the knife passed harmlessly above his chest.

His hand snaked out and he snatched his assailant's wrist. He squeezed and squeezed until he heard his opponent hiss. Then, he kicked again.

Somehow, the masked man slipped back out of his grasp, and limped back through the mud. He dropped the knife. Thistle thrust out with both hands, but the man slipped further away. The chemman followed. This time the attacker turned and ran, and melted away into the darkness and rain.

The chemman took a few steps after him, but stopped. Instead, Thistle lifted the knife and cut the cords on his wrists. He sighed and looked deeply into the open, inviting darkness beyond the camp. He dropped the knife. Slowly, he sat down on the cold, wet ground and waited.

Kelin poked the cloth of the brown tent; it wasn't the heavy canvas he was used to. Instead, it was something else that was very light and slick to the touch. Nor was it covered with that special layer of wax on the outside to prevent the rains from seeping inside. Sometimes, the expensive treatment would melt if left out in the sun too long anyway. He hadn't bothered with their tent before, having been too preoccupied worrying about everything else. Currently, it was the most interesting thing he had. This was better than last time, he told himself, because he wasn't being tortured. Now, all he did was sit in a dark hollow and imagine terrible things.

Der had her back to him and was staring out at the endless water on the other side of the tent. Thalon sat mutely between them.

The tent flap began to move on its own. Kelin backed away from it. A blond elf stuck his head in and entered. He smiled, a little tiredly. "I remember telling you to leave all this well enough alone." Kaleb smoothly slid into the tent and sat down crossed legged in front of them. Kelin and Der stared uselessly for a moment.

Kelin shook himself free. "Well, you know how stubborn Der is, Your Highness."

"Kaleb!" Der lunged forward and tried to tackle and hug him at the same time.

"Kaleb?" Thalon raised both of his hands. He eyed the full elven splendor of the blond with bright hair and even brighter teeth.

The prince embraced her briefly but tightly. "I thought that you were dead," he whispered.

Kelin had found a smile lit his face and he couldn't control it. He had to smile, even when he was exhausted and upset. So, this was elven charm. He tried to wrestle it under control and remember what he had been through. He felt Thalon's small hand on his shoulder.

Kaleb's smile spread until it was as bright as the plenilune. His eyes fell to the child. "And you must be Thalón. Hail and well met."

The wide eyed boy scooted behind Kelin. The big man inched to the side. "Come on out."

Slowly, the boy peered around Kelin's bulk at the crown prince.

That peaceful smile never faded. "I've heard much about you, and I am glad to see that you are just a child."

Der rounded on the prince. "Where have you been? We were afraid that you were captured too!"

"No." His smile suddenly dipped. "No, thanks to you, I escaped capture."

Kelin grunted. "Yeah. Thanks to us. It was Der's idea, not mine. We wouldn't have been tortured if you hadn't been blundering *alone* in our kingdom."

"Kelín!" Der gasped.

Kaleb continued to smile serenely. "I deeply regret what happened to you, Kelin. I was lost and confused." The elf's blue eyes darkened to a deeper blue and he stared into the distance. "I never made it to my escort." He sat down and pulled his knees to his chest. "I had been on my own until I met with you after the murder of my parents. You don't know how badly I was losing the battle to myself. Then, I met you and you have been true friends."

"Friends!" Kelin snorted.

"What happened after we were captured?" Der asked. She glanced at Kelin, but then dropped her eyes. She damn well knew what happened to them.

The prince shook his head. "I escaped again in Second Acron, and soon joined with others. After that, my party met with those with whom you have been kept prisoner. We're going to Riverfall. It's an elvish, well, hideout deep within the mountains. It's treacherous to gain entrance, especially this season." He looked up, his face suddenly brightening again. "I'm glad to make this final push with friends."

Kelin coughed. "Are we still friends, elf?" His voice echoed hollowly off the canvas walls. "After what we went through? You didn't even warn us!" He sat back, eyes wide after he heard the venom in his own words, but his mouth kept running. "You didn't even try to rescue us, either! It was your fault! They pulled out my teeth!" Tears lined the corners of his eyes at just the blurred memory.

"Kelín!" Der's hand shot up, as if she was ready to slap him.

Kaleb pressed his lips. His tone dropped softly, and sounded like it rolled across velvet. "I hope so." He continued, "We did replace your teeth. The physician told me what he'd encountered with you."

"Now you sound like a real elf, and not a friend."

"Of course we are still friends!" Der glared at Kelin. "Or we were tortured for nothing."

He didn't back down from his best friend's glare – he had faced it more than enough times.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Thalón jumped to his feet and screamed with his fists balled and eyes shut. "Stop it! We're all hurt!"

They stared.

Kaleb finally smiled. "I think that he's right. We've all suffered." He looked directly at Thalón. "You have much wisdom, child. To relate to you, I lost my mother too." His eyes clouded over in the thick silence that followed. The boy inched forward and took a seat next to the prince.

"Do you cry too?"

The prince nodded. "Yes, I do. But, it's a secret, alright?"

The boy nodded.

"We've all suffered." Kelin blinked, and was surprised to find that he'd said it. "This is what war does to people, I suppose. And, I'm bitter. But, I've got to remember that I'm not the only one."

"I've got to remember that too," the prince replied. "I exceptionally regret what happened to you. You know that it was not my intention to abandon you to such a fate. I should have held hope for your survival and done something to ensure it. We were lost in a panic."

"Alright. Alright. It's not you I'm angry with anyway." Kelin sighed and relaxed. Kaleb smiled.

"So, you're the crown prince," Thalón said into the silence. "My dad has something to tell you. It's important."

He nodded. "So I've been told."

"My mother said we had to find you. She said 'we need to find Prince Eddie'."

Der snapped her fingers. "Right, it was Ed-something."

"Prince Edillon, Derora," he replied.

She shrugged.

Kelin sighed. "Elves. The stories are true, Der, they're strange." He looked back to the elf. "I don't even know what to call you."

The prince grinned. "Kaleb is still fine for the moment." He looked critically at Der and then glanced at Kelin. "Besides, Kelin, I believe it is you who is the odd one currently. You're the only one in this tent who doesn't have elven ancestry."

Kelin stiffened. "I am the only real human here, aren't I?"

"I am too!" Der yelped, grabbing one of her ears. "This is so little that it doesn't mean anything! It sure didn't help at our trial."

Kaleb shook his head. "No, it certainly had an impact with the judges."

"Not Farallon," Kelin muttered.

"She broke his nose, Kelin."

"But, that was after the trial!" Der protested. "And I'm not sure if they've treated me better for it. I'm only one sixteenth elven, it doesn't mean anything. In fact, some seem to think worse of me for it, especially him."

"The duke thought you were a part-elf willingly helping a chemman."

"I was." She crossed her arms and set her jaw. "The good one."

"My dad is good!" Thalon nearly shouted. "He loves my mother!"

"Did Thistle have a trial too?" Kelin asked quietly.

"No, not exactly. He was brought before a tribunal." the prince answered. "However, before formal proceedings could begin he swore on Carenth and Ahtome."

"What?" Kelin burst.

"As you know," the prince said, "On rare occasions, one can swear on a god that he does not follow in order to tell the truth."

"Yes." Der nodded. "The oath obliges the god to punish the person if he lies. Even humans do this, so we know."

"Right," Kelin added, "It means more because that god isn't favorable to the person."

"Yes," Kaleb said, "But, can you understand what that means to us to hear a chemman do that?"

They shrugged. "Mayhap," Kelin said.

Kaleb continued, "They tribunal, of course, did not free him of any guilt, but because he surrendered to Silver Dawn, they could do nothing without the knight-captain's consent. Circumstances were strange enough that Sir Jakkobb spared his life, for now." He looked down to Thalon. "I'm sorry that you won't be able to see him for awhile, but I promise, he is still alive and well."

The boy opened his mouth, but then closed it instead.

Der looked up. "So, Kaleb, you're going to let us go, right? No more being prisoners."

He shook his head. "I can't. You're prisoners of Silver Dawn, that's not part of the kingdom of Arbourn. The knight-captain would have to do that."

"Oh." She deflated.

Kelin said, "Well, he and the cook are about the only ones who have given us a chance."

Kaleb nodded, and then smiled. "Well, I think they are the ones who have had the most contact with humans, actually. Especially Sir Jakkobb – at least half of Silver Dawn is human."

"Oh, I knew that!" Der snapped. "Because they're a dragoon army. I mean, I should have known that."

The prince nodded. "Yes, you should have. Now, my friends, if you'll release me, I have much business to see." He pushed himself up on his knees. "We'll be on the river in the hour. They are dangerous rapids, but you're in safe hands."

"You know," Kelin mused. "We've never been on a river before. Crossed one many a time, but never in a boat."

Kaleb grinned. "Then, you'll have to learn very quickly."

The tent flap rustled again and an elven guard poked his head inside. "Excuse me, Your Highness, you're needed by the river immediately."

"Of course." He backed toward the entrance. "Fare well." And he was gone.

Thalon shivered and grabbed one of the blankets. Kelin helped him to get it around his shoulders. Outside, during the day the temperatures were still barely cresting over freezing, but not by much.

Der tilted her head and listened to the rain and the sounds of the camp beyond. Snatches of conversation were the most audible, but she didn't understand the exquisite language from this distance. Occasionally, a momentary break of laughter or a small chuckle reached the tent. And always, there was the roar of the river's fresh rage. She frowned. "Let's get something to eat."

"Are we even allowed to leave?" Kelin asked.

She shrugged. "Well, we're only not allowed if someone stops us. Now come on, I'm hungry."

Around the camp, the rainfall suddenly passed with only a few drops trailing behind. The clouds began to separate. A white moon peeked through the veil occasionally. Next to the river, a small party stood dangerously close to the black, raging waters.

"Any information you have, surrender it now." Kaleb's face flashed darkly under a brief splinter of moonlight. "Unless you have just lied to us and claimed to have information to be spared."

Thistle met the prince's gaze evenly. He palmed the knife he'd pocketed, and his hand didn't twitch. None of them elves got close enough to bind him again yet. He smirked straight into the faces of Sir Jakkobb and Sir Amthros. He relaxed his hands at his sides.

Amthros snorted and leaned forward. "I still say we should just push the bastard in." His armor appeared black underneath the night forest.

The storm-reader stared right back. The knight was less than a foot away, and within inches of the hidden knife. He cleared his throat. "The chemmen would not do anything as gross as write it by hand, but from what I've deduced, it's your Duke Farallon. He betrayed your king and queen."

Sir Amthros gasped in honest surprise, while Kaleb and Jakkobb fought to keep their faces straight.

Thistle continued as smooth as a knife trailing through water. "He should be here, right now, of course. But, where is he? Where is his duchess? Oh, I saw a small party leave on the river just now – I assume to warn whoever ahead of your arrival, but the duke wouldn't need to go. His obligation is to stay here with you."

"No, you're lying," the prince hissed, taking a step back.

"Who has the most to gain? These attacks began on the king and queen – no enemy should have access to them! Someone aided the chemmen, and you know it. You must know that."

Jakkobb's face remained as stone. "It makes sense, I have to grant you that, but so do the best lies. Words are anything but proof."

"I don't believe you. The duke would never be so naïve," Kaleb snapped. "Every elf knows that the chemmen won't rest until we're all dead – until everyone but them is dead. You can't steer a tidal wave." He narrowed his eyes at the prisoner, which were so deep blue they appeared black in the darkness.

Thistle nonchalantly swung his hand in front of him and raised an eyebrow.

The prince sighed. "Or, since you are chemmen, this could be an elaborate trap to cast doubt amongst my own people in a time when we need unity most. I will not act against one of my own on the word of my enemy with anything but evidence."

Thistle bowed his head. "As Your Highness pleases."

Kaleb took a step back to take the three of them into his view. "This is in our confidence. Speak of it to none."

"Of course, sir prince." Jakkobb nodded, and then frowned.

The knight-captain glanced around and the scowl darkened. "It's quiet."

"That river is anything but quiet," Amthros replied.

"Ignoring that, it's too quiet."

"Is anything wrong, sir knight?" Kaleb asked.

The massive elf shrugged. "I don't know. I'm going to check on the sentries."

Kelin yawned and stretched. The thick, creamy soup filled him to the brim. It was sweet and spicy and above all, warm. It even stayed warm in his stomach, and spread its soothing fingers to the rest of his body. He rubbed his stomach happily as he ambled around the camp. He moseyed over to Derora and Thalón. "You know, I think I'm feeling better."

"Good," Der answered. "How are you doing, Thalón?"

The boy stared at the ground. "Fine."

"Where's Eve, Kelin?" she asked. "She's usually never far away from the fire."

He shook his head. "I didn't see her, but there was a ladle spilled on the ground. I can't say that I know her that well, but I couldn't imagine her dropping a ladle." He shrugged. "Weird."

Der shrugged also. "Mayhap she left already. They launched two boats because two are missing."

Thalón's head snapped up. "Do you hear that?"

Kelin shook his head. "No, nothing."

"No," Der said. She listened and heard a cessation of the normal background sounds and silence flooded the camp, and it was so quiet it rang in their ears louder than the nearby raging river. It didn't mask the sound of the river, but it muted it. Their skin sucked in the distressing cold. A cloud lazily drifted over the moon.

Kelin shifted his weight anxiously. The cold breeze shook his nerves loose and he began to tremble. He looked into the breeze and listened. Something was breaking loudly through the sticks and trees before them, coming directly to the hidden sanctuary.

Sir Amthros ran up, drawing his sword. "Something's not right."

Kaleb was directly behind him. He shook his head. "I don't know. Perhaps the chemmen found us. Sir Amthros, we need to prepare to launch, now!"

Moans echoed throughout the camp. The crunching of the foliage grew closer in an unerring trail toward them. Glaringly bright moonlight gradually spread over the area as the cloud drifted away. Six bodies walked ungainly into the camp, issuing guttural, slurred noises. Der tried to swallow, but it stuck in her throat.

"That's not the chemmen. Wouldn't they be silent?" She stepped toward the approaching men. "Sennha! They're followers of Sennha, I see a tattoo! But, how did they find...?" Her nostrils flared – the scent of blood and death shot into her head. She staggered back. Then she saw the rich, fresh blood caked over their wounds. No one could survive those cuts.

"Shit," Thalon said.

Kaleb pulled Der back by her shoulder. He freed his own sword from his scabbard, and it reflected the moonlight wildly around the camp. His voice was as pale as his face. "Undead."

Amthros growled. "They're between us and the canoes. We can't flee safely, we'll have to destroy them first."

"But, the chemmen –" Der started to protest.

"They – they..." The prince shook himself, and shouted, "To the trees!" He darted to the nearest pine. The trees still stood like sentinels, massive and unyielding. Also, they stood slippery and dripping with the inches of rain.

"Why?" Kelin demanded, following the prince's footsteps exactly. He stared unsurely up into the dark branches. He lifted up Thalon over his head so that the boy could grasp the prince's extended hand. The lowest branches were above his head, and he couldn't fathom how the prince had jumped so high with his weapon drawn.

"They don't have enough control of their bodies to climb!" Kaleb answered harshly as he sheathed his sword. "They're puppets, Kelin!"

"But who's controlling them?"

The prince gritted his teeth as he pulled himself higher. "I'll give you one guess. They won't be far behind. We need to flee." He secured his balance. "Archers! Prepare!" Instantly, arrows were drawn from lidded quivers. Perhaps he had thirty of elves, and not all of them fighters.

Kelin and Der stared up into the pine; the branches were like a network of ladders, a very wet, slick network of ladders. The elves seemed to sit on the thin branches like a breeze, but they weren't too sure about their own weights. They also weren't sure if they could climb some of those narrow branches. How in the world did the sentries sit up there for hours?

They spun to see that the dead cultists were only ten feet away. The moaning increased in volume and intensity now they were close to fresh meat. They shambled faster toward the pair. Looking around, Kelin and Der realized they were the last people on the ground.

"Here!" The knight of Arborn reached down from the next tree over. Der shoved Kelin and ran after him. Kelin tossed up his hand, and with a grunt of effort Amthros hauled him up into the tree. He nodded to Kelin and jumped lightly higher into the branches. The young man turned and lowered his hand to Der.

"Hurry!"

She hesitated, looking between him and the cultists.

"Derora Saxen! Now!"

She half-turned to face the three lurching monsters that were closing on her.

"No! Don't you dare! They're undead!"

"That's why I'm going to." The white smile that split her lips scared him more than the walking corpses.

She ran back into the tents, where she knew the guards had been. Behind her, the undead shuffled faster. Everyone else had fled to the trees.

Above her in the trees, the moment was as taut as a drawn bowstring, quivering with unreleased energy and fear, straining against the tension. Everyone inhaled the last moment of peace.

As soon as Der had ducked between the rows of canvas, the elven archers let fly. The arrows struck their targets in tight spreads, but completely failed to halt the creatures' advances.

Der's luck held, and her fingers closed around the grip of someone's sword. It must have been left here in a mad dash to relative safety. It was light and balanced and its edge was as sharp as the stinging cold. She found herself unable to fight from grinning and beckoned with her blade. They shambled toward her, moaning hungrily.

Kaleb stared at his friend below, but kept climbing. Thalon rushed up on his heels. The prince grunted. Something wasn't right, he kept telling himself. If these beasts were controlled by the –

He hollered as he came nose to nose with a dead elven sentry. Sightless, wide gray eyes stared emptily at him. He yelped.

A malevolent snicker fell on his shoulders from above. He dragged his eyes upward to see a chemman already there. The storm-reader was almost invisible in the overhanging shadows. Orange eyes grinned down at him. Mechanically, the elf looked around and saw the same thing in every tree. The sentries were all dead. The chemmen waited above the elves in every tree. They pointed their crossbows at the elves below.

The elves hadn't seen them yet. Kaleb screamed as loudly as he could, "They're in the trees! The chemmen are in the trees!"

The archers let fly another round of arrows at the undead cultists.

Their aim was true and struck their eyes and heads of the undead creatures – at the same time they were shot at from above. Some screamed, but for most, it was already too late. They fell almost silently from their perches to the forest floor.

Beneath the prince, Thalon shrieked, "Dad! Dad!"

Above him, the chemman's smile hadn't changed. He said, "Welcome to your death."

On the ground, Der ran to the nearest cultist. The stench almost drove her back, but she let the sword lead and easily stuck the creature through the chest and out the back. The creature didn't bleed from its wound, it only oozed a little. It continued walking forward at her, pressing its body further onto her blade. Its cold fingertips brushed her hair and shoulders.

Gasping, she wrenched the sword out, jumped back, and tried again. She hollered in frustration and rising panic. Several crossbow bolts struck into the ground behind her heels.

A dark shape tackled the creature in front of her, landing heavily on top. She heard some bones snap like dry branches. She watched the head roll away from the corpse, and its feet still twitching. She inched forward. "Thistle? Is that that you?"

He rose and turned. Thistle's eyes burned like a fire. "Take their heads." He held just a small knife in his hand, but she fought the urge to back away from it all the same. He spun on his heel and leaped to the next cultist.

Der didn't even acknowledge him. She ran to the next and thrust her sword through the nose of the cultist. Its arms fell to its side and it slumped on her blade. She wrenched the longsword free and the corpse toppled to the ground. Der spared a glance around the ambush. Her heart leapt in her throat when she saw too many of the elves dead on the forest floor. Slowly, she raised her eyes to see the combat in the trees.

Her mouth dried and her jaw slipped open. She froze in her space. She realized what the cultists were. They were just there to draw in their attention, to keep them from looking anywhere else, to get them in the trees as easy targets. She felt the rage inside her rise like the river.

Ahead of her, Thistle moved without fear. He attacked the next cultist, driving the knife home in its neck. Within seconds, its head dropped from the shoulders. He didn't stop there. He slashed the knife across the creature's chest, over and over again.

He looked around. "Calvar!" he shouted.

"What?" Der yelled back.

Sir Jakkobb appeared from the darkness, looming up behind one of the cultist creatures with his huge, double bladed axe in one hand. He evenly split the undead monster in twain, from crown to navel. He barely even stopping running to do it. "He said calvar, Derora, run!"

"What's a calvar?"

From behind the knight, enormous, white-beige vaguely horse-shaped beasts charged thunderously out behind the cultists, screaming like banshees. Many more chemmen followed them.

Kelin squeezed his eyes shut for a blink of shock, and he missed almost everything. Open-mouthed, his head spun in all directions and he saw chaos and falling bodies that were alive a second ago. Shouts pounded around his ears, he couldn't distinguish an order from a death scream. He tried to balance himself on the small branch, but scrambled more quickly than he could manage. He crashed heavily back to the ground.

Beside where he had just been, Sir Amthros shot his arm upward through the sharp pine needles and drove his sword into the sole of a chemman's foot and yanked down. The storm-reader buckled and plunged down through the branches. That didn't stop the knight's momentum, and as his opponent bounced on a branch, he took the time to slice his throat.

He ducked instantly, and a blade buried itself in the tree above his head. Still, crouched on a single branch, the elf pivoted gracefully. He parried another attack and another before he caught a look at his opponent. His sword swirled swiftly and fluidly, as if he was controlling a straight stream of water, and his enemy found no opening. But, he found no angle of attack.

The female chemman balanced easily on the branch on the other side of the trunk. He noted her wicked shortsword and crescent-moon hook blade in her other hand. Both blades were ebony, coated with some material so they did not reflect. The weapons absorbed any light that came near them. They were most likely poisoned, the knight reasoned. The chemmen and elf blades erupted in searing sparks as they clashed.

Below him, Kelin picked up a dead chemman's sword. It had just fallen from the tree. He licked his lips and wondered what the hell he was doing. "Oh, Der," he whispered, "If I survive, I am going to kill you for getting me into this."

He really wished that the chemmen did not exist, so much that it hurt his throat. He did not want to believe this was happening. Elves were immortal, beautiful beings – they couldn't die! Unless, they were killed, he reminded himself as he gazed over the carnage. His hand trembled so greatly he barely kept his sword upright. In his mind, he remembered seeing Laurel's body, bereft of life.

Something chuckled behind him. He didn't want to turn, but he did anyway. The point of a chemmen sword rushed toward him.

The chemman batted Kelin's sword to the side like a toy, and his other hand moved with an adder's swiftness toward the human's gut. Kelin barely saw the tiny blade concealed in the hand racing toward him. He launched himself backward, stumbling over his own feet. He held his sword up, but his adversary pushed it to the side almost negligently. With a deft twist of his wrist, the storm-reader disarmed Kelin. The human gasped and ran backward. He resisted squeezing his eyes closed. He tasted his bitter breath rushing in and out of his mouth like ocean waves.

The chemman lunged. The human ran sideways in an effort to escape, something with the chemman obviously hadn't expected. Gasping, Kelin seized his opponent's wrist in pure reflex motion. He stared. Then, he kicked and ran.

At least one bolt stuck Kaleb fast in the arm after the chemman above him had shot. His armor saved him from others. At least he had warriors beside him this time. He spit a chemmen on his sword who dared too close. He didn't see what had become of Thalon. The child had disappeared.

When he finally had a second of respite, he ripped the tiny dart from his forearm. He tried to lift his sword again, but his arm began to tremble. He slumped against the trunk of the tree, his body felt distant and sluggish. He fought himself to keep his eyes open. The sword slipped from his fingers toward the ground. The elf couldn't keep his head above his shoulders. "Poison," he wheezed, and fell forward into darkness.

The chemmen on the ground congregated in circles around the trees, who weren't fighting those survivors on the ground. The fights in the trees broke the limits of mastery of weaponry and balance. The storm-readers and elves fought each other at different heights, above their heads or below their feet. They kept their balances, even jumping to different branches and dancing around trunks and blades. Despite the elves' brilliance, the advantage was all to the ambushers.

Jakkobb halved the last undead creature. It had been, until recently, a rather large human woman. He hit so hard, the red ooze splattered onto his mail and face. He hadn't time to put his helmet on. He surveyed the fight. The chemmen were perfect. Half of the elves were dead or too wounded or too scattered to do anything but perish horribly. They also outnumbered the elves at least three to one, more now. The elves were entirely surrounded, and they had no ground to retreat. The chemmen must have predicted the elves would run to the trees at the sight of the undead. They must think they're very clever, he snarled to himself. But, how the hell did they get into position above the camp without the elves knowing? Were they there before they even camped here?

Were they told to come here? Was there truly a traitor?

He cut wide at a chemman who ran toward him. His battleaxe was a magnificent creation and he was probably the only elf the world to carry one. Axes weren't sleek and fast weapons, but he made this one fast. The inlay drew a complicated picture of a hunting scene. The hunter forever chased the leaping stag.

As she was attempting to decapitate one of the last cultists, something large and heavy clipped Der's shoulder. She cursed and jumped away, turning to face the new opponent. A huge, shrieking beast reared and sharp, pointed hooves like maces rose above her head.

She lunged at the pale beast. Her sword skidded off its tough hide. She saw the blue-green veins hammering inside the hairless skin. She wrenched herself to the side and tried to retreat a few steps. The creature vaguely resembled an emaciated horse that died three months ago and hadn't realized it. Its pointed teeth dripped with a green, smoking liquid. It followed and struck at her with its sharp, pointed hooves. She didn't know if the edged hooves were natural or whether the chemmen sharpened them, but it didn't matter – they were sharp and deadly regardless.

It stared into her pale eyes and she looked into its wild, fiery orbs.

The beast in front of Der chomped at her again. She took a wide swing at its head. The blade caught it between the teeth, and she was delighted to see black blood on her sword. The beast shook its head and spat out the blood. Der went for its neck.

She embedded her sword almost to the hilt with a low two-handed thrust. She grinned as the creature expired. From the corner of her eye she saw an approaching storm-reader. She tugged on her sword. Nothing happened; it was stuck fast. She wrenched it again – it moved an inch.

She braced and yanked on the sword again. The chemman was now only a few paces away. She tensed to jump out of the way and run to a dead elf and grab his weapon when the storm-reader stiffened. He gasped and toppled to the ground. The figure behind him withdrew his sword.

"Don't forget about her friends," a heavy voice said. Der blinked and stared at Kelin.

"Kelin!" She finally tore her sword free.

"Don't speak to me. I'm angry with you and I have a weapon." He grinned, and the blood across his face glistened like warpaint. He pointed at the dead beast. "What was that?"

"Calvar," she replied immediately.

Kelin shot her a look. "You're not supposed to be able to answer that."

She shrugged. "That's what I was told." She looked up toward the rest of the fight. They stood on the very outer edge. There were at least two or three chemmen for every elf she saw. The elves were isolated and scattered.

A second calvar bounded past, and gleefully tore into the meat of the corpse of a devil worshipper. Several more followed and galloped up the base of the trees. They jumped high, and to Der's ultimate surprise, punched their sharp hooves deeply into the wood and began to climb. They used their momentum to keep their upward motion, jamming their hooves into the trunks. The trees groaned in protest. Most fell, but they gnashed their teeth and started again. The elves above them cried in alarm and distress; they were already too busy with the chemmen.

She glanced at Kelin. His sword point dropped. "We have to find Thalor."

Their blood smeared the pine needles and branches around them, but Amthros and the chemman didn't notice. He swiveled around the trunk again and perched on the opposite branch. The female storm-reader followed, lunging. He waited for her to extend, parried and smashed her face with a granite fist. He thrust with his sword, and despite how dazed she was, she still parried. The elf grabbed a branch and shoved it in her face. She caught it in the crescent-moon blade and nearly sliced his hand. He forced the branch further into her face and with the tip of his sword, sliced her ankle. It was the only opening he had.

The chemman cried aloud and desperately stabbed at Amthros. Her feet slid dangerously on the narrow branch, and Amthros stamped down on the base of it. The branch shuddered. The chemman took one final thrust at him before she fell, and missed by an arm's width. His muscles tensed and twitched as he almost followed, but there was no time. He sprinted down the narrow branch and leaped into the next tree.

He leapt from his perch, descending to the ground. He'd seen the prince fall from another tree. Several of the elves had already clustered around him, with a ring of chemmen attacking like rabid wolverines. He smashed through them.

Peyna had materialized at the prince's side. The physician carefully knelt beside Kaleb, heedless of the chemmen and other beasts in the battle. Slowly, he pressed a hand against Kaleb's forehead. "He's alive. For now. I do not know what poison they used." He looked up to see the knight's stern face. Jakkobb arrived with his giant axe bloody to the handle, even steaming in the cooling mountain autumn.

"We've got to get out of here." He grimaced and hoisted the unconscious prince onto one shoulder.

Amthros surveyed the fight one final time and licked his lips. "We have enough as a group." He nodded to himself. "To the boats!"

The remaining elves dropped from the trees and converged around them, sliding into formation. The storm-readers swarmed after them, unrelenting in their assault. The elves advanced in an arrowhead formation with Jakkobb holding Kaleb in the center and Amthros on point. Those in the rear fought the chemmen behind and took their steps cautiously backward. Many elves shot their eyes up into the trees for a brief look, and strained to hear the reloading crossbows. The formation was not advancing fast enough.

Thalor tried to squeeze further inside the overturned canoe. He felt the wood scrap against his cheek, and his neck bent sideways. Outside, narrow, sharp hooves stabbed the ground around the canoe. He heard something sniffing loudly.

In his hand, he gripped and gripped again the long knife he'd found on the ground. So many people were so suddenly dead, and they'd left behind all their earthly weapons. Inside his mind, he heard his mother's voice, because she had explained to him many times that taking other people's things was wrong. He sniffled and fought against crying. His dad always said that crying was weak, even silent tears.

A hoof smashed through the canoe's hull. It struck the dirt below, missing the boy by inches. He wound himself tighter into a ball. More hooves followed, pounding like rain.

He twisted the long knife in his hands, so that the tip pointed upward. He closed his eyes and waited for the monster to just go away.

The calvar's hoof came crashing through again, and Thalon heard a deep throated gurgle. He gingerly released his fingers from the hilt of the knife. The hoof had driven the pommel deep into the soft mud below, and the blade disappeared up into the frog.

Then, the calvar screamed. The shrill cacophony was louder than the river's rage. Through the holes in the canoe, the boy watched as the beast thrashed, and pounded its hoof into the ground to try to dislodge the blade, but that only drove it deeper.

The calvar's head exploded. Only after the spray of blood cleared, he saw a shape standing there with a sword in one hand and a knife in the other. The figure bent over the canoe.

Thistle kicked off the remnants of the boat and lifted the boy up in one hand.

"Dad!" Thalon grabbed him as tightly as he could and refused to relinquish his grip. Tears bubbled and he couldn't control them, weakness or not.

The formation of elves didn't stop their advance as the calvar scrambled in between them and the canoes. One of the beasts turned around and trampled a canoe, tearing it to splinters. It was so immersed in destroying the boat that it did not notice the rest of the chaos.

Amthros leaped ahead, his sword flashing. He cut a deep gash in the shoulder of the canoe stomping beast. It screamed and hobbled back. Another two replaced it. The elves marched shoulder to shoulder with him. Those in the rearguard matched blades against the chemmen. For every blade they parried, three more dove forward.

The elves in front lunged simultaneously. Many of the calvar screamed and bit and kicked. Several reared, flailing with their deadly hooves. Amthros cut deeply into the exposed underside.

Jakkobb held his axe before him, ready to cut down anything that got past the other elves. Nothing so far touched them. The prince on his shoulder hadn't stirred at all. He scowled. Next to him, Peyna dedicated his attention and hands to the prince and whatever mysterious vials and powders he carried.

They continued their slow advance toward the canoes. Only a couple of feet now.

"Wait for us!" Der waved with her bloody sword and dashed forward. Kelin nearly tripped himself running at her heels.

They charged into the calvar between them and the canoes. Luckily for them, the numerous chemmen were on the other side. Der leveled her sword. "Remember! Straight thrust or your sword bounces off!"

Kelin's sword tip barely punctured the skin on the rump of one of the horse beasts, but it was enough of a surprise. The calvar reared.

Der stabbed at it, and didn't even stop running.

Kelin didn't dare stop running either, suddenly finding himself lost in the middle of a herd of those things. He kept poking. If these monsters weren't confused, he realized, they would kill him. He and Der had to keep them off balance and keep moving.

Suddenly, they were through and nothing was between them and the elves. Already, the elves were backed up against the rapids, but it wasn't a barrier, it was an escape.

The river roared so loudly behind her she could not hear the splash of the canoes onto the river. Der just concentrated on fighting the chemman before her. Behind her, Jakkobb carefully but quickly lowered Kaleb into one of the canoes. Peyna wasn't a step behind. The captain nodded to the surgeon and turned back toward the combat. He smashed through some of the extra canoes with his axe. They'd all be damned if the chemmen were able to follow them downstream. Most of the elves readily jumped aboard while the rearguard fought under increasing pressure from the chemmen. Der felt their chances of survival drop with the decreasing number of elves on the shore.

"There's Thistle!" Kelin yelled. He wanted to point, but he didn't dare move his sword.

"Come on!" The knight-captain yelled in a parade-ground voice, while he held one canoe on the tip of the edge of the river with one foot. Thistle, carrying Thalon, didn't even nod his thanks. He dove into the canoe, and then the darkness downstream swallowed them.

The knight inched backward, kicking the last one toward the river. The paddles rattled around inside.

"Last boat out!" he hollered to Kelin and Der. Kelin stole a quick glance, everyone else was already gone.

Cursing, he attacked the pursuing storm-reader high while Der went for his knees. He couldn't parry both and fell from his cut leg.

Der finally turned and ran to the river and over few steps distance she imagined blades in her back. The water was thrice as wide as it was the last time she saw it, and it seemed to be thrice as fast. Wet boulders squatting above the water shimmered dangerously in the full moonlight. Kelin slid in the mud beside her. She splashed one leg in the river as the other elf all but tossed the canoe into the water. Her blood chilled in the icy water and she could feel the colder fluid traveling up her leg. The rush of the water threatened to tear her leg out

from under her. The sensation was over in a second as she jumped in the canoe. She fumbled for balance in the rocking craft and her sword dropped from her hand into the dark water.

Jakkobb was the last one in. The boat was made to carry three people, but it sat disturbingly low in the water with all of them. The elf let go from his hold and they jolted into speed on the open water. A chemman, perched on a boulder overlooking the river, took her last chance. She sprinted and jumped into air, landing inside the departing canoe. She maintained her balance by keeping her feet squarely on both sides of the canoe. She swiped a small cut across Kelin's face with her sword. He cursed as he grabbed his cheek and rolled to the bottom of the canoe.

Der grabbed the paddle and slammed it into the chemman's leg as hard as she could. She was amazed by the chemman's ability to keep balance, as the storm-reader stood on only one leg. She attacked the remaining leg just as Jakkobb hit the chemman in the back with his axe. The body crumpled and splashed into the water.

Der turned around, leaning over the edge of the boat. "My sword! I dropped my sword!"

"We're not going back for it," the captain snapped, sitting down.

"I know, but – it was an amazing sword. And, it's the second sword I've lost! Dad's going to be so angry with me when he finds out I lost his." She stared for a moment and no one answered her. She leaned a little further over the edge. "Kelin!" She whirled around. "Are you alright?"

"Aye," the Kelin muttered, holding his most recent cut. "I'm so glad you think of me first."

"Quiet, both of you. We'll have to check all our wounds," the elf said. "The storm-readers used poisoned darts, and they probably poisoned their blades too."

The river was narrow and swift, with many surprising corners and boulders. Even when extremely flooded, it felt like she could extend her arm over both edges of the stream.

She craned her neck to see the canoe Kaleb was put in. But, his boat was too far ahead and it was too dark. She sighed and stared out over the rapids. The speed of the water comforted her now, carrying them farther away from the chemmen's reach. The moonlight turned the whitewater into one giant silvery glow, but it was dulled somehow. She glanced ahead. "Dawn, finally." She studied the horizon. The canyon they traveled down was definitely brighter ahead than the surrounding mountains. She stiffened, as the elf and water jerked the canoe around a sharp corner.

"Waterfall," the knight-captain announced. "Hold on." Der looked ahead, the canoe in front of them was almost out of vision, but it certainly looked lower than they were. Their canoe's nose dipped and disappeared. The small watercraft flew through the air, and Der felt much lighter than even with the rate of the water's speed carrying them along. They were flying. The canoe seemed to hover in air for an endless breath, and then smacked into the dark water fifteen feet below it. Der was terrified the wooden boat would shatter on impact, as water erupted around them like a white volcano. Then, the current of the river caught them again and they skimmed over the water.

The knight stared darkly over the glowing horizon. "I fear a worse strike soon." His jaw tightened. "If they can find us."

"They found us tonight, sir," Der pointed out.

Chapter Fifteen

The Secret of Riverfall

Below in the plains, out of the shadow of the mountains, on the mighty Pelippen River, an elven town normally aglow in autumn's glory was instead aglow in sky high flames. The trees, scattered throughout the village, already wilted to the heat of the fires.

The storm-readers had exploded out of dusk's failing light. There were hundreds of them in less time than it took to gasp. Their war cries reached higher than the flames would. The elves tried to scatter into the forest, but one by one, they failed, and one immortal perished after another.

Among the screams and the bloody chaos, there was a hollow of silence. Vlade danced furiously in its center. The long, thin midnight black sword in his hands was his partner. Around the whirling pair, no sound escaped.

The elves remembered. It had been thousands of years, but to a true immortal, it was so very recent. They remembered the horror of the silent sword, and the warrior who tore their flesh. But, that warrior had been slain! That sword had been melted!

The memory was still singed into their minds, and here was the nightmare reborn.

The chemmen had surrounded the village, and those who escaped from the buildings were cut down just the same. Vlade planned this strike carefully. Since he couldn't have the targets he wanted high up in the mountains, he took his wrath out here.

A fair-haired elf, who looked no older than nineteen human years, burst through the door of his stone house with a bundle under his arm. In the window, a wreath of blue and yellow flowers began to wither and burn. He ducked around the side of the house and began to run.

The chemmen commander jumped in his path. He raised the sword and the man's curse was lost in the aura of soundlessness. The bundle under his arm began to kick furiously.

Vlade held the sword still and the screams of battle rushed in like a thunderclap.

The elf spat at his feet and held the chemman's gaze steadily. "I remember that sword. I watched it burn until it was nothing but a puddle." He put a calming hand on the blanket. "You are not its wielder, either."

"Yes, I am!" He brought the sword level. "Now, give me that blanket!"

The elf swiveled to put himself between Vlade and the kicking blanket. A small girl's voice wailed from inside. The elf spun on his heel to run, clutching at the blanket.

Vlade pivoted and lunged in the same moment, and the black blade bit noiselessly into the bundle. He felt the satisfying crunch of bone vibrate all the way up his arm, but there was no scream or cry or even whimper to be heard.

The elf scrambled to hold the blanket, even as he felt the warmth of the blood spread across his fingertips. He gasped, and his mouth opened in a scream as he held the dripping bundle to his chest. Slowly, he folded down onto his knees. A tendril of blond hair escaped from the depths of the blanket. He clung tighter.

The chemman held the blade still again and sound echoed back around them. "I've always wondered, do immortals even need to believe in an afterlife?" A curved smile split his face. "Tell me if there is one."

He brought the sword down.

Around him, the flames began to reach into the sky. In the middle of the fires, in his realm of silence, the chemmen commander lost himself to the sweet smell of blood and victory.

Over a thousand miles away, in one of the thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of nameless streams and mountain waterways that would eventually converge into the awesome Pelippen River, the water curled its way between the peaks. Many streams had flowed together and the river had risen. Several canoes glided on the water.

But now, the river changed to a new shade. The water transformed into a sheet of clear diamonds. Der felt the air push heavily against her, like a strong, stationary breeze. She gasped when the sensation released her. She gripped the edge of the canoe and looked around wildly. They continued downstream and the river gently skirted the majestic forest. Vibrancy and laughing colors – gold and red – now played all around them, brilliant and gloriously bold. This could have been the first time she saw the world, she thought, and she had only looked at the world before through a veil. She could always see light and colors, but never seen the real, undistorted beauty. Her hand eased itself into the water, and she felt the sweet taste running through her fingers. The air was lighter and easier to breathe.

"Welcome to the elven lands." Jakkobb grinned as he steered the canoe.

The trees brightly burned with autumn. Crimson and golden leaves carpeted the water that the canoes glided over. Most deciduous trees shouldn't have been able to grow at this altitude, and the river shouldn't move or smell like honey, but she couldn't deny the reality of her senses. The air was warmer here too with only a dusting of snow.

"It's incredible." Kelin leaned over the side of the boat. Der nodded emphatically beside him. The forest around them stood proudly, with the most amazingly tall deciduous trees, oak, elm, maple and more. The ground was open with no choking shrubbery and small plants to tangle feet in. The forest floor was wide, spacious and carpeted with many golden and red leaves. The calm waters too were almost hidden under a beautiful pattern of autumnal leaves. They almost failed to see the buildings, hidden in the forest.

"They are gorgeous," the knight agreed.

Der wrestled a finger into her ear as it popped again – it had felt like they had been popping constantly as they descended into this valley. Jakkobb gently steered the canoe and its nose softly kissed the mud of the bank, and then rocked dangerously as Der clambered out of it. After days and nights in that tiny watercraft, the ground felt too solid and unyielding.

Behind her, Kelin whistled. "Will you look at that?"

Around them, the other canoes had already arrived, some even made it hours ahead of them, or were hours behind. Behind the almost invisible buildings was another view. On the other side of the settlement, the world fell away over a cliff into a deep valley. The river curved slowly through this hidden shelf, picked up its pace, and then fell away into the valley below.

"Derora," Jakkobb called. "Wait by the shore."

She jogged back to the canoe. "Why?"

He sighed. "We will wait here until we are invited."

She pushed her hair behind her ears and frowned. "Is that normal, sir?"

The knight shook his head. "No, but with the horrible happenings as of late, precautions are necessary."

Kelin tottered back to Jakkobb and Der. "That was my first boat ride, and I can honestly say that I never want to do that again."

Der ignored him, and wound herself in circles around the abrupt river shore. "Where's Kaleb? Or Ed... or whatever his name actually is?"

The knight sighed louder. "Wait by the shore."

Kelin held his stomach. "I don't want to wait either, sir. It's been three days on a raw fish. I'm starving, like."

Jakkobb threw up his hands. "Fine. Go on up to those buildings. Get shot full of arrows."

Der had raised her foot at the word 'fine' and was still holding it in the air when she turned slowly. "Are you serious?"

He lifted one blond eyebrow. "Are you hungry enough to find out?"

"No." She dropped her shoulders.

Silently, another canoe glided across the water and pressed into the mud beside them. A hooded figure slipped the paddle along the inside of the boat. A much smaller hooded figure leapt out of the canoe. "Der! Kelin!"

The child's voice bounded forth, and Thalon's orange eyes grinned beneath the hood. His father put a hand on his shoulder. The chemman kept his own eyes downcast. He said in a voice barely above a whisper. "It is best to throw our weight behind your lot now than wait to see if this storm passes. It won't."

Jakkobb's blue eyes shot wide. His mouth hung open and his hand gripped his axe. "Well, I don't believe it. You must be a traitor to the chemmen after all."

Thistle shrugged while Thalon hugged Der and Kelin in turn.

The knight's voice was even. "I fought to put the chemmen in Darkreign, you know."

Thistle just shrugged again.

Der asked, "Why are you helping the elves? Because Laurel meant so much to you?"

Again, he shrugged.

"Dad..." Thalon trotted back over to him.

Thistle pulled his hood lower. "The truth. My son and I have nowhere to run. They may have seen Thalon and he will be hunted, but that's not the worst of it. If the chemmen annihilate the elves, take your guess as to their next target. Humans or dwarves? If you, dragoon, truly fought my ilk, then you know that they will not be sated until only chemmen are left. You must know this."

The silence that followed sucked the air around them. Jakkobb growled in the back of his throat, but said nothing. Finally, he nodded. "So be it."

Der knotted her hands and cracked her knuckles. "So, anyway, I never got around to asking because, you Sir Jakkobb, made me shut up every time on the river. Please, may I ask now?"

The knight didn't look away from the chemman. "Yes, Derora, you may."

She stamped her foot. "What the hell were those white horse looking things? Calvar, you said. Thistle, you've got to know too."

Kelin stood beside her. "Yeah, and those men... they were the cultists, but they were dead – had been killed."

Thistle smirked. "To be so naïve."

Jakkobb said, still with his eyes on the other, "The horse looking things are called calvar. Nasty beasts. They didn't exist before the chemmen created them in their horrid experiments."

"No, actually," Thistle said. "They were natural beasts of the wilderness – and the storm-readers captured them for their own intentions."

It was the knight's turn to shrug. "Either way, they were rare. They are similar to horses in many respects, but as you saw, extremely different. They're shorter, no hair, thicker skin, double jointed knees, and so on."

"Could you ride one?" Der asked.

He shook his head. "The chemmen don't try for a reason. As for those cultists..." He frowned. "That's not a horror that most humans ever witness. It's something the chemmen did quite often before they went into battle. Obviously, you must destroy the head – the brain in fact. It's still the control for the body."

Kelin frowned. "We were always told that the brain was there for cooling the blood. Thoughts come from the heart."

The knight snorted. "If I am injured anywhere in your kingdom, don't let the healers near me. Oh, I am aware that you don't have access to information that dragoons and elves do, but, honestly?"

"Those cultists deserved worse," Thistle growled.

"Dad?" Thalon asked.

Jakkobb shook his head. "Magic. It's like a tool for the chemmen, and it starts the mind again – to make the body move. They're slow, and don't even think, they just want to feed. It's the most basic instinct we have, and the only one left for them. The soul's gone."

Der made a disgusted face, as if she'd just eaten a dirty sock. "So, the storm-readers killed these people and somehow made them."

"Oh, yes," Jakkobb agreed. "The chemmen love fodder. Even before their immortality, they hardly risked chemmen lives when they had so many other choices to use."

Thistle nodded silently.

Fear struck Der like lightning. That could have been her. Dead, lumbering on earth without a soul. That could have been Kelin. Oh, she realized, he'd never forgive her for that.

She bit her lip and looked at the ground. "Um, so, how long before we're invited?"

The knight rolled his eyes. "I don't know. I don't think the crown prince has arrived yet. There are many streams that break apart and come back together."

They waited by the shore until the sun had started to fade. Its heat seeped away with the light. More canoes had arrived and they too had stayed by the river. More leaves fell into the icy water, adding another blanket to the surface of the laminar river.

Around the bend, two canoes came into view. On one of the boats, someone lit a small candle or torch and waved it in a circle.

Jakkobb nodded. "There he is, and... we'll see."

Der turned her head. People had started to melt out from the buildings. They must have been watching, but she had certainly not seen anyone peeking. Out in front of the silent parade, she recognized Duke Farallon and Eve, the cook.

On the river, the canoes were gently piloted to a small, natural looking inlet and came to a rest in a shallow, high motionless water. Sir Amthros hopped out of one and began hovering close to the other, effectively sandwiching the physician between himself and the prone prince.

Everyone grouped together at the edge of the river. Those elves that Kelin and Der met thus far were warriors and outfitted for survival and combat. Here, they finally witnessed the elves as themselves. They were astounding beautiful, and dressed in flowing garments that shimmered like clouds at sunset. They glided together in a graceful, rhythmic stream of people. Just their walk was like watching a well practiced dance.

Der elbowed and shoved through the gathering crowd. "Excuse me." She grunted. "Excuse me, *please*?" She trod on someone's foot and broke the spell as that person cursed under his breath. She reached the edge of the ring of people, where Kaleb sat, propped up by Peyna.

"Are you alright?" she breathed aloud, earning many more angry glares.

The physician's head snapped up. "You! Do you owe us silence?"

"Not that I know of."

"How fortunate you are that you were not poisoned," intoned the acerbic voice of Duke Farallon. He emerged from the crowd coming from the settlement.

The prince smiled weakly. Everyone else went suddenly quiet. "Lucky you. However, thanks to Peyna, I'm safe." He shifted his weight back and propped his head against the tree.

Der put her hands behind her head and stretched. She opened her mouth to say something more, but as she gazed at the river it just hung open. She had never realized that so many people staring could have so much weight – actual, physical weight. She snapped her lips back together and stepped back into the crowd.

"Vulgar lout," Farallon murmured.

Sir Amthros lifted an eyebrow. "It doesn't mean that she's wrong, my lord. At least she fought with us, while you had gone on ahead. Why had you gone ahead? You missed combat by only a few lucky minutes."

The duke frowned. "Yes, I had gone ahead to make way here. A few of us went. I left a message with Soheir —"

"Who was killed only a few minutes after you departed," the knight of Arbourn snapped. "More elves, perished!"

"Killed? I heard of the attack from those who arrived before you... This is unbelievable." A tremble sneaked its way into his voice. His eyes shifted around the crimson scenery.

Behind them, someone very deliberately cleared his throat. The dragoon knight stepped forward. "Yes, this is tragedy, but, as soldiers, it is our duty to defend those that are still alive. We can mourn later. Please, take this advice from this old soldier and save your tears."

The gathered elves stared at him as if he spoke in tongues. They blinked against their blank faces. Der frowned, realizing that they didn't understand what the knight was saying.

"What could you mean?" asked a man from the assembly. "Elves have died. They are gone for as long as we shall live. We can never see the ones we love again."

"Listen to me," the knight growled. "I regret very much that we've lost people, good people, who had nothing to do with the chemmen Banishment. However, we have other, just as important problems that cannot wait."

The duke clenched his fist. "What could possibly —"

Thistle stepped up beside the knight and pulled his face free of his hood. The storm-reader deftly stared down at the bows and swords suddenly bristling in his direction. Thalon trembled behind him. The chemman said, in fluent elvish, "I come to aid you. I was set on leaving the worlds of you and the chemmen. But, so that my son and I may live in peace, I need you to win this war."

"Since killing is not allowed in our haven," Farallon extended his sword point, "I will accept your surrender."

"No. I do not surrender," the chemman replied in a deep, smooth tone. "I believe I still am actually a prisoner of Silver Dawn, if I recall." Thistle slowly shook his head. Thalon hunkered down around his father's knees. Worry burned on his small face.

The duke snorted. "Then we will take you hostage again. This is the second time you have forced your presence upon us."

"One elf trusted him."

Kelin twitched in Der's direction before his mind registered the speaker's voice was male. His head swiveled to see the knight of Arbourn. "He may have invaluable information. Someone tried to kill him before he could speak, therefore, someone's afraid."

"There are many reasons why an elf would want this creature dead," Farallon barked.

Amthros held up a hand. "I think that we could listen and divine for ourselves what is useful and true."

The duke's upper lip curled. "When did you change the lyrics to your song? I believed you to be my ally in this."

"Then, perhaps you thought wrongly, my lord." He reached a hand in Thalon's direction, but the boy rolled away from him and pressed further into his father's legs. "It's just, we... We need to care for the children. Even the ones with orange eyes. They're innocent."

Thistle slid directly between the knight and his son.

"This is a ruse. He has a plan." The duke kept his sword steadily facing Thistle.

Amthros said sternly, "He killed chemmen in the ambush too. I saw him. I have never witnessed a chemman put a blade to another."

"Enough," a crystalline voice commanded. The crown prince winced, but pushed himself to stand with the physician's aid. "I've seen enough. He has a son, a half-elven son. I do not trust his word, but the child should not lose both his parents." He turned his blue steely gaze to Thistle. "I promise that we shall treat you fairly and not alienate you from your son. You have my word."

The chemman finally nodded once, and put a hand down on his son's head.

Some of the elves refused to look at Thistle and peeled away from the crowd and then the layer after them followed. Der and Kelin stood back hesitantly as the crowd began to quietly disperse.

Jakkobb cupped one hand around his mouth. "You two, come on, this way!"

They trotted over. He jerked his thumb to the path aside the river. "Stables are this way, let's go." He leveled a finger at Der. "And you, keep your mouth shut." He turned to walk toward the naturally camouflaged buildings.

Golden and red leaves floored the avenue running astride the river. The architecture of the buildings they passed by was intricate and exceptionally detailed, but nothing seemed too much or out of place. The patterns were so elaborate and complicated and yet the overall design was so simple.

The buildings were built into the forest, instead of destroying it to make space. The lights shone through the structures and warmed the air around them comfortably. The woodwork was the same shade as the trees, even with the colors and shades of autumn. Every bit of building was painted or naturally fit into the overall art of the architecture. Der espied a bridge over a stream running through Riverfall, and it told her how far away she was from home. The bridge in Riversbridge was bulky and gray. This bridge was a quarter of the size, wooden and carved into patterns of endless knots. Now, the wonders of Duelingar and Second Acron seemed so crude.

The captain poked his head around the corner, and then swaggered around it. "Spike!" He threw both of his hands wide open and approached his massive black warhorse. "I thought the storm-readers would've speared you and had you for dinner."

Der swore the horse narrowed his eyes.

Jakkobb spun on his heel. "Now that we know that the horses and this arrogant bully made it, how about lunch?" Behind him, Spike pawed the ground.

They walked away from the stables and into the lucullan halls of Riverfall. They trekked through a wooden, ornate arch. The slender, curling carvings and paintings were built into the design of the structure, instead overlain like the portraits and tapestries that the humans had seen before. The many pictures of trees and people were painted directly on the walls, and the carved decorations must have been all one piece because neither Kelin nor Der could find a single nail or metal fastening.

Jakkobb seemed to know his way, or at least, followed his nose and led them unerringly toward the kitchens.

Among the steaming bowls and fires, Eve rose from kneeling by the oven like a blossom. She smiled and they forgot all about the horrors they witnessed in the mountains. She dipped in a half curtsy. Her brilliant ruby and gold dress seemed out of place in the kitchens, but she moved here like a leaf in the wind without so much as a dusting of crumbs.

"Welcome to the secret of Riverfall," she said in a voice like a thousand bells chiming.

Der and Kelin stared, unable to answer.

"You may just be the only humans ever to witness this place." She moved back to the counter to stir something that sweetened the air. "This is Riverfall Haven, created long before the chemmen created themselves and one of our most dear secrets."

Jakkobb cleared his throat. "Well, it may not be for too much longer. We've got too many guests."

She shrugged.

"The crown prince has arrived, and alive, but..." He narrowed his eyes. "I very much suspect that you knew already."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Indeed. I must apologize for not being there to aid at the river, either. I knew that I must be here. I had no idea... I don't know why I was not able to warn you. Perhaps the chemmen learned from last time."

Der scratched her head. "Why? How could you have known?"

The knight and Eve exchanged a glance. She smiled again. "No, of course not." Now, she looked directly at Jakkobb. "And you, taking humans under your tutelage again, are you?"

He held up his hands. "I think I'm the only one here qualified. I do it all the time with the Order."

"Yes, I'm aware. You just don't seem to have time for anyone else these days. It takes this unforeseen and absolutely horrible tragedy and after tragedy to get you on this side of the mountains again."

The knight retreated a single step. "You know, just to be detailed, we haven't crossed the Riverfall Divide yet. We still haven't crossed into Arborn's side."

She shot him a thin-lipped expression that could freeze fire.

"Er. You know, I'm going back to check on Spike and the other mounts..." He wheeled on his heel and vanished through an archway.

Eve stuck her hands on her hips and exhaled sharply.

Der frowned at the archway. "That was strange. He was the one who was hungry, after all." She shrugged. "Weird."

Kelin coughed into his hand. "Anyway, I'm hungry myself, like."

Eve shook her head. "You can't eat here. I'm creating for tomorrow's event." She started to whip the bowl again.

"Which is?" Der prompted.

The elf gave her a stern look, but said, "There is a meeting tomorrow of high ranking elves. That's common knowledge here in Riverfall – and not known anywhere else." She stopped stirring. "Children, I'm busy now, see one of the other cooks if you're hungry. I wish I could spend the time with you, but I cannot. Please come back later."

Kelin pulled Der at the shoulder. They wandered further into kitchens and grabbed some bread bowls filled with tomato soup that no one seemed to be minding. After three days of nothing but a raw fish, the soup was as sunlight is to dawn. It was thick and soothing and total bliss.

Their feet found a small, round fountain where they sat to enjoy their pilfered meal. The water sang enchantingly. Der could almost make out the words of the water's song as they tickled her ears. Around them, pictures that could have been real stood against the walls. Kelin wiped his chin, and looked around the room from the corners of his eyes. "The elves haven't left us alone until now." He fought a shiver. "This place seems very foreign now."

Der nodded, choking down the last piece of soup soaked bread. "You're right. So, let's explore."

"Are we allowed to do that?" He frowned. "Aren't we still prisoners?"

She shrugged. "Well, how about this? We will until someone says no." She hopped to her feet and spun in a circle with her arms wide. "You heard Eve. She said that we may be the only humans ever to be here. It's forbidden to outsiders! This is amazing. We really should learn all that we can." She darted out of the room, leaving Kelin to chase or be left alone.

In the next room, a fresco over the constellations and the moon glimmered with a soft radiance, as if the night sky lit up the room itself. Der pressed her nose against the wall and cupped her hands around her eyes. "The paint is glowing!" She turned around to the opposite wall.

Kelin was already staring. The mural on the other wall moved. Der retreated. "Oh, we didn't see anyone! I'm sorry."

She stared. The figures kept moving without acknowledging them. She squinted – it wasn't people, it was the painting. The people portrayed walked and moved and silently laughed as if they were actually there doing it. Several elves moved gracefully against the scenic backdrop and continued to have an eternal, formal picnic. Der could have sworn she saw Eve amongst the finely decorated elves.

Kelin relaxed and smiled at the moving portrait. The life sized figures started their endless routine again, stepping into their beginning places as seamlessly as if it were planned.

"If this is here..." Der grabbed his shoulder and pulled. "Let's see what's in the next room!"

"No, Der!" He tried to throw off her hand, but it was too late. They were in the next room, and she pulled him into the alcove. It was much darker, but gems and lights glittered like stars.

She gasped. In the corner, three walls were filled with tapestries and jewelry and a small coronet. The patterns were very similar in their sleek, endless formation. She picked up the small coronet. She twirled the platinum circle in her hands. All of metal was inlaid and etched delicately with stunning scrollwork. Around the giant emerald set in the center, was a thick line of blue that encompassed the small crown and refracted the light that struck it in a thousand different rainbows.

"What's wrong with these gems?" Kelin asked. "They're – they're not cut."

"Questing for treasure?" a melodious voice queried from behind. A pale Kaleb leaned against the wall of the alcove. "You've got a good eye then, because Pallens items are not easy to come by these days."

"Kaleb!" Der yelled, and took two steps toward him before remembering to set down the coronet on the pillow.

"P-Pallens?" Kelin stuttered, eyeing the treasure laid out before him.

The prince offered a weak smile. "Oh, indeed. Poor Pallens. She fought the chemmen with the elves, and only to lose to another enemy in another war."

Der checked into the archways and corners. "Shouldn't you have guards or something?"

He smiled weakly. "They think I'm sleeping. Peyna's orders, but I didn't feel like it."

"Are these truly relics of the paladin empire?" Kelin asked.

"Yes." He pushed himself away from the wall. "Pallens's style is very similar to most of the elvish designs – King Midan himself was elven – but there are some very noticeable differences." He gestured to the coronet. "Elves typically use more wood and stone and natural things, but Pallens used more metals, such as gold, silver, or platinum. However, the main distinctness is in the use of gems."

"We saw that there was something different," Der acknowledged.

"Aye, we elves usually cut them very carefully so they reflect light, but Pallens didn't use cut gems often at all."

"What else can be done with gems?"

Kaleb smiled. "They had a way of melting gems into whatever pattern or shape they wanted and somehow getting them to act as prisms too. It's beautiful. Even we didn't know how they did it."

Der picked the coronet again and studied it intently for any imperfection. She ran her fingers over it to find a bump or maybe an air bubble. "It's flawless, absolutely flawless." She looked up at the prince. "A remnant of the old Empire. I'm going to break it. I know my luck."

He grinned. "In that case, you'll just have to find another relic of Pallens to replace it."

"Sounds like an adventure." She set the coronet back on its velvet pillow. She grinned, glancing around at

the encasing art and delicate, intricate architecture. "This place is nothing like I ever imagined. Like that tree growing into the window there. It's obviously meant to be there." The entire window and wall was part of a larger, intentional theme that included the tree, the plants and the ivy, both real and painted.

Kelin said, "All the, well, I don't want to use the word streets – that's just too mundane, but all the avenues and walkways are so wide! An alley in Second Acron was barely wide enough for both me and Der. But here..."

The prince smiled. "I'm glad that you find our little haven excitable."

"Yeah," Kelin agreed. "I don't think Der's feet have touched the ground yet."

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that? I *never* had my feet on the ground, even in Riversbridge."

"I know how you feel," Kaleb said. "We'll find ground though, and hit it running."

She grinned. "And kicking too."

He turned at a noise behind him, to see a patrol making it rounds throughout the city. He shook his head. "Patrols in an elven home. I'll never get used to it."

Der looked over his shoulders at the elves. The patrol walked in step, even their solemn faces exactly matched each other. Every one of them carried a sword, a bow and a lidded quiver strapped to their backs. Most of them were men, but a few women marched with them.

Kaleb muttered something in elvish under his breath.

Der blinked. "Well, that was rather rude."

The prince stared at her. "How in the corners of hell did you understand that?"

Her mouth hung wide. "Oh, uh, the physician gave me the language when he healed me. I didn't ask for it."

Kelin waved a hand in front of Der's face. "What the hell are you two saying?"

Kaleb ran his hand over his forehead and sighed. "Kelin," he said in Common, "Go see Master Peyna. He'll curse and lament, but he'll give you our language."

"Oh." He dropped his shoulders.

"Now," Kaleb continued, "We elves do not have a standing army, not the way humans define one. Yes, we have guards and many of our people know combat, but they also have other lives. They bring their arms when war is so rarely necessary, but soldiering isn't all they do."

"Makes sense, I suppose," Kelin said. But, his eyes were elsewhere. The gems and metals of the treasures in the room glittered too brightly.

Der's attention and eyes wandered back to the artifacts from the paladin empire. The palm of her hand rested on the velvet pillow. "I didn't realize how different we are before. You knew all along."

"I didn't know how similar we were until I came to know you and Kelin though."

"Thank you," Kelin said.

The prince sighed magnificently. "I've heard that some say that elves are invidious. That is to say that we provoke envy. We have no intentions of such. This is how we live."

"But, it's so much better. It's not fair. I mean, your camp was too normal but this place is beautiful, smarter, you know more. Why can't humans live like this? Just a spoonful of your wisdom could do us wonders."

"It's not medicine, Der." He smiled and the light bounced off his white teeth. "Ah, but I doubt everyone would share your enthusiasm, besides people need to learn for themselves. The wisdom is already there for them to learn. From what I've seen of humans, and please don't take this personally, is they tend to be too short sighted. They don't plan for the whole of tomorrow. Then, they only take care of kin or friends, they don't take everyone into perspective."

"But, that's how I grew up. My parents weren't wrong."

The prince shook his head. "I never said they were. However, that's the way things are done." He put his hands behind his head and walked away from the wall. "The most profound thing I realized when I traveled alone was that humans destroy more than they create. There is no equilibrium. Nature tends toward that, and so do the elves."

She glared at him, but said, "Well, what about the chemmen then?"

Kaleb twisted his fingers together. "They exploit nature and tried their best to control it – and that is not equilibrium." He sighed. "I don't know why – for humans or chemmen. Nature supplies everything you need and more. The earth is our true mother – she gives us everything. But, I don't believe they ever comprehended that. The storm-readers tried to conquer her, like they did with people, and it scarred her."

"Mum used to tell me that nature was about balance," Kelin mused. "I remember when we would be gathering firewood. So, wouldn't the chemmen be the natural balance to the elves?"

Both Der and Kaleb stared. The prince finally shook his head. "No. Perhaps. But, there are so many differences that don't balance out. The chemmen created themselves, elves were always this way. And, besides, the chemmen outnumber we elves. Offspring is a resource to them, not a family."

Der opened her mouth but shut it for a long moment. Then, she frowned. "But, Thistle cares about his

son.”

Kaleb wrung his hands together. “Thistle’s different. I was speaking of elves, humans and chemmen overall, not individuals. Elves, and most humans, believe every person has the potential to be beautiful or to contribute to beauty in a family or community, and that every individual life is important.” His shoulders slouched. “To say their world is lifeless is a lie, but not all life is sacred, like I used to believe. It can become corrupted. Some of it would be better off if it had never been born.”

Der sucked in her breath so quickly she almost gagged. Beside her, Kelin gasped.

Kaleb plunged on ahead. “You don’t know how much effort it took me to say that. I love life. I would never ill use nature or take a life if I didn’t need to. You think I enjoyed killing those cultists? No. Whenever I hunt, I say a prayer for the animal’s soul and explain to it that is part of the cycle of nature. But, I want to kill the storm-readers just because they are storm-readers.” He hung his head. “I’m horrible.”

“No, no, you’re not.” Der started to pace in a tight circle. “I understand what you’re saying, I killed them too and I enjoyed it. But, look at Thistle and Thalon. If Thistle is good, he made that decision on his own, and not as a chemman.”

Kaleb breathed out slowly. “I know better than what I said. Thistle is an individual. Race doesn’t determine who people become – humans don’t have to be farmers, elves don’t have to learn how to sing. Race is a heritage, but it doesn’t have to be a destiny. Thalon was raised well, I can see that much plainly enough.” He tapped his chin. “Race doesn’t define a person, the person’s lifestyle does. So called races usually band together because they have a shared history, and they’re similar to each other. However, every person has the choice to become who they will be. Elf, chemmen, humans, fairies, gnomes and a myriad of the others, we all have the choice. You and I both have it.”

“Elves are so much wiser, because I’m not sure I understood what you just said,” Der said.

“Yeah,” Kelin agreed.

Kaleb shook his head. “We’ve just had so much more time to learn.”

Der frowned. “Then why are the storm-readers evil? They have eternity too.”

“Well, now that’s the question.” The prince’s blue eyes burned. “And what they did – we can’t forget about that. They killed hundreds of thousands, even millions to achieve immortality. Millions – can we even understand that number? Truly?”

Slowly, Der and Kelin shook their heads.

Kelin couldn’t meet the elf’s eyes. “So, why didn’t you stop it before they were immortal? When they were killing...?”

“We didn’t know.” He held up his hands. “Perhaps we should have, but we didn’t know until it was too late. That’s what my father taught me. So, when they turned on the elves, we banished them. Banished to Darkreign.”

“Darkreign?” Kelin repeated.

“That’s how it translates into Common.”

Der shrugged. “That explains itself.”

“That’s not what they call it,” Kaleb whispered. “They call it home.” He sighed. “It’s a place that needs a magical bridge to enter – and no one is supposed to be able to leave. That’s the lore, anyway.”

Der snorted and shook her head. “Fair enough, but banishing an entire race?”

He shook his head. “The deed was done before I was born. No, it wasn’t right, but it’s done. It was the end of one of the Centum Wars, and not the worst of those either. Maybe it was the wrong decision. We elves are just as fallible as any other race. We make our own decisions. I don’t think there was one, absolutely right thing to do back then.”

In the wake of that hot silence, Kelin raised his hand. “Um, if it’s a magically sealed realm or whatever, how were they banished there?”

Kaleb sighed. “The Baroness of Elloan. She’s a most powerful sorceress and psychic. She did it at my father’s command. She’s also a target of their vengeance, I’m sure. They must still fear her greatly – more than they’ll admit.”

“Well, if she’s still around, why can’t she just banish them all back again?”

The prince shook his head. “I do not believe that it is so simple. I know that we could seal the bridges again – if we weren’t scattered across the continent, but why? They’re already here.”

“Ah,” Kelin mused, “So, she just opened and closed the bridges, is that what you’re saying? That she can’t just remove just the storm-readers in the world at her command?”

Kaleb nodded. “Yes. That would be impossible.” He began to walk, and the others followed.

They passed through corridors of trees, arched perfectly over the street. The sunlight gently descended through the branches to set the grove alight. A small stream ran through the middle of the city, and they crossed a wooden bridge, with four, strong living trees as posts. Once on the other side, a mural that overlooked the heart of the elvish town drew Der’s eyes.

She walked in front of it. "This is your family..." She gazed at the four figures, they were so lifelike she swore they could've stepped right off the wall. Kaleb and his brother were younger by a few years, and she couldn't ever recall seeing her friend smiling that happily in life.

"Yes." He dropped his face.

Der's eyes sought out King Valladen, and she took her time studying the late ruler. He was an older Kaleb, wearing an exquisite crown. The crown of Arbourn was sleek and elegant, and made the little coronet from Pallens seem like a plain circle. Crushed gems surrounded the larger, many faceted jewels. In the center was what looked like a gem, but it was gold.

Kelin ran his fingers over the still painting. "It's amazing, so lifelike."

Her eyes drifted back over the face of the king. "This is truly you, then. The crown prince, soon to be the king of the elves."

"The king, yes." He sighed. "In the back of my mind, I knew this was my destiny, and I studied my father." His fingers extended to rest on his father's face. "But, I never thought the time would come. My father should have lived forever."

"But, your destiny has arrived." Der half grinned.

Kaleb's lip trembled and he dropped his gaze. "I don't want it. I want my mother and father. You don't understand, we're *immortal*. We feel things more intensely when one of ours perishes. The price is so much higher and we'll *never* see them again – not even in an afterlife."

Kelin looked away. "I'm so sorry."

The prince rubbed his face. "I'm too young, and I'm certainly not ready. Many of the elves are upset about a child ruler. They have said nothing, but I see the way they watch me."

"Is that why you find it easier to confide in a mortal? To us? Someone else who is unsure of what will become of their life?"

Der nodded.

Kaleb hinted at a smile. "I suppose so, but you are friends."

Kelin grinned. "Always good to have royalty as a friend."

Der leaned back with her hands behind her head. "At least you know what will become of you. The king of the elves."

"You understand I won't be king of all the elves, just the kingdom of Arbourn."

"I'm sorry, king of the elven kingdom. You'll probably be the most powerful man alive." She put a hand to her forehead and laughed. "And you're taking advice from a mortal, penniless warrior."

"You're hardly penniless, Der."

"No, I am." She grinned. "I have absolutely no money on me. And you haven't made us pay for anything."

He nodded. "Elves live differently. We don't use money unless dealing with the younger races. Besides, money is not something you'll ever have to worry about, I promise. If we survive this war."

She grinned. "That's one less concern anyway." She walked over to a window. "I've been meaning to ask, why are we here?"

"It's safe. The high elves are going to hold a war council here, because Long Range is unclean."

"Long Range Palace. Your palace. When will you be crowned?"

He shrugged. "Whenever this war is over. I wouldn't waste time on such a ceremony now. Given elves, it must be an elaborate ceremony, something incredible by even our standards. A king's coronation for the elves will be several years of celebration. I will show you a festival. Besides, I have to wait for a new crown to be made."

"Oh, you make a new crown for every king?"

Kaleb shook his head. "No, but the crown itself has vanished. There's never been more than one king – my parents built this kingdom aeons ago. The chemmen must've destroyed his crown by now. It isn't just an object, but the idea of the crown. The crown itself is a light for life, like the sun."

"I am so very sorry for you."

"Thank you." Kaleb closed his eyes. "The crown itself was only a physical symbol of the idea. I would prefer to have it, but it's a trivial detail in comparison."

"I don't think so. It was your father's crown. I lost my father's sword."

He kept his eyes closed. "No, I don't want it. I don't want this life. I wish the chemmen had stayed gone, and then we wouldn't have to do something so horrible as take life – or loose life." He looked back up at them, and his eyes watered with unshed tears. "I fear that if – I fear that to survive we'll have to commit another tragedy."

Kelin shrugged and Der held up her empty hands.

"The absolute worst part is that I not only have to show bravery when I don't feel brave, but that I actually have to be brave."

Chapter Sixteen

Council of War

Nothing allowed a better bath than candles, a warming fire next to the tub, wine, chocolate, bath salts, oils and lots of steamy mountain water. Only Kelin's nose and toes poked away the surface. On the ceiling above him, the water's reflection danced liked children at play. He wiggled his toes. He'd never had a bath where someone else hadn't used the water first. It almost made the ordeals so far worthwhile. Almost. It certainly helped to drown those memories.

He'd never had this brown stuff before, but it was very fulfilling, both sweet and creamy at the same time. He savored each delicately crafted piece. And the wine too! They said that it was only a thimbleful in that glass and the rest was water, and his head still spun. He settled for gently sipping occasionally, and relaxing in the warming hum it brought to his entire body.

New clothes, including shoes, were laid out for him. He didn't ask where they'd taken his old clothes. With any luck, to burn them.

In the moment, he was able to just let everything go. The chemmen were still an ancient myth. He'd have to go back to the forge come the morrow. For the moment, he was safe. He spared a thought for Derora, and hoped that she enjoyed her bath just as much and, for the moment, wasn't getting into trouble.

In a narrow, oval room, with the walls inlaid with glowing star patterns, the elves assembled in a long ellipse. Heaviness weighed the air down. Off to the side, a table was laden with an abundance of small foods. Nothing as large as an entrée, but enough to sustain people for a very long discussion.

Sir Amthros, Knight-Captain Jakkobb, Duke Farallon, the duchess, several other elven faces and Eve sat stiffly on long, mahogany benches. The crown prince leaned in a high backed chair, each arm on its own armrest. Above his head, a picture representing the four seasons in one circle adorned the chair. Behind him, dawn's light began to warm the room through a stained glass window depicting a laughing family. The lattice walls surrounding this room were covered with natural growing ivy, kept warm inside in the winter. The walls stopped, but the domed ceiling, supported by pillars, flew higher. It was decorated with patterns of the forest. Natural light flowed into the room through the space between the ceiling, the walls and the windows.

Below their feet, a map anchored the stone floor. The entire kingdom was delicately drawn. The mountains even rose off the floor and the rivers flowed.

Kaleb smiled at the duke. "It is well to see your nose healed."

The duke grumbled and rubbed it. "Yes. Master Peyna had wasted on his supplies on that girl. Thankfully, there were more supplies here."

The prince nodded. "Of course."

Sir Jakkobb walked over to the prince and bent low so that only the duke and prince could hear. "The chemman prisoner has requested an audience. He also says he will say nothing but to the three of us."

"Absolutely not!" Farallon roared. Then, he glanced around at the others who stared at him.

The knight pursed his lips. "You must consider the possibility that there truly is a chemmen renegade."

"And married an elf who died just before he stepped into our lives? We remember the last time a chemman promised to be different. The one who wielded that terrible, silent weapon."

"There is the child," Kaleb whispered.

Jakkobb shrugged. "Or, my lord duke, we're just so blinded by our knowledge of the chemmen that we cannot see the truth. After all the humans told us the truth in their trial."

"Right. They told us their truth, captain, that doesn't mean that is what is real. It's just their perceptions of it."

Kaleb leaned forward and frowned. "Indeed. Perhaps we should just hear what he has to say."

Farallon's reaction was hijacked by the double doors at the end of the hall. They cracked open and several hooded robes slipped into the room. Kaleb half rose out of his chair. "Who?" he mouthed.

The shortest of the hoods, tossed back his facial covering. Tousled auburn hair adorned a young face marked with nervous, gold eyes.

"Alsalon," the crown prince breathed. He threw himself away from his throne and caught the younger elf in an embrace. Alsalon hugged him back tightly. After a moment, Kaleb pushed the younger prince back and held him by the shoulders. "I'm proud of you, little brother. You made it here safely." He choked back the emotions in his voice, but he could feel them drowning in his lungs. None of the other members of the council had even raised their eyebrows at this display. He squeezed his brother's shoulders. "You must tell me of your escape when this meeting is concluded."

Alsalon nodded. "Of course." He batted back tears of his own. "I missed you."

"And I as well."

The younger prince took a seat on one of the benches while Kaleb returned to the wooden throne. Intently, he took the space of a heartbeat to look into the eyes of everyone present. Every one of them was vital to their survival as a kingdom, even as a people. He tried not to flinch at the thought of one of them being a traitor. His eyes wandered over to the duke. He shook his head to push that idea away. He'd always been a loyal friend of his father's. He'd fought the chemmen up to the Banishment. It couldn't be possible.

The prince cleared his throat. "The chemmen want our people slain because their hate demands it. We are here in Riverfall because Long Range Palace has been abandoned for the first time in our endless history. The elven court has never been forced to seek sanctuary before now. The crown of the realm is missing – something else that we have also never been without." He raised his head. "However, that changes nothing."

Several gasps whizzed around the room.

The prince's eyes didn't flinch. "It changes nothing. We are still the same people. We are still willing to fight to protect our lives. I will not continue to run whilst the storm-readers nip at our heels until we run ourselves off a cliff."

"Where shall we begin, Your Highness?" Eve asked, sitting straight with her hands resting in her lap.

Kaleb rubbed his forehead. "This supposed spy for the chemmen."

"There's a spy?!" exploded the mayor of Riverfall. Her dark face flushed deeply. Nearly everyone in the room edged to the lip of their seats.

The prince held up his hands. "Perhaps, and it may be someone of rank. I do not wish to believe that there is indeed a spy amongst us. I wholeheartedly wish that it is just an attempt to sow discord in a time when trust is most needed."

Sir Jakkobb raised both eyebrows. "However, good people, I do not think that this news is prudent to ignore. They trapped us on the river."

"What could possibly possess an elf to turn on his own people?" asked the mayor of Riverfall.

Jakkobb grunted. "Perhaps someone wants to improve his own rank." He watched as that thought settled across their faces. Most elves didn't even think about trying to better their status. There was no real point in a society where people did not perish and few to none wallowed in poverty.

"Perhaps this elf just assumes that we will be victorious and entirely misunderstood what the enemy is capable of doing," one of the men said.

Duke Farallon shot out of his seat, his feet stomping very near to the map. "This is outrageous! What you have not said is that the source of this information is a chemman, *and there are no chemmen traitors!* How do you think that they found us on the river? He told them! There is no disloyal elf – it's all that bloody chemman!"

Jakkobb and Sir Amthros watched him coolly.

Prince Alsalon shook his head. "It's not sensible. If indeed there is an elf aiding the chemmen in their horrific crimes, then he must know that they'll kill him too." His frown deepened. "Besides, if a chemman told you this, why on earth would you ever believe it?"

Duke Farallon coughed, and all the elves who had been on the river did not meet each other's eyes. Kaleb sighed loudly. "Because this chemman had a son."

The mayor of Riverfall shook her head. "Why is that significant? The chemmen have many children."

"No." The crown prince struggled to push the air out of his lungs up to his vocal cords. "The child is half elven."

No one gasped this time. A thick silence fell like a blanket that smothers a fire.

"The chemmen were banished from this earth," the mayor said softly. "How is that possible?"

"We always thought that some may have escaped the Banishment," Jakkobb offered.

Lady Sabille fiddled with her fingers in her lap. "That place – Darkreign – it was supposed to be their prison. How did that one escape? How did any of this happen?"

Eve looked down at the map, at where the one of the entrances to Darkreign once was. All of them had been sealed. She sighed. "Their prison became their fortress. They're resourceful. We weren't watching. They've been plotting this since the day they were thrown off this earth, and they will not stop until everyone but them has fallen by their sword."

Farallon coughed. "No. We can't even spare their children – we've made that mistake before and it cost us dearly. That's why King Valladen chose to banish them from this realm – we couldn't tolerate their entire breed trying to kill us! Remember, children born to immortal parents are immortal. They all had to be killed or banished, every single one of them. Now, you feel for another child because he's half ours, but, don't forget what that other half is."

Amthros hung his head in his hands. "He may not be like the others. I pray that we need not take such action again." He stared at his hands. "I don't think I could even defend my life again."

"It is a tragedy to bring those memories back from their rest for you," Lady Sabille said.

Eve shook her head. "Life is still sacred, my lord. It is our duties as immortals not to forget that as they have."

"They weren't immortals," he snapped back. "They're still human. They just didn't die like their supposed to."

"Regardless, my lord, life is still sacred, even though they choose to desecrate it."

Amthros ran his hands over his face. "Mayhap we should just commit the sin and kill every last one we can find." He cracked his knuckles, and the elves flinched as he did so.

Eve slapped a hand over her mouth. "We shall do no such thing!" She withdrew her hand. "It's obvious that the seals on Darkreign were not enough. Perhaps we should do more to encourage those locks and banish them again."

"Then, they'll just return someday, my lady," the knight replied. "We can't go through this again. Destroy them all. Except the children. We can teach them better this time since we know what to expect."

"Are you speaking of the half chemman?" Lady Sabille inquired.

"The half-chemman is an abomination," the mayor spat.

"He didn't choose how he was born." Jakkobb replied stiffly.

"Well, what can we do?" Alsalon asked.

The dragoon knight didn't raise his eyes from the map, but said, "Stop fleeing. Win a battle. Got to climb the mountain one stone at a time."

"And, how would we do that?" Amthros queried.

The other knight frowned. "I don't know yet. As for the race, kill the soldiers, certainly. However, I agree that we should send the rest back to Darkreign and make certain that neither of us are able to open that entrance. For now, we must have a goal we can attain."

"Where could we even attack? Where can we win?" Kaleb mused.

Farallon stared at the map. "They expect us to attack Long Range. They want us to attack our own sacred ground."

"Do they still have people there?" the dragoon asked. "Or did they just piss on it and give chase to the rest of us?"

"Mind your tongue, sir!" yipped Lady Sabille.

He shrugged, and turned his attention back to the miniature palace on the map. "Long Range would be a fool's errand and we would only damage the palace and the lands around it and lose more lives."

"They want that," the duke snarled as he folded his arms.

Kaleb pursed his lips and nodded. His eyes were absorbed in the tiny color carving of the palace in its mountains that was his home. "That is a fight we shall avoid. She must be freed by victory elsewhere."

"Well, where else could we strike with victory assured?" Alsalon asked.

"We don't know," his older brother replied. "We don't know where they are." He cocked his head, eyebrows narrowing. "It appears that they are using Darkreign as their fortress, and most likely housing their army there while sending out raids against our motherland. I studied history – their entrances may be anywhere." He stared at the map, as if willing entrances to be shown. Then, his eyes drifted to the walls.

"Is something wrong, my prince?" the duke asked.

Kaleb peered at the ivy enshrouded wall. Finally, he shook his head. "No. I thought I heard something."

"There have also been attacks on the Pelippen River," one elf said. Small illusory fires began to glow over the map, lighting up the destroyed areas. "I doubt they will remain there though."

"First time in thousands of years we've been assaulted in our own lands." The leader of Riverfall tapped her fingers on the back of her other hand.

Eve closed her sapphire eyes. "I heard a silence on the wind blowing up the river. The rumor may be true. They may have that silent weapon again."

"It was destroyed, lady," one of the elves who had been silent so far said. "We watched it melt. Perhaps you sensed something else."

No one spoke for a moment, each dwelling of the memories and stories of that noiseless blade and the warrior who wielded it.

The crown prince shook off a shudder. "They may just be taunting us. We know that they must have grander plans, but wanted to scatter us."

"It worked," Eve said softly. "We are not unified."

"They took our leaders," Amthros muttered. "They founded this kingdom."

"Are we not the leaders now?" Kaleb asked sharply. He settled back into the throne and eyed the wall of ivy again. It was starting to shake.

The knight didn't meet his gaze and instead looked back to the map. "We need to find them and their strength inside of our lands before we can truly do anything against them." The knight of Arbourn's eyes scanned the whole of the map. "We must act soon too."

"We have no army. We're scattered. We need more time," Jakkobb said flatly. "The dragoons are on their way, but I fear they may not make it in time."

"We need to win this war quickly." The duke stared darkly at his own domain and the few fires burning over it. There were murmurs and nods of consent from everyone.

There was a very loud crack behind the wall of ivy and muffled cursing. All the elves turned to face the wall with wide eyes. Jakkobb rose from his seat, balling a fist stronger than a hammer. Kaleb swallowed the rising bile, but something about the imprecations just didn't sound chemmen.

"Damn!" a voice called from the very top of the wall. The owner of the voice's foot slipped on a vine and lost its balance entirely. Derora tumbled and hung upside down on the wall for a bare instant before the vine trapping her ankle snapped and she plummeted to the floor. She lay splayed and dazed for a moment, and then jumped to her feet. She absently brushed herself off, straightened her sword and pulled a few leaves from her hair as she limped toward the nearest bench. "Sorry I'm late. But, the door into this room is missing from the outside. I had to find another way in. You might want to find the spell that's messing with it." She took a seat between Amthros and the mayor.

She glanced around the conference expectantly. "What have I missed?" She met a range of expressions. Jakkobb's face was twisted halfway between stunned and laughter. Farallon was livid. Everyone else was mostly surprised.

Kaleb ran a hand over his face and looked at her from between his fingers. "Der, what are you doing here?"

"I'm not being left out of this."

Farallon's face shone as red as a strawberry. "You have a remarkable talent for being in places you should not be. Unless Carenth Himself granted you special orders to be here, I want you gone. Now."

"I'm just trying to help." Der kicked her foot out toward the map, as if to point at it. "That's amazing. Look at it."

"Go away!"

"No."

The duke gripped the polished bench so hard splinters broke off under his hand. "Let me explain this to you, little mortal. We're full elves, you're only one sixteenth. We are elven royalty, elven nobility, leaders of our people, or very high ranked military officers with much battle experience. Don't think you can play with us, child."

Der shrugged and folded her hands neatly in her lap and, on an afterthought, straightened her shoulders. Farallon crashed his fist into his knee. "Get out of here!"

"How many noses —"

Kaleb snapped his fingers. "Der, please."

"Oh, come on, Kaleb, I'm trying to help."

The duke gasped so much, he hit a higher octave.

This time, the prince clapped his hands. "My lord! When we met I kept my identity disguised and they came into the habit of referring to me by a casual name. It is no dishonor to me."

The duke switched to elvish. "This mortal has no respect. She is nothing more than an arrogant infant."

"Peace, Farallon," Kaleb replied in the same language. "In this war we need such an attitude."

"My prince, that's not an attitude, that's insanity."

"Hey!" Der interjected.

Kaleb held up his hands. "That's as may be, but she's in this war as much as you or I. She and Kelin have been tortured at the hand of our enemy, which is more than I can say for the both of us."

Der rubbed her hands over her face. The torture now seemed to be only a dazzling splinter in her memory. It was enough to sidetrack her for the moment.

"Giving the duke refuge," the mayor of Riverfall interceded gently, "Derora Saxen, you were captured under almost condemning circumstances."

She huffed. "Yeah, well, he's still wrong." Then, she stared at the mayor. "Who are you, my lady, and how did you know that?"

The mayor straightened her dress over her knees. "Your story is known, child."

"Guards!" the duke roared. The dark armored figures appeared out of the shadows. Duke Farallon jumped from his seat. "Get her out of this place!"

Der successfully dodged one questing pair of hands and landed right in the others. She twisted and kicked out, but to no avail.

Jakkobb managed to cough, but his shoulders were shaking and his hand clamped tightly over his mouth.

"Wait! Wait!" She let her feet slide, forcing the guards to drag her. "I've figured out how you can defeat the chemmen!"

"Hold!" a graceful voice commanded. Eve's curls slipped and rolled like silk as she tilted her head. A frown creased her face. "What say you, Derora?"

The guards didn't release their grip on her shoulders. Der still pulled against them. "Invade the chemmen! Look, we're running with our tail between our legs. We're scared of them, but they need to be scared of us. We must strike fear into the heart of our fear!"

"Eloquence without meaning!" the duke roared.

Finally, Jakkobb laughed. He clapped his hands together three times. He swallowed another guffaw. "I like it, Der, I really like it, but it wouldn't work." He earned himself several accusing glares.

She sagged against the guards' grips. "Why not?"

"Because not even the elves dare their sanctuary," Lady Sabille explained. She smoothed her skirt over her knees. "The old legends declare, rather ardently, that no one leaves Darkreign. That is why we banished the chemmen there."

"So," Der licked her lips, "If no one leaves, why are they back?"

The knight-captain's grin faded. "Excellent point. However, my reasons for not offering such an idea was more about tactics than legends. It's their ground and we honestly know nothing about it. It'd be impossible to bring an army. And, if we sent our soldiers there, who would defend those elves in towns and cities all across Arbourn?"

"Oh." She completely deflated.

"It doesn't matter!" Farallon hollered. "She's still evicted!"

The crown prince sighed so loudly that his voice carried over all of them. "Der, just take a seat and shut the hell up."

"No," the duke protested, but it fell limply from his lips.

She pursed her lips. "And we don't allow weapons here, child."

Der wrinkled her nose. "Uh, why? This is a council of war, after all."

"Der." Kaleb held up a finger. "Be quiet, please. Let's just carry on."

Farallon was still shaking his head. "That is not wise, my prince. She could be a chemmen agent after all this. She could be proffering a very tasty trap. Telling us that we should invade the storm-reader stronghold, it's impossible!"

"Fine." Der sniffed. "Then, I'll go there. You don't have to."

Lady Sabille put a soft hand on her husband's arm before he could bark again. "Please, let us return to the purpose of this council instead of needlessly arguing."

The crown prince nodded in agreement. He half-grinned. "Yes, insulting Der may feel like we're accomplishing something, but it does not bring us any closer to defeating the chemmen."

Der made a face at the floor.

Jakkobb cleared his throat. "Since it's obvious she's staying, shall we return to the topic of this council?" Agreement circled around the room. Farallon reluctantly nodded his head while glaring daggers at Der.

One of the other elves frowned. "We know they've been concentrating around Long Range." The features of the map on the floor lost their brilliant colors and sank into the floor. Immediately, another meticulous, stunningly perfect image of the elven palace and its hinterlands rose from the floor. "There have been attacks radiating out from there." Several small fires exploded into existence on the map. "It's almost a perfect circle. They've destroyed everything they could find there. It's a wonder why our forests aren't burning."

"They can't set fire to the forests. The earth would put them out as soon as she sensed it. They're trying to hide from nature as best they can." The prince's eyes reflected the magic flames.

"Why?" Der asked.

"The forest is," he pressed his lips together, "It's more alive and awake in the elven lands. If the chemmen did something outright and direct to it, the forest would retaliate."

"Oh, right. Then, why didn't she warn you about the initial attack, where you lost the king and queen?"

A silence full of glares greeted her.

Even Kaleb's eyes dropped to the floor. "Der, I don't know. There may have actually been a spy in our ranks."

"I know. I believe Thistle. Which is another point, if there is a such a spy, then the chemmen are going to know what you decide to do. They found us on the river easily enough."

"We will keep our plans to ourselves, girl," the mayor snapped. "We do not need a child's consent."

"And what if the spy is in this very room?" Jakkobb asked in a low voice. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the map, but Amthros's eyes jerked to Farallon for half a heartbeat.

"Then we may already be lost," Kaleb leaned back in his small throne. "We are the leaders here. However, I do believe that our captive chemman lied to us. As of now, I trust everyone in this room." He put both his arms back on their armrests. "We should do what this council was intended to do. We should determine where the storm-readers will strike next – and prevent it."

"We don't know where they are, how many of them there are," Farallon snorted. "We can't guess where they will strike next. Their attacks have been everywhere and lightning fast. We know they want the princes. So perhaps here is their next target, if they can find this hidden city."

"They should not be able to, even if the spy told them where," the mayor said.

"In order to prevent more innocent deaths," Amthros mused, "We should distract them. We need their attention elsewhere, but I know of naught we can do. They have us on their game board."

"Like attacking them?" Der interjected. "That'd get their attention."

"Be quiet," Farallon snapped.

"No. This damn conversation isn't –"

Lady Sabille gasped. "Do not curse around the princes."

Der blinked and turned to just look at the lady. "Pardon me? Ka – Prince Edillon's decisions will save or break your eternal nation. I sure as hell hope that he can handle the word shit." She glanced back over at the crown prince and tried to grin. "Right?"

He nodded slightly. "I would hope so too, but now is not the time for cursing." He looked back over at the knight. "I believe you were proffering something important?"

The knight of Arborn sighed. "We have no way to end this war quickly. This could persist for centuries. We should do something, and do it quickly. Draw them out, we need a battle."

One of the other elves shook his head. "A fool's errand, Amthros. Such rash action will only get us exposed and killed."

"I believe it to be our best choice."

The cook shook her head. "No, sir knight, patience may be our ally."

Amthros said, "No, what I am speculating upon is that we should drawn them out, their army, and lead them away from destroying more hapless towns and people."

"We don't have an army enough to field against them," Lady Sabille protested.

"No, but make them think that we do."

"They won't battle us openly," Eve said. "They know they have the advantage in hiding and lightning raids."

"Then, we need something that they cannot resist, my lady. We need something to earn us just a couple of weeks to gather our forces. Winter draws nigh, and if we do not act, this may be our final autumn. Remember, my friends, as the autumnal sunlight fades, so do the brilliant colors of the season."

Jakkobb said, "We're doing all that is possible. Forces are amassing, but even with the tree paths, it still takes time."

Der pressed her thumb to her chin. "What about killing their leaders? In a battle. That would be a distraction, make them cover their own tails."

Everyone stared blankly at her. She sighed. This might be in some secret, magical elven haven, but those were the exact same looks she was used to from home. A thought began to itch, maybe it was her after all. Maybe it wasn't that everyone else was weird. Maybe it really was her.

"Can't." Kaleb shook his head slowly. "Uh."

Jakkobb chuckled dryly. "A dragoon party from Silver Dawn routed that outpost where you were tortured. No one was found. It wouldn't work, kid. Good try though."

Der blinked and shrugged. "Alright. Um. So, raid them in Darkreign. Just a small party. That would seize their attention."

"Derora," Eve began.

"No, listen to me!" She jumped up to stand on the bench. "Finally, I'm taller than everyone. Alright, listen. If the chemmen are running all over the surface of the world, raiding your towns, killing your people, watching us duck and hide every time we think one of them is nearby. Do you think they're watching their own lands too much?"

"Sit down, girl!" Farallon yelled like dog on a thin leash.

She looked down at him. "I can't kill a chemman." She paused, earning even stronger glares. She'd already fought and killed chemmen, and everyone here probably knew that. "Without a sword, and I can't say my intentions if you keep interrupting me."

The duke's eyes bulged and his jaw hung too far open for any words to come out.

Der shifted her gaze to Kaleb. Farallon's glare was sharp like a knife's edge. "I'm young, and I'm probably see things in a simplistic manner, but at least I'm not making this too complicated. You need a method to end this quickly, and here it is. Invade them! You have the men. You're not using them because you don't think you know where to attack. Right now, you're merely waiting for them to come and attack you, and every day you lose more ground and people and time. If you want to live, shove this fight down their throats." She could imagine the blade. "Victors and vanquished."

"We can't possibly do this," the mayor protested weakly.

"No!" Farallon shouted, jumping to his feet. "That wasn't even attempted during the Centum Wars. Never! No one in the history of the entire world has ever been so foolish!"

"Surprise!" Der hollered back to him. "They certainly won't expect it!" She felt a smile force itself upon her lips; and she did her best to bite it back. She couldn't think of why she would smile now. "Nothing else has stopped them. Yes, they've retreated for a few centuries, but out of necessity, not out of fear. If this is successful, at worst, it will drive them back for another three and a half thousand years, but not for mysterious reasons like in the Centum Wars. Because we outsmarted them and raised our own banner in their precious city." She took a deep breath, giving her mind time to catch up with her mouth. "They started this war, and you're just sitting here letting them finish it!"

The elves were absolutely speechless. They sat on their mahogany benches as if turned to stone.

Jakkobb drummed his hands on his thighs. "Well... The chemmen wouldn't see that coming."

"I have never heard anything so improvident!" Farallon yipped, his face flushing ruby red. "That, my friends, is madness. What I would expect from a mortal."

"The most reward is from the greatest risk," Prince Alsalon said softly.

"Yeah," Der added. "It's just enough to make it look like we've attacked their stronghold in Darkreign. Just enough to hold their focus while you get your army together."

"Well, you may be a tactical genius, or an idiot." The knight-captain leaned back, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Of course, the raiding party would have to have a load of guts between the lot of them."

"And wouldn't mind losing them," Amthros said through a glassy stare.

"We know nothing of their lands in Darkreign!" Lady Sabille exclaimed. "Nothing."

Farallon shook himself free. "This has never been tried for many a good reason, captain. You want to set foot inside their domain, you wouldn't be able to leave, not that we'd miss you. It's sealed – there's no way to escape. Even before that, there was the lore, no one left Darkreign."

"The chemmen disproved that," Der said flatly.

Amthros scowled. "I'm loathing saying this, but this raid would be enough of a distraction for us to gather our strength – if they believe it."

"Of course..." Jakkobb stalled. "Of course, we don't know any path into Darkreign, let alone out."

Eve said, "We could attempt another distraction. We know that the chemmen have three priority targets remaining. The two princes and myself. Without doing something to make a play, the chemmen will find us like they found our beloved king and queen."

Der quietly stepped back on to the floor. "Why would they want you, Eve?" She frowned thoughtfully. "You're not just a cook, are you?"

Eve shook her head. "No, I am not. The name that everyone knows to call me now is Evelyn of Elloan. Yes, I took a human name, but that is a story for another day. I am the Baroness of Elloan, and it was I who banished the chemmen into Darkreign and sealed them there in case the legends that no one could leave were not true." She sat primly on the bench. "It's misdirection, sir knight. We don't know the size of their force, so we don't know how large of an army we need."

Jakkobb shook his head vehemently. "No, my lady, there are less dangerous roads for you."

Der cocked her head. "I knew you couldn't be just a cook! But, if you're a magic user, why can't you just tell us what the chemmen are planning? Or who this traitor is?"

Eve smiled sadly. "My dear, I am powerful, but I do not know everything. I simply cannot divine anything that I wish. I would wish to know if the chemman is lying about a spy, but sadly, I do not."

The duke distractedly waved his hand over the map. "My lady, I also must protest. You may be the only one who can damn them back into Darkreign. I must protest."

"I see our future without attempting this madness." She looked to Der. "If we do nothing to argue our fate, then we will all perish." She held out her hands. "I will be the bait. It will buy your raid a few days, which can buy the army their couple weeks."

"This won't work, my lady!" one of the other elves shouted.

"Why not? They said the tactic of the Battle of the Bridge wouldn't work either. One often needs the enemy to believe something other than the truth." Echoes of horror and gasps bounced around the chamber. "Misdirection worked then, it can work now."

"It nearly didn't," Jakkobb's voice rung hollowly, and a little piece of hell burned in his eyes. "But, it had to be done. However, not like this."

"Sounds like you know the legend well," Der observed.

"That happens when you see it with your own eyes."

"But that's ancient history! Over two thousand years!" She clapped her hands on her cheeks. "Oh, and you said you'd been a soldier a long time."

Farallon clapped his hands together once. "About time you realized with whom you're dealing."

The mayor said, "I agree with the duke. I also agree with him about this raid, 'tis a ludicrous plot."

"A small raiding party would leave the larger forces here to protect Arbourn, once they've gathered." The captain smiled a bit himself.

The duke waved his hand around. "This stupid, incredibly outrageous idea, was thought of by a fool who's never been in a war before. She doesn't know what she's talking about."

Der didn't lose the rhythm of the conversation. "Yes, yes, alright, but at least we can all agree we need to defeat the chemmen. You're scattered with no army and defenseless people are being slain. The only thing you can do is cause a distraction, and fast. It's all just common sense, really. They're your enemy, not mine."

"They're the enemy of every sentient being, child," the mayor said. "In fact, I'm surprised that the chemmen didn't attack the dwarves first."

Kaleb shook his head slowly. "Of course they're enemies too, but not as much as we are. They want revenge most."

Der shrugged. "They're still enemies."

Farallon slammed his knee with a fist. "Too far! This has gone too far!" Silence echoed around the chamber.

"The raid could work!" she yelled. "It would buy you the time and —"

"And reveal our desperation!" Farallon jumped to his feet. "My prince —"

Kaleb raised both eyebrows calmly. They did all the work yelling does for most people. "Pardon me, Duke Farallon, but I must've missed your plan of war. What was it again?"

A stunned silence attacked the room. Heads swung back between the prince, the duke and the young girl.

Jakkobb cleared this throat. "I think this raid could be successful as well. It's no more insane than any other diversions."

The duke pointed to the map. "Draw them out into the open surface, our territory, where we are superior."

"I agree entirely with the duke," Amthros said.

The cook extended a delicate hand toward the map. "I believe our gallant captain has merit."

Jakkobb frowned. "Waste many more men's lives, spend too much time to set the attack up, less chance of victory, and so on."

"I can't believe we're discussing this preposterous idea of raiding the chemmen!" the duchess interjected. "If we do successfully raid them, what do we gain? A few trinkets?"

The captain's eyes twinkled dangerously. "If we're going to be this reckless; if we decide to go ahead on this fool's errand, we must utilize their paranoia. I don't think they would believe that this is a ruse if we honestly make it seem like an invasion force, even if only for the few hours it takes to get their full attention. It's too much of a chance for them to take. I doubt they can run between Darkreign and earth easily. They'll all run back there, giving us time here. There's no guarantee of victory, but if it works, we will get you the time to get your army and destroy our enemy. If it doesn't, not much is lost."

"Fool's errand indeed." The duke stamped his boot over the depthless surface of the map. The images once again melted into the floor, and only darkness replaced it. "We know nothing of the chemmen settlements of Darkreign, how it's set up, what traps it has. What magic could we use against their chthonic powers?"

"Well, what about Thistle?" Der asked.

Once again, the room filled with a tingling silence that warmed her skin uncomfortably.

Alsalon squeezed his hands together. "Brother, I don't agree with this. It's too risky."

Der directly translated in her mind that he didn't say brother, he said older brother. Apparently, in elvish, it was a single word. She was honestly trying to pay attention, but there was just too much going on. The younger prince ducked his eyes when everyone turned their attention to him.

"Risks are a part of war, younger brother." Kaleb sighed. "Volunteers. This mission will have to be a small party regardless."

The mayor shook her head. Her face twisted. "My prince, you're willing to allow this errand?"

Kaleb nodded. "Yes, if successful, we will have earned an advantage. As the captain observed, if not, not much is lost."

"Not now!" Farallon slammed a fist into the bench. "Not on the advice of a human. The chemmen are human for our holy forest's sake!"

"Aye, now." The prince's voice remained calm despite the duke's outburst. "Perhaps on the advice of a human. Now is the time we should seek out the other races again. As a people, we have been quite reactionary since the end of the Centum Wars. We barely associate with the younger races. I've learned much in the short weeks with Derora and Kelin." He stared back the black floor. "If we were alone in the world, and entirely superior, we would not be losing this war."

"That's as may be, my prince," he snorted, "But you can't be serious about this."

Kaleb sighed again. "If they're successful, this war can be over within weeks." He looked between

Jakkobb and Der. "Great minds think very similarly, and perceive solutions otherwise never examined. Entirely coincidentally, stupid minds do too." He shrugged. "If there are those willing, we shouldn't deny them."

Farallon straightened his shirt. "We certainly won't deny them being tortured to death."

Chapter Seventeen

New End, New Beginning

Kelin charged. “Der!” He grabbed her arm and yanked her around. “I don’t know what you said or when you said it, but this outrageous foray has your scent all over it!”

“What?” She tried to back away but the former blacksmith’s grip was iron. “You heard about the raid?”

“Why did they listen to you? Why?”

“Because we could end this war!” She pushed her hair behind her ears.

“You want to go *back*?! Have you forgotten? They tortured us!” He slapped his leg, hard. He had to hit *something*. “I told you that you were too bold! This is crazy! This is not our place!” He strangled the air with his hands. “Do you need a perspective on this? You’re walking up to the dragon’s snout and telling it it’s ugly and it needs to bathe!”

She plugged her nose. “It’s not the only one.”

“Stop joking! Just stop it!” He shoved his finger under her nose. “I’ll tell you exactly what you’re doing! You take the scariest myth we have and poke at it with a tiny raiding party *on their home ground*. And that’s not even truly part of this world!”

She snorted. “Yeah. I know.”

Kelin held up his hand threateningly. His face was hot and red. “You’re not in charge! You’re human, despite what little elvish blood you have, you were raised a human and you will die as one! We are mortal! All we’ve got to look forward to is dying! They’re immortal and you aren’t, what do you know that they don’t?”

She straightened her sleeve. “How to make a fresh start.”

“Have you forgotten what happened to us? This will be worse, and I can’t imagine worse.” His tone melted away from anger and dropped into pleading.

“Can’t you?” she whispered. “I fear worse will come to pass if we don’t do this.”

Kelin growled deep in his throat. “Now you’re sounding like an elf!”

“What’s wrong with that?” a voice asked not unkindly behind them. Jakkobb leaned against the wall behind them, arms crossed casually.

Sir Amthros stood behind the dragoon, breathing slightly harder than the other knight. “We heard shouting.” He glared at the other’s repose. “He was closer.”

Kelin still glared at his friend. “Just Der’s stupid idea. And you elves, for going along with it.”

Jakkobb half grinned. “Well, she’s not going.”

“Why not?” Der hollered. “It was my plan!”

The captain laughed. “I’m sorry, Der, you got the spirit, but you don’t have years of military experience and training under your belt.” He shrugged. “Also, we’ve spoken to Thistle. Things may have changed.”

“What?” Amthros said.

Jakkobb held up his hands. “Farallon was in that council. The premise is still the same, of course, but we can’t be too careful.”

“Why wasn’t I told?”

Jakkobb shrugged. “It isn’t my place to keep you informed, but nothing has significantly changed.”

Der stamped her feet. “What about *me*? It’s my idea, I want to go!”

Amthros still stared heavily at the other knight. “You’ll be kept safe. There’s nowhere really safer than here right now anyway. Besides, you saw what the chemmen are capable of, you saw those undead cultists.”

“Yes, I did, and that’s why I want to fight them – so they don’t do that.”

“Perhaps you’re missing my point.” He glanced over at Jakkobb. “Of course, I still predict that this raid will end in disaster.”

“So do I,” Kelin agreed. “Der, we’re just two humans. We should be running away.”

“Then, why are you still going?” Der demanded.

The captain nodded. “That’s your decision. You probably could escape this nightmare; they wouldn’t put too much effort into chasing two mortals when they have the princes right here. If they know where they are.”

“I’m not running.” Der tightened her jaw stubbornly.

Amthros said, “It might be best for you. Think about it.”

“I’m not running, sir!”

Jakkobb sighed. “No, you’re not, kid.”

“I’m scared, Der.” Kelin’s eyes were lost. “Please. I’m terrified, we’ve seen what they can do. I know you’re scared too.”

“He’s right,” the knight of Arborn agreed.

She shook her head. “I’m scared too, so that’s why we should beat them back, so we don’t have to be scared anymore.”

Jakkobb sighed. “I can’t host an argument against that.”

"Yeah." Kelin squeezed his hands together. "The thought's been in my mind to leave, with or without you." He looked at her jaw, and knew it was a losing fight. "I'm scared, Der. This isn't the meadow, on a plough pony, dreaming of knighthood. This is gory reality. There's nothing we can do that the elves can't do better."

Her face tightened even further. "We can't abandon them. Kaleb is our friend, and we owe him friendship. Friends don't run away when there's danger."

"If we leave, he won't have to worry about some clumsy humans stumbling in the way."

"No, he'll just have to worry about us on our own."

Jakkobb said, "I'm sure Kaleb can arrange something safe for you."

"Then he can arrange something safe for himself." She crossed her arms.

The knight's mouth opened and then clicked shut. "You are the most stubborn human I've ever met."

"Everyone tells Der that," Kelin muttered out of the side of his mouth.

Amthros sighed. "I wish you understood the chemmen better. No one is truly safe, not even around Thistle, despite what you may think of him. The storm-readers are vengeance incarnate."

"Well, what about Thalon?"

He shook his head slightly. "He's a child. He's, uh, different."

"Thalon," Jakkobb said softly. "Well, we'll just hope his elven side shines through for now."

"What does that mean?" Kelin asked.

The knight-captain looked directly at the other knight. "I wasn't there, unlike some." Amthros shifted backward. Jakkobb continued, "But it was what led the elf king to decide to banish the chemmen from earth. There was a battle over a chemmen town, called Darii, and the elves did not keep any chemmen alive. It was a war of no prisoners."

"Except for the children." Amthros gripped a fist at his side. "The children were spared. We kept them in their own prison, but treated them well. They looked and acted like they were frightened, and we forgot who they truly were."

"What happened?" Der asked.

"They honestly thought that they were doing the right thing. They broke from their prison and attacked us in the middle of the night, killing some of my dear friends. And we..."

Jakkobb took the reins of the tale. "In order to survive the elves were forced to defend themselves."

Amthros stared at the floor. "We did what we had to do. I wish it never happened. I wish that we didn't have to commit that horrible sin."

Der frowned and leaned against the wall. "Perhaps it's just best to leave the past in the past."

Amthros didn't meet her gaze and merely shrugged again.

Jakkobb cleared his throat. "Well, since we've all got on our long faces, then it is time we should walk to the ceremony of vanishing."

The light was mute in the circular hall, nothing more than a background fixture. Colors carried no voice here. The gold patterns spiraling around the walls seemed dull. The air was sluggish and heavy and ultimately still. Kelin and Der blinked, but their vision did not adjust and everything remained a little blurry. They shuffled to the back of the hall.

They must have been the last to arrive. Jakkobb nodded a silent farewell and skirted around the edge of the gathering of the elves and closer to the dais at the far end of the room.

On the carpeted dais the crown prince stood in the center. His face revealed no expression, but his eyes were wide and broken. Prince Alsalon, Baroness Evelyn of Elloan, the mayor of Riverfall and Duke Farallon of the Aeolian Plateau surrounded him. Sir Amthros rigidly stood in front of the dais, guarding the princes, even here.

Behind Der and Kelin, the doors swung shut of their own accord. The room dimmed even more. Der glanced at the door anxiously; she almost entirely settled into the pattern of not having doors at all around here. She rolled her shoulders back nervously.

A song rose in the room; it needed no aid from instruments to sound beautiful. The slow melody was a river, washing through the soul. It scoured even those dark and forgotten corners, and then the song suddenly became hot as it whipped up speed. The music was agonizingly beautiful. It pricked at the heart. Its magic wove into Der's mind and washed her far away from the elvish city. Her parents filtered across her vision. A worn memory surged upward. Two years ago, the river flooded and Der and Riodan rushed into town to help save people. They were lucky. No one perished. Der remembered the hot dinner Rhoesia and Chera prepared them when they arrived home, soaking wet. The family relaxed on their house on the hill and ate dinner together while watching the water pass. She pressed a hand over her heart and realized how much she missed them. At least she could go home.

Then, one final glorious note pierced the heart and saturated the air for one endless moment of bittersweet ecstasy.

Silence seized the hall.

Prince Alsalon flashed a quick glance to his older brother, who nodded almost imperceptibly. The younger prince pried his lips open with his tongue. "We must never forget those whose grace has been stolen by the hand of our enemy." His words began to pick up momentum. "We will always remember the warriors slain in combat and the innocent murdered by deceit."

He dropped his gaze. "They killed our king and queen in our own sacred palace. Such a crime has never even been attempted, and is still unfathomable to my brother and me. We were there that day; we did not want to leave them. Our parents forced us to run whilst they remained. They were marked for death." The tears on his face carried more water than a rainstorm. "From there, my guard and I traveled through the forest of Cambreth. We met no troubles by grace of the Tree. We hid for a cycle of the moon in the forest before it was safe to venture here."

He began the next song. This time the music went on for a long, long time. The song melded with the walls and bounced back in perfect harmony. It was a song of mourning and loss. The room caught the music and quietly whispered it into the ears of anyone who entered the hall from that day forward.

Kelin grabbed his head and gasped. The song pounded with the rhythm of his heart. He saw in his mind, and suddenly came to know the individuals who died. He knew their names, where they were from and what they did in life. A mental picture of the slain materialized; not at their point of death, but a smiling moment. Kelin wished he didn't know. It would have hurt less as he watched their spirits swirled across his vision.

Grief choked him. He'd thought the weeks had numbed him to the sensation, but the very real emotion left him dizzy. He recognized a few of the laughing faces as they passed into his memory. And they were dead! These amazing people were dead! He couldn't contain the searing hot pressure building in his chest. It was too hot to touch, but he couldn't help it. He was boiling from the inside.

The song surged around him with the elvish voices beautiful and unbroken but so incredibly sad. He was overwhelming relieved he was in the back row and could not see most of the elves' faces – it would break his heart if he could.

He stumbled back into the wall – he couldn't stand this anymore! How could the elves do this to themselves? Then, he realized this was a facet of the elves humans didn't see. What an honor, he thought through the haze of memories.

He looked at Der, her face wet with tears, and staring straightforward. Her knees shook and her fists were white at her sides and her jaw trembled, but she remained standing. Kelin glared, this was so typical of her!

He ripped his gaze away from her and let it settled on the dais. Farallon competed with Der for the straightest face. Kelin hung his gaze. Death hurts them more, he thought, but they also learned to appreciate life a thousand times more.

The song continued. The elven king and queen crystallized in his mind. Their dulcet, melodious laughter sailed through his soul. The king propped a very young Alsalon on his shoulders, while young a Kaleb dutifully trotted at his side. The queen smiled and waved to her youngest, pretending he was sitting on something as high as a mountain.

Then it ended. The song faded from the room. Kelin clawed at the air in front of him. The song was anguishing, but he wanted it back compared to the soul sucking silence. Now there was just empty air, with no music or life to it, and that was somehow worse. The breath he inhaled was hollow.

"My parents were my heart." Kaleb stepped forward to the edge of the dais. His voice fell over the room as softly as a whisper of rain. "And it died with them. No matter how much earth we shovel into a grave, it will never be enough to fill these holes we feel. No one else will share in their beauty and laughter again, and I miss a future with them as much as I miss them now." His hands hung helplessly at his side.

"I want no one else to have to feel this way, and I regret we do now. We've all lost those dearest to us. Our population is not so large as our enemy's." He raised his head and clenched a fist, and stared back at the assembly with burning eyes. "So we will take action." His tone chilled the air. The tears of the elves slowed and waited for him.

"This is not the end. No, this is not an end – not for us, not for the enemy. Only those that have died are free of this fight. We shall not wait them for them to kill another elf. We shall stab their heart, in their own city. A raiding party has volunteered. They will risk their lives for all our sakes. May the Tree hold them high in her branches and the light shine in their souls." He bowed his head reverentially.

The elves bowed their heads in return. "May the Tree hold them high."

Anyone else, Kelin knew, they would have shouted off the dais for saying such absurdity. His mouth collected the dry air. He didn't need Kaleb to tell him who thought of such a ludicrous plan of attack. True, it could end the war almost immediately, if it succeeded, but he didn't want to believe the elves were willing to risk this. It didn't make good sense to him, so it certainly couldn't be sensible to the elves!

He turned toward Der, but she wasn't there. The door behind them was cracked open, as if someone hadn't wanted to make any noise closing it. Around him rose a song for the warriors about to travel into battle, a blessing and a warning mixed in the lyrics. The tune was sharper, like the edge of a sword and much faster

paced. He glanced around. He didn't think he had any more tears, and his mind was slowly pumping in anger. It was the influence of the song, he realized. He had to get out of here! He tiptoed out the door.

The sunset slipped through the window and into his eyes. He shaded them, and looked wildly around the corridor. He fired a glance at the sun. Had he been in that room for most of the day? It felt like fifteen minutes, *at most*.

Der, resting beside a window that boasted a view worth a king's ransom, quietly wiped the tears from her face as if they meant nothing more than dirt. "I don't understand what's so impossible to accept. Yes, it's terrible, but life goes on."

He too tried to blink the tears away. "I don't know. Maybe if no one died, we'd see it differently too."

"And I guess why they're so hesitant to fight. I mean, all they've done so far is run away."

Jakkobb said, "Elves usually avoid battles because it's not worth the sacrifice." He must have been standing right on guard for the whole time. They spun toward him. He continued, "You don't understand what it takes for us to go to war. We're risking eternity – the possibility of never seeing loved ones again. Ever."

"Yes," Der said, "You're the one who's going on this raid. Isn't that too dangerous for you then?"

He chuckled. "If I was a normal elf, absolutely. But, as I'm sure you've noticed, I'm not like most elves. As I said before, Jakkobb isn't an elvish name."

"I knew it – like Lady Evelyn, right?"

He shook his head. "Not quite. She did it because she chose to. I did it because I wasn't raised by elves – but that's a story for another time." He sighed. "You know, I've been thinking. You wouldn't be risking as much as an elf, by your own words."

"What are you saying, sir?" Kelin asked suspiciously.

"I'm commanding this raid." He paused and breathed deeply, his own face twisting. "So you'd better learn to take my orders without asking any questions. Questions are good, but you're just going to have to remember them for later."

Kelin's jaw fell wide. "You're going to allow her?"

Der gasped and grabbed the window to keep her balance.

He shrugged. "She's a gifted swordsman, and she's already held her own against the chemmen. Mostly, this is a very dangerous idea, and well, as you've said, you're not risking as much as an elf." He turned back to the grinning Der. "Well, you already know the plan. I trust you can do this. But, you've got much to learn first and very fast and learn to keep your mouth shut, even under the knife. Do you accept?"

She bounced on the balls of her feet. "Yes, sir!" She raised her fist in salute.

He didn't grin back. "This is the most serious undertaking. If it's too much for you, tell me or I'll tell you before it's too late." He didn't miss a beat in the conversation as he turned back to Kelin. "Now, Kelin, are you joining the party?"

He retreated a step, shaking his hands. "Certainly not! I remembered being tortured! I can't go through that again! I'm going to have nightmares for the rest of life because of that!"

"Me too!" Der fired back. "That's why I want to go, so I can beat the nightmares back!"

He glared at the knight, and then whipped his hot gaze onto Der. Birds would have fallen out of the sky for that glare. She didn't flinch. "You're all lunatics!"

"You don't have to come," Der pointed out.

Jakkobb held up both of his hands. "Children, stop it! Der, you know we have a plan. Kelin, hear us out first. This raid is not as shallow as it looks to be. We have a plan."

"What plan?" Kelin asked.

He smiled. "Yes, a plan. Actually, you being human and sadly, previously tortured by the chemmen, will only grease the wheels, so to speak. We do not attack the chemmen, we are a raiding party. This is just a distraction in order for us to gather our army."

Kelin trembled with unshed rage. "Alright, fine! Aye, I'm going with you. Damn my own stupidity, but I'm going. This is more than me."

"Good." The knight nodded, and grabbed one shoulder apiece. "Now, try to chase some sleep if you can. They'd be busy for days if they could in there. These are very truncated obsequies."

Once again, neither Kelin nor Der knew the word in their original language, but they knew what it meant in elvish. In order to understand it, they had to mentally translate it back into Common.

Behind them, the song continued until the moon herself had gone to sleep. Tears rained until the wells ran dry and the spirits of the dead danced on through the night.

"He killed chemmen, Dis!" Vlade roared. His voice echoed around the cave that had been forced to hide in since the elves had raided their Altice Domain outpost. "Our precious spy wounded and killed some of our own! How dare he!" Spittle frothed around his mouth.

"What?" Dis wiped the corners of his own mouth. "That is outrageous!" The king rubbed the scars on his forearms and vaguely wondered where he'd picked up the habit. That was Vlade's habit.

Vlade pinched his eyes closed with his fingertips. "And there's worse. Our troops tell us that they saw a child with eyes such as our own. The thought haunted me through my next campaign. At least those wretched tree paths still work."

"That town wasn't in our plan. You may get caught."

"I needed to relieve my anguish over this child," the commander snarled. "And the princeling's escape! Again!"

"We have no children authorized to fight." Dis frowned. "So, why was there a child there?"

"I'm getting to that," the other snapped. "His ears... I think – I think he's half of theirs, half of ours."

The chemmen king clicked his fingernails against his new teeth. It was at least his fourth set. That was an advantage of being back in the world – supplies of new teeth were readily available for the taking. "But, why would such a child exist?" Heat rushed up his neck and across his face. He couldn't trust his own men...

Vlade slowly lifted one eyebrow. "Excuse me, your kingness, but didn't we already suppose a traitor could exist in our ranks? What if one of the elves seduced one of our own?"

Dis shook his head. "No!"

"Yes, my own soldiers saw the bastard child!" He ground his own teeth – they were a new set too, hardly even used by the human before him. "And none slew him. They didn't know what to think."

"This is not good. They may tell others, and, there may be discord amongst our ranks." He forced a chuckle. "Of course, in the height of battle, things may often be seen that are not there. The elves would surely slay such a child as well. We know that they have no regard for children." He hopped out of the obsidian throne they'd rescued. "This child is secondary, of course. You know you let the princeling escape on the river."

"I wasn't there for that attack."

"No, you were too busy with your toy sword."

"It worked!" His feet danced a little beneath him before he could rope them back under his control. "I saw their faces. I witnessed the fear reborn!"

"You still failed the chemmen cause! You failed me."

Vlade caught himself before his outburst. Normally, the chemmen phrase was "you failed us." He absently drew the silent sword. "I wasn't aware I was acting on your behalf."

"I am your king!"

Vlade snorted. "If you must remind me, then I'm not so sure you are. My plan, my vengeance, my army."

"I am and I always have been! I was the one who saved our race and I am the one who will bring us to revenge!"

"This is my war!" Vlade struck the very end of Dis's armrest with his sword. Pieces of surgically sharp glass shot across the room. The king lowered his unharmed hand slowly.

He exploded off his throne. He shoved his arm out toward Vlade. "This is your fault!" He ripped back his sleeve and the straight cut glistened on his forearm. He dug his fingernails into it.

Vlade, hissing like a viper, grabbed his own arm with his opposite hand. An identical wound was carved into his own skin. It had been this way since before the Banishment.

The chemmen king stalked closer. "When I find the magic that binds us, I will break it as I break you. Even though you may be my brother, I loathe you and I will raise my hand against you, brother."

Vlade growled. "If your plan is to talk me to death." He forced his hand to sheath his weapon. "You and I share the same pains."

"How can you not be outraged?" Dis snarled like an angry dog. "As soon as I find this magic that binds us, I will see that you are not commander anymore."

Vlade snarled. "Argh!" His orange eyes burned hotly, his hair slid down messily over his face again, and he panted. He gripped his sword hard enough to choke a person.

Dis tapped his chin thoughtfully, smiling as he watched his counterpart's intensity. "Nevertheless, we must return to our goals. We must kill the princes, and that damned baroness. Then, without their leadership or their witch, the rest will fall easily to our sword."

A horrible smile slithered across Vlade's face. Enemies as they were, they were brothers in this cause.

"Good morning, recruits!"

Der squinted; a red blur obscured the world. She blinked a few times. "Sir, it's not morning, there's no sun." No light yet dared to enter the room through the window.

Jakkobb craned his head toward the open window. "Yes there is! Almost. Anyway, get out of bed." He grinned like a maniac and cracked his knuckles.

"Wha..." Across the room, the shape under Kelin's covers slithered. The captain reached out a massive hand and yanked the blankets off the young man.

"Get up! You've got a quarter hour to get dressed, down to the kitchen and fed."

Der sat up in bed. "That's not much time, sir."

"So, get moving."

"What's going on?" Kelin dazedly rubbed his eyes.

Jakkobb chuckled. "Weapons drill."

Der's back stiffened straighter than a board. "Sir!"

"This is going to hurt." Kelin shoved his feet to the floor.

The knight grinned. "Now, would I ever hurt my newest recruits?"

"Yes."

Jakkobb shrugged. "It's for your own good. Now, step it up!" He left them blinking stupidly in the pre-dawn light. Der rolled clumsily out of bed.

When they collapsed into the chairs in the kitchen, Lady Evelyn – who by now they took for granted did not require sleep and always had food prepared – already had two bowls waiting for them. She brushed her hair from her eyes.

The light of her smile lit up her multi-faceted sapphire eyes. "It's plain, boring, tasteless stew. The captain insisted. You're just fortunate he didn't try to make it himself." With a sympathetic smile, she spun on her heel and left down the corridor.

Jakkobb entered from the other archway and took his place on the opposite side of the table. He wore a great sword on a baldric now. He sipped from a large mug in his hand. "Well, eat up, you got two minutes left."

"What's after breakfast?" Kelin suspiciously narrowed his eyes at his bowl.

"Hurting." The captain took another drink.

"What about the raid?" Der inquired. "Do we have time for training?"

"Yes. Now, finish up. You won't be going on the raid without it."

The impromptu arena was a large open courtyard enclosed by trees, like many of the open spaces in Riverfall. However, the ground was even and swept neatly of any fallen leaves.

"Your mail and weapons are over there." The captain pointed over to the farthest corner.

Kelin gasped and raced over to the corner. "My sword!" When he arrived, he saw that it was not the sword Sigard had made. It was differently colored and the blade was longer. His fingers closed around the handle and he felt anchored again. It may have not been his sword, but it was close enough to be a link to home.

Jakkobb pointed with his foot. "See if that armor fits you."

Kelin picked up a very heavy chainmail shirt. "Ugh. I wouldn't have thought elvish armor would weigh so much." Parts of it were speckled with rust. "Or, look ready to fall apart."

"Oh, this isn't elvish. Don't think that you get to be so lucky. No, you'll start with these old patches of iron." He clapped his hands. "First lesson, taking care of your equipment."

"Aren't we going to learn how to fight, sir?" Der fiddled with the older equipment. "Why do you even have this stuff here?"

The knight sighed. "Yes, Der, we will. But, you can't truly use a sword if you don't take care of it and it rusts over."

"Elvish swords and mail rust?"

"No, they don't." He pointed a finger warningly. "No more questions. You'll need to oil any leather: boots, belts, sheathes, armor, whatever else you have. I would have you do that now, but I'm rather rushed today, so I'm ordering you to do that on your own. Alright, next." His eyebrows narrowed quizzically. "Well, you've already fought some of the worst things humans can fight and you didn't run away. Did well, in fact, for being entirely untrained. Um. Yes." He shrugged. "Aside from chemmen, undead and calvar, there's not too much else that's scarier."

"What about dragons, sir?" Der bounced on the balls of her feet.

He held up his index finger. "Don't get me started on dragons. I've seen enough dragons."

"'Cause you're a dragoon knight."

"Right." He nodded. He shrugged off his baldric, drew his sword, inspected it quickly and sheathed it. His huge, double bladed axe leaned against the wall, and he plucked up the shortened handle like it was a feather. In his other hand, he hefted a massive kite shield, complementing his armor in color.

Der cocked her head. "You have a kite shield and full plate mail. That's redundant. You don't need both. And what's with the axe *and* the sword?"

Kelin stepped up beside her. "I was wondering about the axe too."

Jakkobb took one deep breath. "Alright, after the shield, it's the armor, after the armor, it's my skin. The more heavy metal between my enemy and me, the better. Follow the logic? With the axe and the sword, it's the same principle."

"Elves don't use axes," Kelin said, "So I always thought."

The knight laughed. "Swords are merely old, axes are ancient."

Der's face bunched up and she wrinkled her nose. "Fine. How much does it all weigh then?"

"More than you." The knight winked.

Kelin leaned over. "That means don't try to arm wrestle him."

Jakkobb chuckled. "Sound advice, lad. Alright, you two fight each other. I want to see how well you can handle your weapons first."

Der ran Kelin into the wall instantly. He wasn't fast enough to escape her blade, especially once she found she could move the elvish blade twenty times easier than her father's. She overcorrected herself several times. She stepped back and let him return to his on guard. They fought again. Der struck him two or three times for every touch he landed on her. They both bled from tiny cuts with the security in the knowledge that would be healed after the practice. He was stronger, but she was faster and knew swordplay better. She was also furious and never stopped. They danced around the courtyard, their feet trampling over their dusty footprints as they circled around and around.

The captain clapped his hands once. "That's good. Stop." He stepped forward as the pair lowered their weapons. "Kelin, you keep shifting your grip. Don't. Der, you need to retreat. Just a half a step or so when you parry. You don't back up at all. If you do, it gives you more space to execute your moves, and you don't get too close to your enemy. Both of you follow?" They nodded.

Jakkobb grinned. "Good. Alright, Der, let's go." He drew his sword.

For the first time, she bit her lip and inched backward. "Um."

His grin spread. "You wanted to be a warrior, now put up or shut up."

She nodded, lifting the point of her blade. "Alright." Her stance and style weren't going to change, especially after the first few strokes. She was entirely outclassed, but wouldn't take a step backward.

"Retreat!"

She tried, but she concentrated on the step back so much that she fumbled her parry. She barked a curse. She shouldn't have wasted her breath swearing, and Jakkobb forced her back again. This wasn't working for her at all, she decided, and didn't try to retreat again. She hit back awkwardly, and he laughably blocked anything she tried. Finally, the knight stopped his assault altogether.

He half-grinned and shook his head. "You just don't know when to be intimidated."

Der breathlessly shook her head.

"I'm going to grind it into your mind to retreat. Are you just going to stand there and get killed?" He set down his sword and picked up the massive axe. Kelin took two steps back, but Der simply stood there, swallowing. Suddenly, the knight attacked. Der ducked the blow, stuck her sword out and skittered to the side.

"Oh, don't think you can run away from me!" He crossed the ground with his enormous strides and was upon her before she was ready. She ran away many more times before she finally settled into a pattern where she could at least launch a few counter-attacks. She knew it was because he allowed them. How could anyone hold that huge axe one handed for so long and still be so fast? Her sword was already weighing down her hand and arm heavily.

"Halt!" Jakkobb held up his left hand. "That's enough for now. You're getting the idea. Now, in formation, you obviously can't give ground like that. You won't have the freedom of movement you do in one-on-one, but we'll get to all that later." He whirled and pointed the axe at Kelin. "Your turn."

"But, you're sword's still over there, sir." Kelin nervously pointed.

"Der got the axe, so it's only fair you do too." The captain was much slower and easier on him. It wasn't the same whirlwind of attacks Der provoked. "Kelin, keep your moves as small and tight as possible." Their weapons clashed together, Jakkobb jerked the axe back. "That's too small. Keep them useful!"

Then the knight-captain instructed them in standard drills, on footwork, bladework and everything else they could imagine. Der swore her body should have given up long ago, but it kept moving, and she couldn't explain how. She glanced up at the sun to see how far it moved. Finally, he allowed them rest. "Drink water." He tossed a waterskin in Kelin's direction.

Jakkobb said, "First rule, always attack when you have an opening. Der, I don't believe you have a problem with this, but sometimes you attack when you don't have an opening."

"Yes, sir." Der wiped the sweat from her face. "Why are *you* training us, sir?"

"Because, as a knight-captain of the Silver Dawn dragoons, it is actually part of my duty to oversee the training of recruits." Jakkobb shrugged and leaned against the oak. "This is enough for now. You need rest." He frowned. "Well, no, it isn't, but it's where we're going to halt. The pair of you still need much work, but you're not hopeless." He glanced at the sun. "Getting late in the morning." Then he shot Der a critical glance. "You left home to become a soldier. Whose service?"

"Thealith's Royal Army, sir."

"The bright side of this whole war, you didn't waste your talent there."

Der's face lit up like a thousand candles. There weren't stars shining in her eyes, a full moon glowed in each. She couldn't hide it. Jakkobb laughed. "However, you are a mite arrogant when you fight. Watch out for that."

She shuffled her feet. "But you fight like that."

He grinned. "I'm just confident."

"What's the difference?"

"Experience." He winked.

Kelin cupped a hand and leaned over. He whispered loudly, "Which means he's made a lot more mistakes than you have."

Der laughed before she got her hand up to her mouth. Kelin stepped behind her, but the captain was laughing too.

"Well, are you training or just joking around?" The crown prince stood in the arched entrance to the courtyard, along with Sir Amthros and two other elven warriors. They were suddenly there and Der was sure the sun glowed a little brighter. Kaleb continued, his voice sweetening the air, "Because, I very much loathe to miss a good joke." He looked to the captain. "How are they progressing?"

"Surprisingly adept, my prince." Jakkobb bowed.

"I am pleased to receive such news," the prince replied. He gestured to the other two elves. "These are your other volunteers."

"Two more than I expected," Jakkobb murmured. "Which is another reason for letting the humans go."

A dark haired elf with flashing silver eyes bowed stiffly. "I am Fienan of the Aeolian Plateau. Well met."

"Well met," Der and Kelin echoed.

The other elf, who was fair haired, also bowed. "And I am Salinienn of Elloan, and I am here at my lady's request."

"I thought this mission was for volunteers," Der remarked.

He smiled with his dark eyes. "I should say that I am. She was the one who informed that there was a dangerous mission in which I might enroll."

The prince's blue eyes darkened. "Just five volunteers. I can't believe that this war may depend on so few souls." He opened his mouth to say something more, but instead glanced over at the knight of Arbourn and quietly sealed his lips.

"Five volunteers, yes," Jakkobb said, "Six on this raid."

"What?" Fienan asked. "Conscription is against our law."

"Thistle's going with you." The prince kept his head high, but his voice was low. He ploughed through the gasps, "We need him."

Salinienn held up his hands and shook his head. "I will not travel with a chemman!"

Fienan made a disgusted face. "I also must protest, my prince."

"You didn't think that traveling to Darkreign would be without risk? He can gain insights that we cannot." Kaleb raised an eyebrow. "He has brought us invaluable news before and he's fighting this war for the sake of his son and the memory of his wife."

"Yes, but he's *chemmen*," Salinienn hissed. "He's a storm-reader in the end."

Jakkobb shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I say he goes and I'm in command here, begging Your Highness's pardon of course. If you don't want to volunteer, you don't have to. My decision to include him was only after a lengthy discussion."

Fienan stamped a foot. "But, this raid could end the war. I want to go." He exchanged a glance with Salinienn whose shoulders drooped and he nodded.

"Wait, wait. If Thistle goes, what about Thalon?" Kelin asked sharply.

Amthros smiled gently. "Since I cannot go and since I am staying with the princes, I could care for him."

"No!" Jakkobb barked. "You have other duties."

"I thought you'd decide to come with us, Sir Amthros," Der said. "You've been with us through everything so far."

The knight of Arbourn shook his head. "I'm sorry, but my duty is to escort the princes and Lady Evelyn to Moonrise Castle in Elloan."

Kaleb buried his face in his hands. "Truly, Sir Amthros? Perhaps it is best if we keep some secrets in case their mission isn't flawless. You know exactly how likely it is that they will be captured."

"Likely? What does that mean?" Kelin asked.

Salinienn smiled grimly. "It is known that prisoners of the chemmen are tortured for what knowledge they may possess. Something that I believe you're too familiar with."

"Ah." Der tried not to shutter at her memories. "So, that's common, then, is it?"

"Every time," Fienan said.

"Speaking of talking," Amthros interjected. "It is imperative that no one speaks to Duke Farallon. He does not need details – it's dangerous enough that he knows of the raid."

"Why?" Der asked.

Amthros shook his head. "Please do not ask."

Once again, the crown prince studied the floor intently. "These are dark times indeed. We know not whom we can trust, and yet, must risk our lives upon such information." He looked up. "Derora, Kelin, this isn't your war." They squirmed beneath the weight of his gaze. "This is an ancient conflict, Der, possibly older than your elven ancestor."

She shrugged. "I have to do the right thing, even if it's dangerous. I must prove to myself I can go down there without being tortured or caught. I have to conquer my fears."

Kelin hung his arms limply. "And I don't know why I'm going." He sighed.

The prince looked out the window. Der's gaze followed. The beauty of the elven lands sang in her mind as she watched the rising moon, even though it was still daylight.

The prince's voice danced into her thoughts. "I remember the lesson of a poem that my father wrote long ago. In times of disaster and grave need, heroes will always come forth because nature is about balance. If there is a tragedy and need, a hero is one to restore the equilibrium."

"Well said, my prince." Fienan smiled. "Especially as we descend into the heart of villainy."

Jakkobb half smiled. "Of course, the other part of that poem was telling the would-be hero not to become the evil he fights, because then that hero just took the enemy's place. The evil still remains."

The prince rolled his eyes. "I hope that is not applicable, sir knight."

Amthros fidgeted with his fingers. "Most certainly not."

Der squeezed up her face. "Uh, did he write a poem about victory or something? I'd rather hear that instead."

Chapter Eighteen

Swallow Hole

Lady Evelyn waited beside Thalon. Thistle stood over his son with a wounded face. The boy pushed himself away from the baroness and threw himself at his father's knees.

"Dad, this isn't fair!" He pounded his fists against the chemman's legs. "You can't leave me!"

Thistle knelt to face Thalon. "This has to be done. The lady will care for you." His words were quiet, and silence trailed after them.

Thalon pushed himself back. "You said I wasn't to trust anyone except you and my mother! *Anyone!* You don't know her!" He jerked his hand at the baroness. "Don't leave me!"

His father's orange eyes didn't flicker. "This must be done, Thalon. And, after this, it will be just you and me. We'll go wherever you want, whatever mountains or oceans that you want to see. I promise."

The boy sniffed back his tears. "Why can't I go with you now?"

"Because I am going somewhere dangerous." He patted his son's shoulder.

He sniffed again. "More dangerous than here? More dangerous than the river?" He puffed up his chest. "I wasn't scared!"

"And I was proud of you. You're getting big now, so you deserve the truth." Thistle looked directly into the small face. "We're going to Darkreign."

Thalon's eyes exploded wide, and he grabbed his father's shirt. "Dad! You didn't tell me! You said we were never to go there! Ever!"

The chemman grimaced. "I know. But, after this, we'll be free. No more chemmen or elves chasing us. Just you and me. Now," he rose gently and spun the boy around on his heel. "You see this lady."

Evelyn smiled and curtsied just a little.

His father pointed over his shoulder. "I need you to watch over this lady, and keep her safe from the chemmen."

Thalon shook his head. "No! Why can't I go with you? I can fight!"

The elf chuckled, the sound drifting down to them like leaves playing on the wind. "He's been listening to Derora Saxen again."

"That's right!" Thalon exclaimed. "Der's going! It's not too dangerous for her!"

"Der isn't six years old." Evelyn gently took the boy's hand. "Come along, Thalon, we can watch them leave after you have a proper meal." He kicked, but her grip was strong. She began to pull him down the open corridor.

"No!" he screamed as he faded from sight. "Dad, you can't leave me! Dad!"

Thistle hung his head and waited until the sounds of yelling and footsteps faded into the elvish secret stronghold. He spun on his heel and punched the wooden wall. His fist broke through the panel. Then, he punched it again, and finally began his way to the training courtyard. As he came around the final bend he heard, "Close your eyes."

"What?" Der backed away and swung her sword between herself and Fienan.

Jakkobb grinned, shoulder propped up against the wall. "I said, close your eyes. You're watching him too much when you need to rely on your instincts."

Salinienn chuckled, also leaning against the wall.

She fought herself as she dropped her eyelids. She felt her entire body tense and shrink in size. Then her arm shuddered and she pushed her blade out blindly in front of her. She hit nothing. Her eyes shot wide open. Fienan hadn't moved at all.

The elf looked at her impassively. She forced herself to shut her eyes again. What was he doing? She stood unmoving, until she realized how stupid that was. But how could she fight with her eyes closed? She waited, but nothing happened. Her memories fled back to her and she remembered being almost blind in that chemmen cell underneath the old castle and fear stabbed her mind. She stamped the memories away.

What would an opponent do? Thrust, probably straight. Ergo, she should parry. Her blade met her sparring partner's with a jarring crash. She almost opened her eyes. His blade must have been waiting for her parry. After a parry, a swordsman should riposte. She brought her blade toward him. He parried, and instantly she was ready for her parry. It was more of a reflex maneuver than a conscious decision.

She thought she was getting the rhythm of it. She tried to disengage her sword and stab low. Fienan's blade countered hers easily, but she took some satisfaction that she tried. Her stance was awkward, her bladework was exceptionally slower than usual, and she wasn't moving at all.

They fought until she began to relax. She often missed his blade or caught an awkward parry. The awkwardness and pressure continued to increase, until she was forced to start moving her feet. Then, her bladework fell apart as she concentrated on her footing on the unknown terrain. The lesson didn't stop, and she

kept her eyes mashed shut. Her body felt about to drop, but her mind was more alert than it had been. She learned to feel the pressure on the blade and how often it betrayed the opponent's next move.

The swordplay stopped abruptly. Der remained ready, just in case. Something suddenly smashed into her chest and she caught something in her left arm. Her shirt felt wet. Her eyes shot open. When she looked down she saw she held a waterskin. She looked up to see Thistle standing there.

She stuttered, "Th-Thistle?"

"Your lesson's over." He drew his own longsword, turning toward Kelin. "Your turn."

Both humans and even the elves all looked at Jakkobb, who shrugged.

Der noticed the scars on his arm were a dull gray, not white or pink. She watched the chemman drill her oldest friend into the dirt by advancing, retreating and circling. The young man stumbled around, panting heavily. Thistle was quicker than a dart, and zipped around him like hummingbird.

Kelin paled through the sheet of sweat. He didn't know he could move so quickly, could dodge and weave, but he still couldn't match the speed of his opponent. Jakkobb had said that he had gotten so much better since the river, but he couldn't see it in the face of Thistle's flying blade.

After he had fallen over several times, the chemman stepped back and sheathed his weapon. Der tossed him the waterskin and offered a consolatory smile.

"The fat one has improved," the chemman acknowledged.

Kelin pointed to the top of his shaggy head. "Oh, thank you so very much."

Fienan muttered something to the wind. "I did not expect that a chemman would train a human to kill his own ilk." Thistle kept his hand firmly planted on his sword.

Jakkobb raised his hand. "None of that." He turned to Kelin. "You have, but we need to do so much more, and there isn't enough time to train."

Fienan half-grinned. "Of course, if all goes to plan, we won't have to actually fight."

"Hopefully," Salinienn said. "Very doubtful, I fear."

"I know, there is much to be feared," the other elf replied. "And they have that sword, damn."

Salinienn made a face. "We melted it. I was there at the ceremony."

Der inched forward. "Excuse me, but if the chemmen made this silent sword you've been discussing – and you destroyed it – why couldn't they just make another one?" She frowned in the face of the stunned faces that greeted her. They reminded her of the looks she earned all the time in Riversbridge after she just said something.

Salinienn blinked. "But, then, it's not the thing to be feared."

Even Jakkobb shook his head. "It's not the same thing, Der, it didn't do all those horrible atrocities."

"Still," she said, "If you can't tell any difference, is there a difference at all?"

Once again, stillness surrounded the courtyard. Thistle slowly clapped his hands.

"We had not thought like that." Salinienn dipped his head toward her.

Der slapped her hands on her hips. "And you immortals are supposed to be smarter." She immediately earned glares that soon cracked into smiles.

Everyone blinked, and then a chuckle tickled a throat. Then another. The elves smiled and chuckled politely. Thistle's mouth twitched, which probably counted as a smile. Suddenly, an awkward silence snatched the training circle as they realized they were laughing together. Thistle backed away, and so did the elves.

Kelin stepped back too, bewilderment splattered across his face. He didn't know how she did it, but she always did, even at home in the meadow. How else could she con the youth into jousting on plough ponies? She probably wasn't even doing it on purpose! She brought elves into joking with one of their worst enemies. It was magic. There was no other word for it.

Fienan couldn't hide his grin. "Well, I hope you keep such wit about you in the coming days."

Kelin felt his face freeze and then turn wooden. Worry shot through his chest like an icy spike. "You know, I'll admit it. I am afraid. I honestly don't want to do this, but I can't back away now. I can't leave you to go without me." He looked down. "I won't be a coward."

Jakkobb's shovel of a hand landed on the boy's shoulder. "Let me put it like this. You're not a coward, Kelin. Nor is Der. I've been a soldier for a long time now, and being fearful doesn't make you a coward. You survived, with your wits intact, which would drive most men insane or at least make them spoil their trousers at the color orange."

Der shook her head. "No, we can't be, not with all that we've been through. You're still alive."

The knight waved a hand to shush her, and looked back to Kelin. "I've seen bravery and cowardice. I've come to know who a coward is. It is someone who runs away from something that he can overcome. Now, this raid, we don't know if we can climb this mountain. Being afraid of this, but still willing to go doesn't make you a coward, Kelin, it makes you brave."

Thistle approached on velvet feet. "The chemmen are taught that to be human is a weakness. The chemmen are also taught that fear is a weakness and that pride can only be a strength. Both are untrue. That

horripilation you feel on the back of your neck will keep you alive in dangerous times. It can be a weakness, but you can train yourself to make it a strength."

Kelin nodded and looked up. "Thanks."

"You'll need it," the chemman growled, "In order to survive Darkreign."

"What's it like, sir?" Fienan inquired. He barely made eye contact.

Thistle shrugged. "Never been there myself."

"Ah," Jakkobb tapped his chin. "So, you escaped the Banishment. We'd always wondered if some had."

"Ha," Salinienn barked. "So, we're going into this realm, and we know nothing about it."

Thistle remained impassive. "From what I've learned at my spying on the outpost is that the chemmen spent centuries conquering Darkreign and its natural inhabitants. They built their own kingdom, well, rebuilt their kingdom. There were two cities of significance, Zazocorma and Darii."

"And Zazocorma was the capital, I remember," Jakkobb murmured.

Thistle nodded. "I don't know how exactly they were built, but the streets may be the very same, in case anyone remembers."

"Lords above," Fienan whispered harshly. "It will be like it was during the war, like we've walked back through time."

Jakkobb snapped his fingers. "If we're extremely lucky – which I am not fooling myself about that – we won't even have to fight."

Der, with eyes as wide as a lost puppy, coughed. "Fight, yeah." She looked around at everyone. "This distraction. It wasn't what I meant to do. I've never been to war before, and I..." She ran her foot over the ground. "Is this honorable? Is this distraction honorable? It's not like we're beating them on the battlefield. It just doesn't seem honest, like."

Jakkobb inhaled deeply and then blew it all out. "You humans are certainly getting philosophical these days."

Fienan chuckled. "Oh yes, like Pallens, you couldn't walk down the street..."

"You didn't answer my question, sir," Der said.

He sighed again. "Fine. Der, I'm not going to try to sweeten war, and you're going to learn what it's truly like soon enough. You don't play with your enemy like you do in a game – there aren't any rules on the battlefield. We're in this for survival, which means we cannot afford to take chances. This is just a trap – it isn't like we're assassinating anyone. You'll soon learn that in battle, the dirtiest, most cunning bastard wins. If you aren't he, you don't survive. This war is about our survival. We're trying to kill them before they kill us, that's all a battle is."

"But, is this honorable?" she persisted.

He held up an index finger. "Honor is defined by what do you after combat, 'cause in the fight, everyone's a bastard. If you aren't, you die."

Der's face was pained. "I just want to hear yes or no." She bit her lip. "But, it's not that simple, is it?"

He shook his head and held out his hands. "No, it's not. Don't dwell on it though, I'm the commanding officer so it's my responsibility, alright?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't worry about it. That's an order." He ran a hand over his face. "There is honor in war, Der. It's what helps to separate the good from the rot. But, there are no rules. You win. Then, after the fight, you tend to the wounded and all that."

"I'm still confused, sir."

He nodded and offered a small facsimile of a smile. "You'll learn. I know you will 'cause you're too stubborn to do wrong."

Fienan also half smiled. "It lightens my heart to hear your concerns, Derora and Kelin. I was beginning to believe that all humans had lost their way again."

"Right." The knight nodded. "Now, let's get you some proper armor."

Salinienn stepped aside to reveal two very lightweight shirts of elven mail. They glistened in the sunlight like fresh waves on the water.

Jakkobb handed Der a thin, red-brown swordbelt. The belt was imprinted with an intricate pattern. She cautiously drew the sword from the elaborate sheath. The blade was perfect and beautiful without a single nick. It reflected the early sunlight as strongly as if it were noon. The hilt was engraved with elvish patterns.

He hinted at a cold smile. "You wanted to be a warrior, so here is a warrior's sword."

The moon could've been behind Der's head for the way she glowed, all fears and concerns tossed over her shoulder for the moment. "Yes, sir!"

Baroness Evelyn of Elloan led Thalon quickly down the hall by holding on to his hand. He had just dried his most recent round of tears, and let himself be pulled by the lady instead of following. She pulled him down some wide, low cut stairs that spiraled around some two-story statute. It wasn't a person, but a depiction of a stag

running up a cliff. He ducked his chin against his chest and did his very best not to look around at the early winter beauty around the secret elvish city. It was too easy to let go of his angry emotions if he did.

They came to a still lively ivy covered stone wall. As he watched, a dead-end archway of stones and the greenery vanished before his eyes. The corridor continued. The lady kept walking without hesitation, but now, he dragged his feet because he was staring.

The hall led to a wide, elaborate balcony with a grand vista of the mighty Riverfall Mountains. Several elves stood around, watching the crown prince, who gripped the ornamental railing with both hands. He recognized Sir Amthros, the duke and the duchess, but he didn't know the youngest elf with golden eyes.

He heard as they swept closer. "...Even word that the chemmen started raiding the dwarves." The duke scoffed. "Apparently, they've already assumed victory over us."

"Not yet," the crown prince answered quickly. "We still have a hand to play." He turned to face them. "Lady Evelyn, Thalon."

The baroness curtsied, and Thalon managed a quick bow. He vaguely remembered his mother saying something about it being rude not to drop one's eyes. It meant a lack of trust.

"Have you heard?" Amthros drawled. "Even the dwarves. It won't be a fortnight before the chemmen attack the humans, probably Thealith and the world from there."

"Yes," she replied. "It's a Centum War reborn, as we feared."

"The secret of Riverfall is no longer safe."

"I fear that no place may be secure." Lady Sabille leaned closer to her husband.

Evelyn bowed her head. "I wish to protest your highness's decision to accompany us to Elloan. It will be dangerous."

He waved his hand behind his head. "Myself in danger? We sit here in comfort whilst our people are being murdered." He stared off into the horizon, watching, imagining seeing the smoke of fires eating the remnants of towns and cities. Instead, the reality of the vista remained peaceful with snowflakes fell like tiny stars, every one shining as it drifted down to earth. "Our fate may come down to an ill conceived plan with a hair's width chance of success. However, it was our people's prior decisions, wise and other that has led us to this precipice."

"Yes, my prince." Duke Farallon rolled his eyes. "However, our duty is to keep you safe, you and Prince Alsalon."

The small prince nodded quietly, keeping his eyes anywhere but the duke.

Kaleb shook his head fiercely. "I cannot send good people to die without taking any risk myself. I would not be a worthy ruler."

Sir Amthros finally shook his tongue free. "Elloan has always been a refuge. I am certain that it still is."

Kaleb merely raised an eyebrow at the knight. Then, he turned back to the horizon. "Of course."

Behind them, Thalon backed silently toward the ivy laden door.

Lady Sabille clasped her hands together. "Please, heed our advice, my young prince. We don't want to lose you as well."

Kaleb turned away so the lady might not see his face. "And I can make my own damn decisions, thank you very much."

The lady gasped as if she had been slapped.

"You and your brother are your parents' legacy," Amthros said. "We must preserve that."

Kaleb growled, deep in his throat. "Before I can assume the throne, I need to earn it." He swept his hand wide toward the distant mountains. "As a leader, and as a son!" He pushed himself away from the railing and walked away.

Prince Alsalon trotted after him, while everyone else stood as rigid as trees.

"Brother, wait," called the younger prince. He caught up with Kaleb as the older brother started up a trail weaving up the mountainside. Slippery snow lined the stone floor.

"I'm leaving my friends to their fate. Again." Kaleb thundered up the path.

Alsalon dutifully followed. "They survived last time."

"Ha. Last time." He stopped and pressed a hand against his chest. "I pray you never know how this feels. Mortals and immortals are willing to die on my behalf! On my word!" He held his breath before finally exhaling. "And yet... what I fear most, little brother, is not dying." His voice retreated to a whisper. "It is losing someone else, especially you. I don't want anyone else to die, and suddenly, I'm responsible for everyone's lives. I didn't want this."

Alsalon reached up and hugged his brother. "I miss our mother and father." He squeezed tighter.

"I know. Me too. I think that we're too young for this burden. Why do we have to be in command? Everyone else has thousands more years of living. Let them decide."

The small prince tried to smile. "Perhaps not. The gods wouldn't give this to us if we couldn't do it."

"Aye, you may be right."

"I believe in you." Alsalon nodded and gazed at him with steel shining in his gold eyes.

"This is not a way to start a quest." Der rubbed the sleep in her eyes and tried not to yawn. She rolled her shoulders, unused to the weight of the heavy backpack.

"You can sleep tonight, kid, and you will too." Jakkobb chuckled at her, despite the seriousness of the moment. "Now, keep a straight face."

The soon-to-be raiders crossed under an archway in an open corridor of the haven. The cold wind threw a few golden and red leaves at their feet. Der squinted through the red morning sunlight to the mountains beyond. Outside Riverfall, no deciduous trees dared. She saw thin, distant pines from this vantage, but right outside were regular deciduous trees that shouldn't grow up here. This place was magic.

Her eyes followed a leaf as it spun to the ground. There were much less of them to fall off the trees now. The party was silent as they passed down through the stairwells of the secret haven. As they descended, the artwork faded and the stairs became steep and narrow. The stonework looked ancient and smelled of moss and disuse.

"It gets slick up ahead," the captain murmured. "Watch your footing."

"Why?" Der asked.

He pointed down. Der bent at the knees to see around the next turn, and she realized the encasing walls ended but the stairwell continued. She felt the blood rush to her head on her next step down and she threw herself against the central stone that held the stairs together. Below them, there wound the tiny sliver of a river, all the way down. She could hardly fathom that it was the same river they'd rode in on. She couldn't see the waterfall from here, but she imagined how far it must plummet. The stairwell continued to descend over nothing.

The wind whipped up around her air, bringing its icy fingers. Clouds crawled to the bottoms of the mountain like the slow, steady advance of a gray army. It wasn't quite the abyss, but certainly a cousin.

She gritted her teeth and forced a toe out onto the next step. "I thought that you elves, you know, being immortal and having to risk a little more life than we mere humans, *would make this safer!*"

Jakkobb, both shovel-like hands firmly gripping the central spire didn't look back. "Well, we don't use this exit. It's just another secret of Riverfall. Many exits, no entrances! Built so that an enemy couldn't follow because once your party goes through because it won't send to the same place twice after half an hour. Of course, it hasn't been needed and fell out of use and upkeep." His voice was almost lost to the wind. "Keep your mind on your feet."

Above her, the wind stole the surprised curses of Thistle and Kelin. It didn't matter, she could still feel the words Kelin meant to say, and she felt the absence of him right behind her. She didn't dare turn her head to see if he was hanging back. Ahead, she saw the knight vanish around the next bend. Cursing every half-inch, she followed.

He stood at a tiny stone arch that marked a definite end to the stairwell. It looked hauntingly familiar – and Der realized it was exactly like the entrances to the graves of nobility back home. Those squat stone chambers with that tiny arch on the front. This entry had no scenery beyond it. It was just black – oblivion black, like the night sky on moonless, starless nights.

Jakkobb grinned and before she had time to shake her head, he grabbed her arm and pulled. She bit off a yell in her teeth, closed her eyes and stumbled forward. She felt the knight release his grip, but it was too late, she was already moving. Her feet struck something solid.

Warm, salty smells immediately washed over her nose, and she felt steam immediately beginning to rise off her face. Slowly, she raised one eyelid against the blinding light, and was tackled from behind. She fell forward, backpack and all, and someone heavy landed on her. She tried to cough, but couldn't expand her lungs.

"What the hell was that?" Kelin yelled. He rolled off her back and sat in wide eyed wonder.

Once she realized she could breathe, she tried to cough out all this white, powdery stuff that she had accidentally inhaled. She spat and spat.

"Is this sand?" Kelin asked, running his fingers through the fine, bone-white grains. "I've never seen sand like this! It's so light!"

Thistle, Fienan, Jakkobb and Salinienn followed, and neither of them could mask their expressions of surprise as they emerged from nothing but air.

Der stared at the white stuff. She didn't know where they were, and hadn't even imagined any place like this could exist. Not in all those stories of distant lands had a story like this been told. Her warm coat was already heating up beyond comfort. She inhaled the wet, salty air. She looked around.

They were on a huge pile of sand with trees boasting huge, broad, incredibly green leaves. The sand could have not been more than one hundred paces across, surrounded by water. She had never seen truly blue water before. She'd always heard the sea was blue, but not like this. This was royal blue and living green and sky blue.

She didn't see any animals, other than the birds raging at them. She didn't give them a second thought. But, there in the center of this new world, was something she'd seen before. She'd seen that circle of trees surrounding an older, ancient tree. In this case, a palm tree.

Kelin wore just as dumbfounded an expression, and his eyes moved with the water as the waves constantly licked the beach.

Fienan smiled, taking off his gloves. "That exit is dangerous. It sends you anywhere a tree path is, in any weather, no matter who is there." He surveyed the tiny island. "But, this. This is not bad."

Der absently wiped her forehead with her glove and just sat, quickly heating up in the sand. She couldn't speak if she wanted to try. She found herself even more thunderstruck by this place than she had been by the elven majesty of Riverfall. The sweat on her forehead tingled in the warm winds.

The knight-captain clapped his hands. "Alright. I wish we could stay. Alas, we've got to get our arses back into the cold."

Grudgingly, with much stomping of sand, they lined up in front of the old palm tree. Der swept her hands across her trousers and realized that this sand was getting absolutely everywhere. Jakkobb, oblivious to the clinging sand, bowed and began speaking in a long, guttural language.

Suddenly, Thistle whirled around, his hand reaching for his sword. Salinienn moved beside him, hand on his own weapon, but eyes on the chemman instead of where Thistle was watching. "What is it?"

The chemman snorted. "I thought I heard something."

The elf shrugged. "Must've been a bird."

They each bowed and entered the tree. Once again, they pushed through what felt like a fog curtain. Der felt the cold sap all of the relaxing warmth she'd just earned. Her sweat turned bitingly icy in a heartbeat. Now, it was worse than when they started. She hopped on her feet to try to regain some of the heat. Looking around, this terrain looked a lot more like home, with rolling hills and short, squat mountains – although she couldn't tell which direction was north. The clouds hung low, and she had to blink several times to focus.

Jakkobb sighed and watched his breath turn into fog. "Come on. It's not far." He began to trudge over the leaf strewn, muddy soil. With wistful glances back at the tree, the party fell into line.

No one urged any conversation so far. Fienan began a song shortly. It was slightly awkward because he made it up as he walked.

Slowly, the others began to pick up the simple three lined chorus. Salinienn, forgetting his usual quiet nature, jumped forward into the next verse; he sang about a tavern and the girl he met there, and the troubles that ensued when he met her other suitors. They sang the chorus through their laughter next time. Thistle was the only one who remained taciturn.

Kelin tried his hand at the next verse, singing about when they would return home. Jakkobb took the verse after that. The song, with mismatched verses and horrible rhymes, continued on for at least half an hour. As they walked, the hills became tighter and steeper. Jakkobb called for quiet when they passed a marker. It looked to Der and Kelin like the ones the merchants used back home to warn of highwaymen. Three rocks set up in a triangle.

Then, they walked in silence. Eventually, Der trotted up where she was even with the captain. "Sir, is this really going to work?"

Jakkobb shrugged. "I hope so. We have to do something, and often, in war, you just have to take that deep breath and go for it. It's a gamble, but we've stacked our deck enough."

"Would you wager on that, sir?"

He laughed. "No, probably not." After a moment, he continued, "We're doing this, so don't try to worry about it. You know what's coming."

"Yeah. Ending this war. Victors and vanquished. I remember how the song goes."

He shook his head. "Sorry, kid, but there's no way for us to completely win this war. Some good men are going to die. Probably in our party. Victors and vanquished is a fireside story."

"No, it's not! We have to win. We're in the right! If we don't – I don't even want to think about what will happen if we don't."

Again, he shook his head. "Remember this, war doesn't determine who is right, war determines who is left."

Der's mouth hung open and she blinked. She looked at her right hand quizzically and then her left. "That wasn't funny, sir."

He smirked. "Got to make jokes when you can." He grunted under the weight of his own pack as they began to push their way uphill. He didn't say anything about the human skeleton he had to step over to get up the hill. Der stopped and stared, which caused the rest of the party to huddle around the skeleton. The bones were yellowed and falling away from each other, but it was still recognizable as human.

She swallowed and just started walking. The rest followed without comment.

"Where are we, sir?" She kept glancing over her shoulder at the long rotted corpse.

Jakkobb glanced at her and then at the others. "You truly want to know? Alright, um, far away."

She raised her eyebrows. "*How* far away, sir?"

He tried to grin. "Oh, about ogre country far away."

She gasped.

He waved his hands at her. "Don't. And, don't speak loudly, no fires, and we won't be here long enough for it to matter." He frowned. "I hope."

"Right. No worries," Der said in a dry tone of voice that most certainly was not.

They reached the crest of the hill. Below them, a thin, muddy river curved in from the horizon and disappeared. The swallow hole wasn't much. The ground dipped down and the river flowed into it, and then in a large muddy ring, vanished underground.

Kelin's brow bunched up. "How does it happen? Why doesn't the river just keep going?"

Fienan grinned. "Not much to it really. See, there's not so much water in this region, it's fairly dry, you've noticed. Except the river, of course. We're on this carboniferous limestone, which cracks horizontally and vertically in what are called joints. This type of rock is permeable and so water creeps into it. The river falls into an enlarged joint and keeps on going underground, in this case."

Der and Kelin both tilted their heads to the side. "What?"

Jakkobb sighed. "He means there's a big crack in the ground and the water fell in."

"Huh." Kelin tapped his lower teeth. "And, how do we get to Darkreign from here?" He glanced over his shoulder. The cacophony of the insects was rising louder and louder. "If we're not there already...?"

"No," the knight replied.

Salinienn cleared his throat. "The Lady Evelyn instructed myself and Fienan after her divination. The swallow hole is a thin place where a crossing into Darkreign is possible. There are several around the world. We never knew to look for them. There's even one in Elloan, apparently. They are a result of too many people making mistakes with too many magic spells – especially with transportation magic. The spoils had to dump somewhere, like midden." He sighed. "I imagine this is how the chemmen escaped." He glanced sideways at Thistle.

The storm-reader shrugged mutely.

"Or," Der postulated, "If the chemmen did so many horrible experiments before their banishment, what makes you think they didn't just experiment their way out of Darkreign?"

"Well said." Jakkobb nodded quickly. He silently clapped his massive hands. "Time for lunch."

"Out here?" Der looked around uneasily.

"Out here, we know the dangers. Once we get through the thin spot into Darkreign, the gods only know what's there."

"Well, that makes sense. I suppose." She shrugged, oddly relaxed.

The noisome air grew loud in their noses as they approached the swallow hole. Salinienn even pinched his nostrils closed. The ground grew squishier by the step.

They slung off their packs, and Der pulled out a little brown package. It rattled when she shook it. "What the hell is this?"

Fienan chuckled. "That would be one of the many luxurious meals prepared for you."

Kelin shook his own package. "Bread crumbs?"

Salinienn chuckled. "Of course not. Perhaps a little. No, these are specially prepared and dried meals. All we need do is add water."

The humans stared at him.

He held up his package and cut the wax that had kept it sealed. He took the water from one of his skins and poured a little inside. "I will admit that I prefer these with hot water, but cool water is still fine."

Fienan joined in, "It takes this food years to spoil and it is obviously much lighter to carry."

They all used their own waterskins to fill their pouches. The river water could only taste worse than it smelled. Soon, the dried food began to soak up the water and become moist and flavorful. As the party waited for the food to soak in the water, they looked around at their surroundings.

Der murmured, "I swear that I see shadows moving back there."

Jakkobb said, "I hope not. I hope that you're just a little on edge."

She watched. She was fairly certain that she saw the shadows moving against the wind, behind the trees, behind that rock.

"That's good."

She startled out of her concentration to see Fienan sitting next to her, also watching.

"Take a good look around," he said. "It might be the last time." He waved his hand overhead at the blanket of clouds. The light was leaking from the horizons – it was nearly nightfall here. The world began to wash out to gray.

Salinienn stepped up silently beside them. "The storm-reader's light. That's what those gray moments at dawn and dusk are named. 'Tis oft said that this is when chemmen eyes are the most acute."

"We're almost there too." Kelin popped his knuckles.

Thistle said, "This is only the entrance, not the journey." He rose from the ground like a striking serpent. "Movement."

The brush under the trees trembled and a small figure burst from it, running as fast as his little legs could carry him.

"Thalon!" Kelin tried to yell and inhale at the same time.

The boy stumbled in between their legs. "They're out there! They're coming!" He stopped short of diving in between his father's legs.

"What's coming?" Fienan whispered sharply.

"Big things! They're green, like puke – and, and – with teeth!"

"Ogres." Jakkobb slowly unsheathed the giant axe.

Thistle grabbed his son by the ear and yanked. He growled something harshly in a language Der did not know, but the boy's face paled even more.

"Lunch is over," the knight said steadily, moving slowly. "We're going, now."

"But the boy!" Salinienn protested. "We can't take him with us."

"Well, we can't leave him here," Fienan snapped.

Thalon started crying. "Dad, you couldn't leave me behind, not again! It's not fair!"

"Be silent!" Jakkobb hissed. It was too late, he already heard the rustling in the trees surrounding them. "Everyone, run!"

A few crude, ugly logs of arrows thudded down short of their party. They flew without precision, but packed too much punch. The party ran toward the center of the muddy ring, sinking further into the mud with every step. Der feared losing a boot as she slowed and sank to her knees in the mud.

"We won't be able to breathe!" Kelin yelled.

"It's a thin spot!" Fienan hollered back. "Just hold your breath and you'll come out the other side – muddy, but breathing!"

Jakkobb waded to nearly the center, and pulled the mud back with his shovel like hands as if he were digging for treasure. He inhaled deeply and plunged face first into the muck. He squelched down and vanished wholly into the mud. Suddenly, the world felt emptier.

Thalon, riding on Thistle's shoulders, beat on his father's ears. "Go! Go! Der, come on!"

More arrows spiked down around them, much closer to their mark.

Der pressed a hand against her drumming heart and fought every step of the way to make progress against the sucking mud. She looked over her shoulder and saw the ogres for the first time. The huge, looming beasts charged them, roaring and waving their spiked clubs over their heads. They had the same basic frame as most of the races with opposable thumbs, but much larger than most. She had never seen such a horrible creature. It wasn't that they walked like people, but it was that they bothered to clothe themselves, and somehow, that just made them seem like a horrible facsimile of people gone utterly wrong.

Ahead of her, the ground slurped and swallowed Thistle and Thalon. Then, Fienan and Salinienn vanished too. It was just her and Kelin remaining. He threw out a hand, and she tried to avoid his panic stricken gaze.

She grabbed his wrist and with all his blacksmith strength, he tugged her to the center of the swallow hole. Then, suddenly, the earth seemed to eat him too.

She hovered over the edge of the hole, taking many rapid breaths. Even with the arrows and charging ogres, she hesitated. She heard the water being sucked down into the ground, and felt it rushing down around her, pulling her down. Der inhaled one last time and held it. She took a step forward and let the world disappear beneath her feet.

In the next terrifying instant, she was stuck with no way up or no way down. Water and mud slid all around her, but she was trapped. She felt the earth tightening its grip on her entire body. She almost exhaled in a desire to yell.

Then, she slipped downward and hit the rock with her feet, jarring every bone, and felt it scrape up her back and legs. At the same time, icy water closed over her body. It moved too fast. This water was sharply cold too, with thousands of tiny blades cutting into her skin. She was completely blind and her ears were too plugged to hear. She edged out over panic.

Then, as she began to think that she was lost forever, something gripped her ankle and yanked. Suddenly, her shoulder slammed into a wall of stone. She exhaled in shock, and her mouth filled with mud. Then, something grabbed onto her shoulder and arm and plucked her out of the water as easily as a small branch.

A massive hand slapped her on the back. She coughed out everything in her mouth. The hand set her down on a rough rock floor. She dimly recognized the captain's voice.

"Der? You're alright. Say something."

She nodded and coughed again. "I'm... here."

He grinned. "That may not be a good thing." He glanced around. "Alright, I think that's everyone. Is everyone breathing?"

"Aye," Kelin panted.

Salinienn pointed. "There's light up ahead."

Der blinked, realizing that there was something to see with after all. But, she couldn't study it as she started hacking again. Muddy water dripped down from her hair, face and clothes.

"Are the ogres going to follow us?" Thalon quavered.

Jakkobb shook his head. "I doubt it. If so, we have an adventure."

"We left our packs behind," Fienan pointed out. "Damn."

Jakkobb snorted. "Well, we probably wouldn't need them anyway."

Der continued to blink, forcing her eyes to adjust. She pushed back the mat of wet hair from her face, while her other hand absently rubbed the scratches she could reach on her legs. "It'll be impossible to get out against the current, mud and rocks."

Thistle glared at his son. "We won't even try."

"I disagree," Salinienn said. "It can be done, but not without effort."

Der shuddered. She didn't want to try. Then, she shuddered again for another reason. The memory of the last time she was in the chemmen controlled area chilled her mind as much as the gunk dripping off her clothing. This time would be better, she told herself: she had resources, allies, a plan and an elvish sword. She wondered if she was going to lose that one too, just like her father's. Most likely.

The echoes announced their entrance into a huge chamber. The sound snaked around the cave and slowly bounced back to them. Overhead, stalactites grinned down at them like gruesome teeth. In the light, they glowed with dull grayness.

Coming around the corner of the rock, they erupted into a forest. It looked like any other deciduous forest in spring. A few flowers budded, and a crowd of bugs buzzed around them instantly. There were too many and they didn't leave. Nevertheless, the group stared in astonishment.

They turned to Thistle, whose eyes were gray here, just like the rest of theirs. He looked as astounded as the rest of them.

No matter which way they turned, there was no color. The world was shades of white, black and almost everything was a depth of gray. It was to the eyes what trying to comprehend a foreign language was to the ears. They didn't understand.

Kelin whimpered. "If I had any false hope of survival before, I don't now."

"This certainly is unexpected," Fienan whispered.

Thalon pulled on his father's pant leg. "I don't like this place."

"You weren't supposed to be here," the chemman gritted. His eyes roamed the unhealthy trees. He reached down and grabbed his son's shoulder. "We shall have words." He pulled the child back toward the cave. "Go deep, hide. Whatever you may hear, do not move." He pulled up his hood and turned to the others. "I will go and scout the path."

Jakkobb hesitated but finally nodded. "Alright."

The chemman melted ahead into the storm-readers' light. This was a whole realm of it.

Salinienn snorted and watched him leave. "This certainly is an evil place."

Der took a deep breath and just sat down. "It is."

"Can we rest, sir?" Kelin asked through his panting.

Jakkobb held up his hand. "I don't think that's a good idea. Now, I'm not giving an order because I'm just as confused, but probably not here."

Fienan threw his hand toward his sword. "Movement! There's something approaching. I hear it!"

Their eyes swiveled all around them. Der tried to imagine what beast might be coming for them and couldn't picture anything else but attacking ogres. They waited and watched.

After a few minutes, the elf shook his head. "I'm sorry, everyone, I suppose that was overeager."

Der shrugged. Then, she froze, listening intently, and she heard wicked smiles stretching across new faces.

"No!" She stamped her foot against the ground, but the resounding echo didn't ring. Thistle stood openly in the narrow forest path and around him at least a dozen other almost identical looking chemmen appeared from behind the trees.

"You bastard," Jakkobb breathed. He pulled his axe free.

Thistle said nothing. Then, the chemmen cut into the raiding party as eagerly as a holiday feast. Blades met them from every direction as the raiding party struggled to draw their own.

Der spun around, swallowing panic against the snarling faces of the chemmen. Beside her, Salinienn dropped his sword. "Pick it up! Pick it up!"

His gaze whirled at her and he looked at her as if he was about to faint. His eyes had partially rolled up in his head and he looked as pale as a ghost. He ducked under a chemman blade and shoved his way forward. He scrambled back for the cave at a full sprint.

She couldn't spare him attention, and she felt the hot kiss of a blade on her cheek as she rolled away from her attacker. She ducked a beheading swipe and sliced at the leg of her attacker. It was a precise slash, and the chemman dropped to his knees. She didn't have time to try and finish him. She parried another storm-reader's attack.

She didn't even think about the lack of color. She didn't have the time to marvel any more. This was survival in its purest form. No matter how many chemmen she or the others defeated, there were three more in his place. They kept coming.

The captain let out a full throated yell; his noise was as much as a weapon. Kelin hacked and slashed without daring to breathe. Fienan fenced ferociously, but the chemman's blade was just a little faster and elicited several serious cuts on the elf.

Jakkobb cursed in a loud litany that didn't need a translator. In the face of the chemmen, he finally threw down his axe. "We surrender!"

One by one, Fienan, Kelin, and Der tossed down their swords. Fienan held up his hands.

"Damn you! Damn you, you chemman!" Fienan screamed and pointed. The chemman had stayed back and observed.

"This didn't get too far," Der muttered.

Kelin looked exactly how she felt. His lips trembled. He stared ahead at the chemmen. "Derora, this is the absolute last time I listen to one of your moronic schemes."

Chapter Nineteen

The Chemmen King and Vlade

Salinienn stumbled, and sprayed himself across the field of late blooming gladioli. He cursed the plants for hiding holes. Winter hadn't curled its tendrils in this tiny pocket of the elven kingdom yet. Autumn's pace was slower here than in the mountains. This season was always late in Elloan, and spring was always early. He picked himself back up and ran toward the castle at the top of the hill. Unlike the elegance of Riverfall or the glorious spires of Long Range Palace, this castle looked squat and heavy. But, this castle could be properly defended with its archery loops and murder holes. Moonrise Castle was built for war.

He stared at the long gladiolus stem in front of his face. The flowers grew up all the way to the castle walls. As he picked himself back up to run, he remembered the flower's name meant "sword-flag." Hundreds of the banners spun in the wind on the fields.

"Good, I think that is for the best." Farallon stood taller than the prince, and saw his face in the mirror high and to the right of Kaleb. His wide peripheral vision caught the fluttering of blue clothing. He turned. The prince, noticing the duke's movement, also turned. Sir Amthros stepped out of the corner he had been lurking in.

"Highness!" the messenger went from running to a curtsy without stopping in between. Her face was twisted with apprehension.

Kaleb fought his mouth opening. He felt he could almost taste the sweat stinging her forehead. "Arise."

She rose slowly, but kept her face downcast at the prince's feet. "Your Highness, Salinienn, from the raiding party, has arrived. He is not well, my prince!"

"But, they've already left!"

She shook her head wordlessly. "He says..." She faltered at the prince's agonized expression. "He reports that the raiding party was ambushed by the storm-readers once they were too deep to escape."

"Ambushed?" he repeated softly, as if he were treading on a fault line and the earth just shifted.

"Yes, Your Highness, ambushed."

Kaleb staggered back a step. Farallon stepped between them. His voice was clipped. "You may go." The messenger hastened away.

He whirled in a circle until he faced the mirror again. He swallowed. "I knew this would happen..."

Amthros hung his head respectfully. "I am not surprised," the knight said. "I am sorry for such news."

The prince dropped to his knees, and then onto his hands. He had known this would happen, but he hadn't expected to hear news of it. It was his parents all over again. Hot sweat mixed with sudden, cold tears on his face. His body started to chill and shake. He didn't notice the fog of his breath growing on the mirror.

"I shouldn't have allowed them. I knew how hopeless and stupid it was. Knew they'd be tortured." His watery eyes reflected the radiance of the mirror.

Amthros offered a weak smile. "Stupid, yes, but not hopeless."

The duke stood behind him. "You wouldn't have allowed it if you believed it was hopeless. This foolhardy escapade was their idea and their decision, my prince. Nothing about this debacle is because of you. It was their decision."

"Their mistake." Kaleb held himself up on one trembling hand. "I shouldn't have allowed it. I wanted to be there too. This is my kingdom and my vengeance. I didn't want to send them on behalf of me!"

Amthros shook his head. "You are our leader, and you will be our king. You know why you couldn't have been."

"I am not king."

"You will be," said the duke.

The prince shook his head. "I am not my father."

"No, you are not. Alas, he is departed."

Kaleb felt an abyss opening up, right there. "He would know what to do."

Farallon tried to smile. "He is not here, my prince, and you aren't he. Nor are you his reflection. Reflections are merely weak, backward images. My prince, you are the heir to our elvish kingdom, and King Valladen's son and legacy. You have your own wisdom and courage, despite your youth." He put a gentle hand on Kaleb's shoulder.

"Then why do the people I care about keep dying?"

Amthros replied, "Because our enemy is cruel. They are the culpable ones." He glanced up at the duke. "Especially when there is one that we cannot trust."

Farallon sighed. "Death is the most painful thing in our world, and we cannot undo it."

Kaleb gazed into his mirror. He stared so long without blinking his vision blurred and colored. His friends died. The elves on the raid volunteered when he announced the idea. Elves died. It felt as if everyone he knew kept dying and he felt the hand of death chipping away at his soul.

He grabbed his head. He allowed this, he allowed it! Immortals died for him, he sent them to their deaths! His friends died for him!

So did his parents.

The prince imagined his body sinking into the floor, but he couldn't sink low enough. His father would not have cried, he told himself. He didn't know what his father would do, and he absolutely didn't know what *he* was going to do, and he desperately needed to.

Der and Kelin and Jakkobb and Fienan might not be dead. Who knows what happened to the chemman? Of course, they could be worse – he remembered the undead from the Riverfall Mountains. He cursed his imagination, and then he cursed the chemmen imagination for thinking of such evils.

He wiped his face dry. They had to end this war and stop this insanity, before anyone else lost someone they loved. He wished it could be like that!

He stood up and straightened his shirt and his hair in his reflection. Wishing never accomplished deeds, he thought as he glanced back at his own face one more time. For an instant he thought he saw his father. Without bidding farewell, he marched out of the room.

He walked through the empty corridor, staring straight ahead. He let his eyes drift over the open walls, the intricate patterns and the vaulted arches. Usually, he walked softly, but this time he let his footsteps echo. At least he could hear himself coming. He wondered if his friends heard the chemmen coming.

"I wish we didn't know who told the chemmen of the raid." Alsalon appeared around a corner like a ghost, carrying a gladiolus in his hand. He fell in step. "I will meet Salinienn with you."

Kaleb shrugged.

"Then, our fate is foretold. The chemmen will come here." The younger prince nearly had to jog to keep stride. "Lady Evelyn says that Thalón has disappeared."

"Suspicious timing. I'm sure he's just trying to protect his family. And, Silver Dawn has not yet arrived," the crown prince said, mostly to himself. "Our knights and soldiers are few and scattered." His jaw tightened. "I suppose soon enough we'll find out which one, chemmen or elf, is truly king."

Even in this colorless grayness, the knives and whatever the hell those prong things were reflected in the light. Some light seeped through the wide, but exceedingly high window. Kelin never imagined that light could still reflect here. Or that it could make those knives look so very sharp.

Kelin's head rolled around on the back of the steel table to which he'd been chained. He didn't know how long he'd been there, time was impossible to guess at in this constant gloaming.

He closed his eyes and wished. Can't be tortured again. Can't be tortured again. This isn't real. This cannot possibly be real. *The chemmen aren't real!* This was all Der's fault!

Not again.

A whimpered squeeze through his lips as the door creaked open. He prayed, wished, hoped that the chemman who entered was Thistle. He'd saved them before. It didn't matter if he'd told the other chemmen where they were. He'd saved them before.

The chemman smiled, but it wasn't anything comforting. "I remember you," Vlade said, almost gleefully. "You and your friend are still alive. Impressive."

He brushed his fingers over some of the blades on the table beside Kelin's. "I wonder how long you might last this time. I think you made a whole minute last time, but that may have only been because there was so much meat to cut through." He idly picked up a scalpel. "Will be it more or less this time?"

Kelin glared.

Vlade chuckled. "Of course, no matter what, this time you must pay for your crime of spilling chemmen lifeblood. We'll take our time getting to that, though. There's no rush here. I cannot fathom your stupidity to come here."

Kelin spat at him. "I'm not afraid of you anymore."

The chemmen commander paused, and then a wide, vicious smile anchored his features. "Truly?" He twirled the scalpel between his fingers. "Then, let us begin."

The gray, razor blade cut through the air, and Kelin kicked against his chains and squirmed away as far as he could. He remembered last time, the pain, the misery. This time, there wouldn't be a miracle cure either. Here, he was in the domain of the enemy.

"Wait! Wait! I'll talk! I'll talk!" Even his lung twinged at the memory of last time. He didn't want to scream, to break down, he just heard his body yelling against his mind's will. Tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes. "Thistle sold us out!" A sob broke through his voice. "I thought he was on our side, but it wasn't! He was – He is!"

The blade hung between Vlade's finger. He leaned in. "He is what?"

"He's chemmen!" He yanked against his bindings again and a sob erupted from his lips.

"Good." Vlade's breath hammered against his ear. "Who is Thistle? The one how alerted us to you, of course."

"He's the chemman who helped us! The one with the child!" Crying, he raged against his shackles. "But, he's a chemman!"

Vlade closed his eyes and inhaled. "Of course. There is no other way." He blinked and his eyes refocused. He pressed the knife against the young man's skin and ripped.

Kelin yelped, even though he felt no pain at first. Then, the laceration *burned*. He screamed. In that white hot instant, he remembered every gruesome detail of the last time. Every horrible, heart pounding, agony laden moment.

"Do they have an army?" the chemman asked sweetly. He dipped the knife below Kelin's skin again.

He gasped. "No! Yes! Silver Dawn is on the way, but they're not there yet – and they're – they're gathering the elves who will fight, but no, they don't! Just a handful of soldiers!"

"Where is the princeling?"

Kelin licked his lips so that he could speak. "El-oh..." He squeezed the air passed his throat. "Elloan! Some place called Moonrise Castle with the baroness and both princes!"

Vlade's eyes began to glow. "Both princes," he said to himself. "And that elven witch!" He chuckled and withdrew the scalpel. Smiling greatly, he dropped the blade and snapped his fingers. Another chemman materialized.

She was the first female chemman Kelin had ever seen, at least, away from combat, but he didn't bother with the fact. She had the same haircut and the same clothes, but a more avian face. He was sure she had the same eyes. Vlade grinned over his shoulder. "Send him back to his cell since he's been such a good dog."

Fienan gripped the bars and threw himself against them with all his strength. The metal didn't shudder. "They knew we were coming! They knew! Thistle, damn you! He told them, he gave us over to him! And, now, we'll be tortured to death!"

Jakkobb's upper lip curled but his voice was even. "Yeah, we should've known about that."

Der grappled with her own fingers. "Kelin's been taken. It's not fair, it should have been me! He didn't deserve this!" She started to pace in tight circles. "And why is everything gray here? It makes no sense! It's unnatural!"

"We knew the danger," Jakkobb said quietly from his corner. He didn't look any smaller without his armor, but its loss had shattered his illusion of invincibility.

Der took her turn yanking and kicking against the bars. "Argh!" She paced to the back of the cell, spun on her heel and returned. "Where's Thistle?"

Fienan rolled his eyes. "Oh, please, human! He's one of them. He told him! I cannot believe that he convinced us, and that we listened."

"What if he did it for Thalon's sake?"

"Then he just killed all of us for the boy!"

Jakkobb raised his hands. "Alright, that's enough, both of you. They're listening to us now."

Der shook a fist at Fienan. "But, Thistle saved our lives."

"Not this time, girl," he yelled. "Don't you understand? It was a trick. There are no chemmen traitors!"

The knight glared. "I'm sure that I gave an order."

Her shoulders hunched. "Yes, sir."

Footsteps crunched down the corridor, Der hopped up and craned her neck, but still could see nothing. She still blinked her eyes almost constantly, hoping to suddenly see color instead of this aberrant grayness. She could not get used to it.

Suddenly, Kelin came into focus, easily recognizable even without color. He was being pushed by a chemman guard. Despite the blood on his arm, he still held his head high. She sighed with relief. The guard stopped in front of the door. He pointed to the back of the cell and said something in a language she didn't know.

He barked his words again and pointed to the back. Slowly, the motley assemblage shuffled to the back of their cell. Quickly, the chemman shoved Kelin passed the bars and relocked the door. The big man collapsed on the other side of the door.

Der slipped forward. "How bad?"

He held up his arm. "Worst of it." He turned his face away.

Jakkobb smirked. "Well, you gave them what they wanted. Besides, they've got time here."

Kelin rubbed his forehead with his other arm while Der began to bandage his wound with a torn shirtsleeve. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I told them where the princes were. I'm sorry."

Der paused and he heard the intake of her breath. Jakkobb, on the other hand, sighed loudly. "Doesn't matter, they would've gotten it out of any one of us. This was a foolhardy plan all along and we knew it."

Der started tying the bandage again. "Besides, Elloan is –"

"Der!" The knight's voice cracked like a whip. "Shut it."

"Yes, sir."

Fienan, shaking his head, stepped up to the door and pulled again. "Can't pick this lock without tools."

"Well, at least there aren't guards just standing here," Der offered.

Jakkobb rolled his eyes. "The chemmen aren't that obvious. You can wager they're spying on us somehow. He looked past the bars and through a very thin window at the base of the ceiling. "It'll be nightfall soon."

Der glared through the blackness of night. At least it was dark enough she could imagine color. She'd taken to closing her eyes every hour and rubbing them to see the patterns that emerged. That was still in reds, blues, greens and yellows.

She leaned her head against the bars. She didn't sleep. She waited until the darkness began to fade back into the dull grayness. She snorted when she heard footsteps. Then, she listened. These were much quicker and lighter than what she had expected. She watched.

A small figure hugged the wall and all but sprinted toward their cell.

"Thalon!" Der bit her tongue to keep from yelling.

The boy reached up with a ring of keys. He grinned like the kid who'd found where his parents hide the candy. "They keep everything in an office down the hall."

Jakkobb moved like lightning to the front of the cell and glared at the child like thunder. "Boy, what the hell are you doing?" He snatched the keys.

Thalon appeared wounded. "But, I watched, just like Dad taught me, and there's only one guard and there's another bunch of prisoners down the hall who apparently are more trouble than you. And, no one's here. I think everyone's gone from the city like this ghost town Mother and I –"

The knight tried several keys in the lock. "Yes, Thalon, I think I understand. How did you ever get here? How did you escape capture?"

The boy shrugged with a face as innocent as an injured puppy's. "I hid, like Dad said. He told me to close my eyes and cover my ears. I still heard... and so I followed you into the city. They didn't even look for me."

Jakkobb finally found a key that clicked. "Yes, then I suppose that they aren't listening."

"They're not?" Fienan smiled in a huff. "I feel like a fool now."

"What does that mean?" Kelin hauled himself to his feet, supported by Der. "Does this matter? Can't we just go?"

The door swung free to the knight's touch. "Well, let's take care of that guard, and see whatever other poor bastards the chemmen have brought down here."

"How are your eyes, Thalon?" Der asked quietly.

The boy held up his hands. He looked up with orbs that were just as gray as the rest of theirs. "They're fine. Everything's a little clearer now. Different, but not weird." He cocked his head. "Are yours alright, Der?"

She nodded. "Uh, yeah."

Jakkobb peered down the corridor. No guard caught his sight. He turned back. "Alright. I will find that guard. Fienan, you're with me." He tossed the keys. "Der, Kelin, Thalon, go find the other prisoners, and if they're useful, let them out."

"If they're useful?" Kelin repeated.

"If they're friendly, if they could help us, or if you can pat them on the back and send them out as a distraction to cover our escape. Useful. Now go!" He pointed, and then, he and Fienan vanished like ghosts down the hall.

The hall was very plain and entirely gray – dull, lackluster, patternless gray. Der frowned, finding it was certainly difficult to fear a gray, clean hallway. She had always imagined – on those brief moments when they'd made up stories about the chemmen – that they lived in dark palaces full of bloody skeletons and such. Certainly not well organized and well swept buildings. This was boring. She honestly tried because she knew the chemmen, but it was hard to be afraid of boring.

She glanced down the hallway, the other barred door seemed to come out of a mirage. She looked back, their cell door already appeared a long way off. As they approached, she began to wonder who was locked away down there. They may have been enemies of the chemmen, but that didn't mean they could be friends to them at all. Perhaps they were spies that failed the chemmen, or just beasts that had to be contained.

Thalon gripped the back of her leg. He looked up. At least here, his eyes were gray like everyone else's and that would avoid an awkward explanation. He tried to grin. "You go first."

Kelin nodded. "Yeah, Der, you go first."

Thalon whispered, "It might be something like those calvar."

Der shivered and stopped walking. She pushed the keys closer into her leg. "You know, I'd feel a lot safer if we had a sword." She swallowed and stepped forward. Her gaze slipped through the bars and she sighed with relief. She looked over her shoulder. "Dwarves."

She offered a small smile and waved. "Good day, I think."

Three dwarves clustered together on the floor. Only a few square inches of face were visible amongst the thick beards and hair. They were bloodied like fallen warriors, with stout arms and legs, sitting in squalor on the floor. Their hair and magnificent beards were matted and frazzled. One of them opened one eye. "Are ye..." And then he just stared.

Der scrambled to find the correct key and cursed as every key so far fit, but didn't turn. Kelin and Thalon inched up behind her.

A dwarf pushed himself to his knees, and then to his feet. He tottered forward. When he reached the bars, he squinted and leaned forward. Then, the dwarf reached into his pocket and pulled out and put on a pair of very thick spectacles. Der and Kelin blinked and exchanged a confused glance.

The dwarf apparently still had enough energy to be surprised. "Humans?" he said in Common. He took a turn staring at each of them. Finally, he asked, "Are ye a rescue party?" He removed his spectacles, buffed them on his torn sleeve and put them back on. Two teenagers and a little boy remained in his field of vision.

Der smiled as a key finally clicked. "Well, I suppose we are now. We, uh, we just escaped from down the hall." She heaved the door open.

The dwarf turned and spoke quickly to the others in a language the rescuers certainly didn't comprehend. He turned back. "Truly? How were ye captured and brought to this cursed place?"

Der grinned as cheerfully as she dared. "Oh, we were caught trying to raid Darkreign. How about you?" Behind her, Kelin covered his eyes with his hand.

None of the dwarves moved toward the door.

"Is something wrong?" Der asked, standing to attention.

The dwarf shook his head, his mighty beard swaying. "Aside from being in Darkreign itself, prisoners of the accursed chemmen and being rescued by mad children, no?" His voice ended in a question.

Der grinned. "Oh, we have a plan. Er, don't exactly have a plan to escape since we didn't know what to expect in Darkreign, but we'll figure it out."

Behind him, one of the other dwarves muttered something that sounded like gravel being kicked around. The speaker nodded and looked to Der. "He wants to know if you're daft."

"Yes," Kelin said firmly. "However, our plan now is to get the hell out of here with our hides intact. You're welcome to come." He shot a furtive glance at his best friend. "Please come before we wind up in more trouble." He darted into the cave. "Can you all stand, and walk? My name's Kelin Miller of Riversbridge."

The be-spectacled dwarf nodded. "Aye, we can." Once more, he looked to all three of them. He seemed to shrug underneath all that hair. "I am Carak. 'Tis best just to know short names for the now. These are Boison and Striggal. We are of Clan Heavyaxe."

Der found herself grinning. "I know that name."

Kelin offered his hand to one of the reclining dwarves and even he strained under the weight of the smaller body. "Duelingar, remember?"

"Oh. Seems like a year ago."

Thalon, standing guard in the hall, peered around anxiously. "Can we go now already?"

Carak stared. "That boy a half elf?"

He froze under that gaze and for a moment, crouched to run. He nodded. "Uh, yes, master dwarf. Uh." He waved a hand. "Here come the captain and Fienan. Oh, they don't look happy."

Jakkobb, wearing his recovered armor and weapons, carried two backpacks in one hand and the recumbent body of their chemman guard in the other. He dropped the guard in the cell they had vacated. He didn't say anything until he was within whispering range. "Dwarves? That's good news, at least. They're usually helpful."

Quickly, the party introduced themselves. Carak stared up and down. "Dragoon?"

"Silver Dawn."

"How did ye land here?"

"We were betrayed," Jakkobb said thickly, after a moment. His swished the last word around in his mouth as if he'd tried to eat something poisonous.

Fienan bunched a fist at his side. "Indeed. There always is a snake in the grass. It was your plan to trust the bastard," the other snapped back.

Jakkobb loomed. "We didn't know. How could we have known?"

"Stop it! Shut up, both of you!" Der stepped in between them, holding out her arms. "As important as this problem is, it doesn't matter right now." She heard their gasps. "It doesn't matter because if we are captured, the chemmen will kill us all, so just shut up!"

The following silence was heavy and the weight of it collapsed on their ears.

The captain sighed and crossed his arms. "She's right."

Fienan snorted. "Let's just leave. Now."

Kelin noticed Carak's wide mouthed gaze. The dwarf looked up to him. "Did she just...?"

He sighed and nodded. "Yes. As usual."

"And how is she still alive?"

"Oh, by being too foolish to realize she's being foolish. I don't know."

"What are you whispering over there?" Der asked while at the same time struggling into her shirt of mail.

He smiled sweetly. "Nothing, just talking about departing this hellhole."

"We can't leave without my dad," Thalor piped up. "We don't know where he is. I followed you because I couldn't find him."

"Er." Kelin bent down and lifted the boy up in his arms. "Your dad's got the best chance for surviving down here, so I'm sure he's fine. Which way is out?"

Thalor pointed mutely.

"I've oft wondered what this building is," Carak rumbled as they began to walk. "'Tis too neat to be a proper prison."

"I don't think that it is, sir dwarf," Fienan responded quietly.

"Ghost town," Thalor whispered.

"It reminds me..." Fienan hummed a little to himself. "It reminds me of those town halls in the Empire."

"Empire?" Der repeated.

"Pallens, of course." He waited dutifully through the revered silence of the humans and even the dwarves while they passed into a new, identical corridor. The doors weren't barred, but instead solid wood. "Every city, even the small towns, had them. Obviously, the bigger the city, the bigger the hall. In some of the greatest cities, they even had to be many, different buildings. They had quite a lot in them: government, the medicinal hub, the local jail, the speaking pools —"

"And the schools," Jakkobb finished. He pointed into one of the rooms they were sneaking past. In the back of the room were bunks, stacked all the way from the floor to the ceiling. In the center of the room were rows of wooden desks, all neatly arranged and facing the front. There were a couple of windows, too high to let anything but gray light filter into the room. No pictures adorned the walls and no written papers were in sight.

"This room's the same," Der called from across the corridor. "They're not much for creativity, are they? All the rooms seem to be the same."

"I guess this is where the chemmen children are sent," Carak mused. "Those desks are too small for anything other than wee ones."

"Why are they empty?" Thalor asked.

"Even the children have gone to war," Jakkobb said.

"There was a man with a young girl," Carak began, "We thought he was human, but it was the girl that I didn't trust. She sat there, didn't ask questions, didn't look around and I've never seen a human child not at least nervous to be in a dwarf mine." He shrugged. "It was too dark, and the man had their faces hidden by hats, so we didn't see the color of their eyes until it was too late." He gestured to Boison and Striggal. "We were the only ones in our mining outpost who survived. We didn't think we were fortunate for that." He seemed to shake himself. "We too, remember the horror of the storm-readers, but we too, fooled ourselves into thinking that they had perished."

Der snorted. "Is it just humans that don't know that the chemmen never existed, then?"

Fienan shrugged. "Dwarves live longer, and their history isn't nearly as fragmented as human history is — especially after Pallens died."

Carak smiled. "Poor lass, we'll keep you in the know."

Jakkobb hinted at a chuckle. "Well, sir Carak, do your companions speak Common as well."

The one previously identified as Boison nodded. "Small. Speak small."

"Ah, that's good. You can understand us."

Boison and Striggal nodded. "Aye," they said.

The party rounded another corner and began down another corridor. Jakkobb glanced around. "I hope we haven't been this way before."

Der fought folding her arms and shivering. "Looks like it."

Thalor pointed. "There's the door. It's the same one I came through. I think."

The knight raised his hand. "Alright, spread out, poke your noses up against the glass and watch for chemmen. We're not stepping foot outside only to be shown right back in."

Der, Kelin and Thalor tiptoed into one of the spacious classrooms. It looked like the previous one, with the bunks and desks all perfectly in order. They pushed one of the desks up to the wall, but it was still too short.

"Let's try with both." Der dragged a second desk across the floor. Stacked together, Der's eyes barely crested the lip of the window. She held her breath and watched. To her surprise, the sun shone brightly into her face. Until this moment, she hadn't realized that Darkreign had a sun. It had nighttime, but she hadn't thought about a sun. It blinded her as its white light spilled across the land in front of her. All she could really make out were some white, square buildings and forest. Gray trees, hiding in black shadows, slouched in the gray light. She gulped.

"Do you see any chemmen?" Kelin asked from below.

She refocused her eyes. "No, but..." She tried to look harder. "No, I don't. This is unlike anything that I've ever seen though."

Fienan materialized in the door. "Any luck?"

"Good luck," Kelin said. "No chemmen."

The elf nodded. "Alright then, let's meet at the door." They followed him away from the classroom. Der tossed a glance over her shoulder, smirking at the two desks now completely out of place. She darted back inside the room and kicked over a third desk. Then, she trotted after the others to the exit.

Jakkobb bent low. "The plan is that we run out in twos. No one stops until they get beyond the treeline. Wait to count to one hundred before you follow. I'm going first, with Fienan. Then, Boison and Striggal. Kelin and Thalon. Der and Carak." Slowly, he kicked the door open and with a quick sweep of his eyes, they were gone.

One. Two. Three... A hundred heartbeats later, Boison and Striggal vanished into the gray forest. The count started over, then Kelin and Thalon were gone. Carak nudged Der. "Fly, fly."

Suddenly, one hundred passed all too quickly. They pushed their heads through the door and took the plunge. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine that the grass was green because the ground certainly felt the same under her feet. She was too afraid to close her eyes, but could barely stomach the white sun and the gray sky.

She nearly collapsed on top of the party. She stopped for breath. Fienan nodded. "Breathe for a moment."

"Trees aren't healthy," Jakkobb commented. The needles under their feet were dry and withered. Even with the lack of color, it was easy to see how the trees were weak and mostly dying. Twigs poked out of drooping branches.

The dwarves shrugged.

"Everyone alright?" the knight asked. "Let's march."

Ten chemmen stood guard in front of the cave entrance. Fienan crawled back to the party on his hands and knees to report. "Didn't see ten chemmen in the building."

Jakkobb grimaced. "Were they actually on guard?"

"They looked bored, but I'll say that they were."

Der's voice twisted around itself, "Can we win?"

The knight shrugged. "Now would be a good time for archery." He sighed. "I guess we'll have to use tactics instead. But, we have the surprise, not to mention the absolute desperation."

Thalon began to shake his head. "No, not without my dad. Not without dad!"

"Well, you weren't supposed to be here," Jakkobb barked. "It's your safety that I'm fearing for! Your dad can take care of himself."

The boy started to whimper and it blossomed into tears.

"Keep crying, lad. My decision's been made."

Carak tapped on Kelin's wrist. "Has his father died? Does the boy not know?"

Kelin shrugged. "We don't know," he said with absolute honesty.

"We may all die in combat soon enough." He spat.

Boison raised a finger. "He not like fight. He reader." He offered a yellow toothed grin and pantomimed writing on a piece of paper.

"Oh." Kelin blinked. Of course the dwarves would have scholars, as well as all other professions necessary to a society, but they'd never thought about things that like in Riversbridge. Dwarves were miners and smiths.

Jakkobb leaned forward. "Alright, everyone's going to have to carry their own weight on this one. Boison, Striggal, Fienan and I are going to go straight in. However, before we get there, Der, Kelin, Carak, you're going to sneak around behind them. As soon as they get to us, you attack them from behind. Thalon, you stay down and hide."

"But, my dad!" he sobbed. "I want my dad!"

"But he —" Der bit her tongue. She put her hand on the child's head. "I'm sure he's just fine. He's got other duties right now, but you know he's coming for you."

"Let's just hope he's not coming for the rest of us," Fienan murmured.

"Quiet," Jakkobb commanded. "You in the flank, you're going to have to the count of five hundred. But, even more important than counting, I need you to be silent. They cannot know that you're behind them, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Der whispered.

"Alright. Then, get going."

She nodded. The decaying leaves and pine needles made it much easier to mask their sounds. The leaves were well on their way to being soil and absorbed the footsteps. Der tried to count, but gave up after she

nearly walked into a tree. She just couldn't focus on counting, hiding and moving at the same time. Not with how quickly her heart was racing.

She watched as Kelin mouthed a prayer beneath his breath, and she couldn't read the dwarf's face at all. Those two stopped and laid their stomachs on the ground. Slowly, with weapons before them, they began to crawl.

Der remained crouched by the tree and then she looked up. Well, she didn't think the chemmen would expect that. She began to climb.

"You're chest high." Thalon looked critically up at Boison. "How can you weigh that much?"

The dwarf grunted and kicked, trying to scramble up the rock face. It may have only been six feet, but it was an effective stop for the dwarves and child.

"Is it the beard?" the child persisted, innocence radiating like heat off his face.

Boison growled, and with his free hand drove the one half of his axe that was a pickaxe into the rock. The other half was a fighting axe. He pulled his weight up and over the edge.

The boy lithely grabbed onto a very thin overhanging stick and pulled himself up with minimal effort. They tiptoed forward and nearly tripped over Jakkobb. How an elf as large as he could hide so easily was still a mystery. At least here, his armor was merely gray.

Hidden low in the meager brush, the knight eyed the chemmen guarding their exit. He scowled. "We'll be seen," he whispered. "No help for it. Ready?"

He waited for every individual person to nod, and spared a long look for Thalon.

He let loose a bull-throated roar and they ran, holding their recovered weapons firmly between them and their adversaries. The elves had to take shorter steps to keep in line with the dwarves, but the dwarves were anything but slow.

Twenty hammering seconds passed before they closed on their intended targets. Two chemmen broke away from the line, leaving eight to face the attackers. They turned to run into the forest, and met Kelin and Carak rising from the trees. One of them immediately folded over the dwarf's axe, and Kelin thrust his sword straight at the other.

That chemman rebounded, wild-eyed, and took a swipe at the Kelin. He parried, but the chemman had already started sprinting into the forest. Kelin followed for a couple steps, but he couldn't match his target's speed. He whirled around and ran toward the line of combat.

The remaining chemman met their opponents' weapons with their own. Already, Jakkobb had felled another. The rest held their ground in front of the cave entrance. The dwarves leveled their axes about mid-thigh and let their own momentum carry them forward. Fienan covered the chemmen swords over their heads. Kelin and Carak ran up to join their comrades.

Der launched over the lip of the cave, momentarily blocking the white sun as she flew through the air. Time slowed for her. She swung her sword and it bit deep through the shoulder and into the back of one of the chemmen. He dropped like a sack of flour.

Then, her feet smacked against the ground, and she lost her balance, landing roughly in the gray dirt. Another chemman hopped back from the line, sword already striking for her. She managed a slim parry, driving his point into the ground, but it also left her no angle of attack. She backpedaled into the cave, hoping the low roof would protect her. She backed into a rock or something and couldn't move back any further.

The chemman dropped to his knees and followed. His sword pricked her foot. On the next thrust, she caught her enemy's sword against the wall of the cave with her foot and held it there long enough for her to lean down and stab her attacker in the face.

She kicked him out of her way and jumped up to rejoin the fracas. She squinted, for just an instant, she couldn't tell who was friend or foe. Until that moment, she never understood how dependent she was on colors. She certainly couldn't distinguish between the subtle shades of gray.

Jakkobb brought his axe down one more time, and then it was over. The party breathed out. "Cuts and bruises will have to wait!" the knight bellowed. "Thalon!"

"One got away! One got away!" Kelin pointed to the trees, where darker splotches of gray could be seen against the forest floor. "He's hurt, but he got away!" Thalon nearly ran into his outstretched arm as he pointed. The boy kept running past him.

"Doesn't matter, let's go!" Jakkobb roared.

"Come on!" Thalon screamed in a whisper. He ran into the small cave opening, but rebounded off something. He squeaked in alarm.

"What the hell?" Kelin pushed his way forward. He too smacked into some invisible wall.

"Barrier!" Fienan yelled, and kicked it, striking his foot. "They sealed it! They sealed it!"

"Back to the forest! Back to the forest!" Carak rumbled like thunder, pulling on Der's arm. "They'll be coming!"

"And they'll set a trap!" Kelin wailed. "We'll be caught."

Carak grunted. "They don't need a trap, we're *already* trapped."

Jakkobb cursed. "None of this! None of this! We just gave the chemmen everything they wanted!"

Vlade stalked down the corridor with a little spring in his step. A dry chuckle danced through the air around him. His plan, on the edge of falling over the cliff, was finally solidifying. He was thankful of his journey home, for here, he could at least rest his eyes. With the three known, no, four known thin spots now – thanks to the intruders – it was only an hour to earth. Here, everything was in their normal colors, as he defined the word color, and didn't strain his eyes, like the shadows at the dawn and dusk of earth. This was the storm-reader's light. Here, he could define those little details in the shadows.

He pushed open a door into an austere room with only a single, black chair. In the chair, sat a chemman, wearing elven style shirt and trousers. Vlade noticed his face had different lines burned across it than most chemmen.

The chemman looked up expectantly. "Yes, my lord?" He asked in the normal chemmen language, accent and all. He held his hands steadily at his sides.

Vlade opened his mouth, and then frowned.

Thistle spoke first, "Has my mission been successful, my lord?"

"Your mission?" the commander repeated slowly.

"Did King Dis not inform you?" Thistle asked patiently. "This mission has been a long time in the process."

"Perhaps," Vlade managed, staring openly at the other chemman.

"I have confirmation that we've gotten the princes and the wicked baroness to move themselves to Elloan. Together and immediately." Thistle folded his hands together. "I don't know how long they'll remain there, however."

"Yes, yes, excellent," the other chemman said distantly, and began to lift on the balls of his feet. "All three targets and in the same place, so you tell me too. Excellent."

"Yes, my lord," Thistle replied evenly.

"How did you accomplish such a feat? Our prisoners knew your face and yet they still followed you?" His gray eyes narrowed.

"I pretended to escape the Banishment, my lord."

"Ah," Vlade nodded. "And they believed you?"

Thistle nodded. "Of course, my lord."

The chemmen commander slowly grinned. It was all coming together! Three different, individual sources all told him that his three targets were there! The human, their spy and now this chemman. The thought of mistrust still haunted him briefly, but this one had acted like a chemman. He was chemmen, and there were no chemmen traitors.

Another thought brought the commander's heels back down to the ground like a rock tied to a bird's foot. "What about the child? The half-bred bastard?"

Thistle turned his head sideways. His face didn't flinch. "The child was an experiment – to see if we could gain elvish healing ability, since they can re-grow severed limbs and we still lack such capacity."

Vlade blinked. "Impressive." His frowned deepened. "Did it work?" he finally inquired.

Thistle shrugged. "We were waiting for him to mature further."

"How was this child...made?"

"What do you mean, my lord?"

Vlade licked his lips. "You did not... mate?"

Thistle shook his head. "Couldn't stomach it, so I experimented using alternative methods."

The other bit off a chuckle rattling in his throat. "Good, good. Present the boy for dissection and study, wherever you stashed him."

Thistle bowed his head. "Of course, my lord. Am I free to return to my duties? However, I would request a bath and a change of clothes. I wish not to smell like this anymore."

Vlade shook his head. "Naturally. I am sure you will want to join us for the final battle."

"Wouldn't miss it, my lord." Thistle eyed the sword on the commander's hip. The silent blade of legend. He too remembered the first one.

"We are in reach of victory! After three and a half thousand years! We are in reach!"

Thistle nodded, still eyeing the sword. "Yes, out of reach."

Vlade must not have noticed. He grinned. "I have duties to attend, swiftly." He spun on his heel toward the door. When he was in the doorway, he paused, dropped his head and turned around.

Thistle maintained a helpful expression. "Excuse me, commander?"

The other chemman startled. "What? Commander?" He swept into the room. "It is I, Dis, your king!"

Thistle's jaw dropped. He recovered and ducked his face to hide his face. "Yes, my king."

"Why would you – How could you confuse your king?"

His eyes spun wildly. "I am sorry. You just had the commander's sword."

Dis looked down. "Oh." Confusion swirled in his gray eyes. "Why –" He shook his head. "Stupid replica anyway. I didn't notice. I never draw my own sword anyway."

Thistle bowed his head. "Of course, my king."

Dis pulled it out and swung the thing around absently. The sword radiated blackness, and deadened and stilled the air around it. All sound vanished from the room. The king shook his head and stopped moving the weapon. "Damned annoying thing, really. I wonder why he gave it to me. He's always drooling over it."

Thistle slid to the floor on one knee. "I shall return it if you like. That way your majesty doesn't need to bother with it."

"Who are you anyway, toady?" Dis frowned. "And why are you dressed like an elf, man?"

"I was a spy, my king. I brought you the prisoners."

"Ah. Yes. Of course. Vlade had this silly idea of a che – of a disloyal chemman." He stopped and stared evenly at Thistle, and his breathed hissed between his teeth.

"I cannot imagine such a creature."

"Nor can I. Now, I must return to earth immediately for our hour of victory." Dis nodded, still frowning at the sword. Finally, he unbuckled the belt, sheathed the sword, and tossed it to the other chemman. "Get that back to your commander, and go and change your clothes."

Chapter Twenty

The Chemmen Made World

King Dis gazed into the obsidian mirror. They'd rescued it before they left the outpost in the Wild Lands. It had been a gift. It had been a gift from... He frowned into his reflection. It had been a gift from... whom? It had always been his, as long as he could recall, but he also knew that it had been a gift. Or perhaps it had been stolen and presented to him. He wasn't sure.

He turned around, but it was Vlade who gazed at the room. However, there was still only one chemman body in the room. His smile spread like a knife. Their army, though scattered across the elven kingdom, had begun pooling together – and like a flood, they would wash the last leadership of the elves away. Their vengeance and victory were almost in his hand.

Dis suddenly whispered over his shoulder, "What's got you so teary eyed, brother?"

Vlade whirled around and glared at the king. He stared directly into the mirror. "Victory, Dis! After all this time." He swallowed a chuckle. "I know where my three prizes are. The witch that locked us away and the sons of that great bastard." He chuckled again. "For a moment, I thought that it might have been possible that they may have escaped. And with this sword –"

Dis pointed. "What sword?"

Vlade's hand dropped to his hip and he bit his tongue. "Where is it?" He pawed at his belt. "*Where is it?*" he roared.

The king shrugged. "I don't know," he replied mildly.

"Who would dare?"

This time, it was Dis who chuckled. "Perhaps that bull-headed girl locked away in the prison with the others."

"This isn't a time to jest, Dis!" Vlade stomped in a tight circle. "You don't seriously think that?"

"Of course not."

"That sword was part of my plan. That was part of my plan!"

"It was stupid! It wasn't the real sword anyway." The chemmen king grinned. "Oh, I know, so I'll tell you that one of your spies has it. It was essential to gain information."

Vlade gasped so hard he choked. He leaned forward, spewing coughs like an angry man spews swearwords.

Dis recovered from his coughing as well.

"I can't believe you!" the other screamed. "It was my sword! I made it! They remembered the pain! It was part of my plan!" He slapped his fist against the mirror and Dis reeled. Vlade didn't see himself reeling in the mirror too.

"Which one?" Vlade growled, as angry as a kicked wolf. "Which spy?"

"The one who brought us the prisoners."

The commander froze first and then stuttered, "But – but, he told me that he was your spy. He was embedded with the elves, almost too daring to believe it could have been done."

Dis turned his head and stared. "What, Vlade?"

Vlade's face snapped into a scowl. "He told me he was your spy. He wasn't mine." He smashed his fist against the wall next to the mirror.

Dis whistled holding his now bleeding knuckles. "I do not care about the pains you inflict upon yourself, but not me!"

"The same pains," the commander sneered. "I worry for your health in this war, I do hope nothing dreadful happens to you." Vlade recalled when he had been mortally wounded. He'd woken up and then Dis and he shared some sort of magical bind. The other chemmen had linked their lives because they couldn't sacrifice their leaders, but the one that had done the lifeline binding had never explained what he had done.

Vlade bit his tongue until the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. He whirled and spat at the king's feet.

The king raised his hand to his own bloody mouth.

"The same pains, Dis, I've always wondered what magic binds us."

The other shrugged. "I have my suspicions, but because of this spy who may be a chemmen traitor, I find that I can no longer trust you."

Vlade stopped. He stopped moving, blinking and even breathing for a moment. He rallied, "Check our prisoners!"

"They still must be there, Vlade. Perhaps he was simply confused as to whom his orders were descending. Perhaps he had us confused. I was confused, why did I have your sword?"

"What!" He paced. "What if this traitor let them out?"

"We don't know if there is a traitor!" Dis yelled.

"What if they've escaped? Enemies may be loose in our city!"

Dis smiled serenely and spoke with soothing poison on his lips. "They will not survive. This is our world. Regardless, we have verified information of where the princes are, right where we can kill them. Your epic still has a pulse, Vlade. Pull all of our army to Moonrise Castle, where the last of the elvish leaders have trapped themselves. You can witness their agony in the glory of color – it has been days too long since I have seen men die in red blood. If there are outsiders in our city, do not fret – let the darkness have them."

"You see things?" Boison whispered loudly from below.

Kelin looked down. "I see a lot." He leaned against the metal support halfway up the windmill. Overhead, the giant blades hung unmoving in the lifeless air. The windmill's original intent eluded him because it was ten times bigger than any mill he'd ever seen. His father's mill back in Riversbridge was water-powered and used to grind flour. This one had massive chains disappearing into the ground below, and he guessed it was probably for some type of well, but he had no idea how deep the water would have to be to require this construction. It didn't seem to matter anyway, there wasn't any wind.

Around him, he could see the forest, the city and the endless patchwork of farmlands. Perhaps this windmill was indeed used to draw up water, he mused. Dry ditches led away from this mill into the fields, where other massive mills dotted the landscape. Each field had been divided by a perfect square of ditches.

But, none of the windmills were turning, and Kelin couldn't see any plants higher than his knees. He wasn't sure if they were green or not, but he doubted it. He thought back to the forest, where the leaves fell or hardly grew and all the trees were twisted and withered.

They couldn't live here much longer. Darkreign was rotting underneath the chemmen's boots. This war against the elves wasn't just about revenge, at least not for the ordinary chemman. He gripped the metal of the support so hard that several of his fingernails bent.

They'd killed their world.

Slowly, he turned his head toward the city and Zazocorma opened up like a split belly. A linear riverbed drove its way through the heart of the city. The metropolis was constructed of squares. The streets marched straightly and intersected at every corner. Kelin's eyes watered. He had never seen anything like that. He was used to winding, curling streets that followed the paths of cows long gone. The villages and town had grown up around them. He'd never imagined a city that had been planned. The overall design of the buildings was rectangular and anything but frightening. It didn't ring true with the ancient horrors of the chemmen. At least, it wasn't frightening if you didn't know what went on in those buildings.

He tightened his jaw. He had seen and felt their horrors, and now he had seen that they'd killed their world. And to think, they had been human once. Kelin had seen the humans in Duelingar and Second Acron and they came in a variety of heights, shapes and colors. That was a normal part about being human. The chemmen all looked the same. What frightened him was that the chemmen had once been human and they had accomplished such horrors. The elves, dwarves and other races who had achieved so-called civilizations had never done anything as vile as the storm-readers. And now, along with millions of innocent lives, they'd killed their own world.

He shuddered, and was thankful that they'd given up their humanity and he didn't have to call them cousins.

His foot felt its way down the metal until it reached a hold, and then the other foot followed. Slowly and meticulously, he made his way down to the ground.

Thalon played with some dry twigs across the small clearing.

"See things? Good," Boison said encouragingly. Beside him, Striggal nodded.

Kelin's eyes burned hotter than the white sun above. "Yeah, I saw a lot of things."

Striggal pointed. "Elf." Fienan lifted an eyebrow.

Kelin sneered. "Aye. I learned that you elves should have killed every last one of them." He drove right through Fienan's gasp. "But, you couldn't do it, could you? Maybe Darkreign wasn't a wicked place, but it was where the wicked were sent! You know, I hope the chemmen do get banished back here so that they all die of thirst!"

The dwarves shrugged, but probably hadn't been able to keep up with Kelin's burst of speed.

Fienan, on the other hand, clapped a hand over his open mouth. "You don't understand. All life is sacred. We couldn't just have killed them all, especially the children."

"It's not sacred to them!" Kelin yelled.

"Shh, shh." Boison waved his hands and danced around in a quick jig.

The young man continued staring at the elf. "Your life isn't sacred to them. Not yours, not mine, not even little Thalon's! That's why they're back, because you played by your code of honor when the chemmen have no such thing! They're trying to kill you all and you're just trying to shoo them away! Look at what they did to their world, look at it!"

The elf raised his hand as if to slap him. Instead, he growled and turned away.

"Not even if it means your immortal life. A human life can be worth sacrificing, I can understand that, but an immortal life?"

Fienan exhaled and shook his head. He unclenched his hands. "I have no answer. Every solution that would provide us with total peace breaks my beliefs." His eyes unfocused toward the gray horizon. He turned back to Kelin. "You have impressed me, young sir. If we survive this ordeal, I will tell others that you have earned my respect."

Kelin stepped back and exhaled slowly. "Uh, thank you."

The elf offered a small, sad smile. "Of course, we must survive. I still disagree with you, but I have no argument."

The young man nodded.

The elf once again let his gaze settle to the distance. "There's no water here. No signs of Der or Jakkobb or Carak, either."

"No here," Striggal said. He motioned his hands pushing something away. "Move."

Fienan tilted his head to the side nodded. "Yes, master dwarf. We should move." He glanced to Kelin. "Did you learn anything on your climb?"

Kelin shook his head. "No, and no sign of the others, either."

Thalon silently slunk toward the crowd from where he had been hiding at the base of the windmill. "What's wrong? Is my dad back yet?"

Kelin shook his head. "No. And we don't know how to find him, Thalon, or the others."

"Go," Boison suggested.

The elf shook his head. "I agree, we need to escape. The rest are on their own."

"No!" Thalon exploded. "No, no, no! I need my dad! We have to find my dad!"

Fienan knelt down in front of the boy. "Jakkobb was right. It is your safety that we fear for, my lad. That's why we must flee. Your father is most likely to survive, but he can't do it with us surrounding him. Do you understand?"

"No." Thalon quivered and shook. "Are you mad at him?"

The elf just turned away.

"Out?" Striggal asked.

"No," Fienan replied. "Well, we can't go out through the swallow hole. There must be other thin spots, we just have to find one."

"Won't the chemmen guard the others?" Thalon inquired.

"Well thought, and probably."

Kelin said, "We can hope that the guard isn't heavy, but they know we're here. Most of them ought to be out with the army. Whatever guard is there will probably be light. We can attack."

The elf snipped off a smile. "Well, I must say that you've certainly taken up the sword since your friend has gone missing."

He shrugged. "Der's not here. Someone has to do it." He dusted off his knees. "Regardless, we shouldn't stay here."

"Agreed, we should stay to the ditches, find a road that seems to be well traveled and watch. The chemmen should be going to earth routinely in this time of their war. We can only hope it's by a tree path or near allies."

Kelin paused. "That's more cautious than I'm used to." He licked his lips. "I like it." As they knelt and started to duck walk through the ditches, Kelin realized that he wasn't noticing how the grass and the dirt weren't brown. He had finally adapted to a milieu without color.

He vaguely recalled something old Erb the forester had told him back in Riversbridge: a man could not be self aware while sneaking or hiding. He'd meant it for hunting. No thoughts, no breath, a man was not a conscious thing. It was best to hide as a rock or a tree or nothing at all.

He felt a bright sore in his mind at the thought. He missed home. The people back in the village doubted the very existence of the chemmen, and here he was, in their domain, trying to end a war. It was all Der's fault.

However, Kelin wasn't thinking this because he was just part of the dirt in the ditch. He slithered around one of the sharp corners where two ditches met and nearly toppled over some chemmen.

Both parties stared in amazement.

Fienan snatched Thalon up in his arms as his feet were already running. The dwarves kept up, their shorter legs pumping twice as fast. Kelin was the last to wheel and run. He was absolutely sure he felt blades licking his back. He urged his feet to fly, and then his legs to keep up, and his head to outrun them all. He ran and ran, hearing the chemmen cries closing behind him.

"Where are we, sir?"

Jakkobb rolled his eyes. "Der, we're somewhere in Darkreign."

"More specifically?"

Carak grumbled something under his beard. "How about lost?" He waved their lone makeshift torch in front of him.

"Yeah, but how many other chemmen buildings have we seen that are built four stories underground?"

"Well, only one," Jakkobb answered. "Because this is first building in which we hid."

"Right, right," she replied, poking her head around the next corner.

"Der, you're supposed to be silent. So, shut up."

She ducked her head. "Yes, sir." And, sure enough, at the next step, she opened her mouth. Jakkobb reached out with one shovel hand and pushed. She coughed and rebounded against the wall.

Then, the wall swung open, revealing only darkness beyond.

The stone wall was mounted on incredibly sturdy hinges. Carak poked his head toward the secret door. The dwarf shrugged. "Old trick. Well done, though."

"Why would the chemmen have a secret lair?" Der scratched her head. "There are no chemmen traitors and all."

"I guess those old human habits never quite faded," Jakkobb mused. He frowned. "I wonder if all the chemmen know about this."

The dwarf glanced over his shoulder. "Probably not. Maybe. Good of a place as any to hide."

Der stuck her sword through the opening, but nothing tried to crush it from the inside.

"Good try," the knight chuckled. "Chemmen traps are usually more subtle."

"There is light." Carak stepped ahead into some pale, gray light that seemed to have no origin.

The party had taken no more than three steps inside the door when it swung shut behind them of its own accord.

"Shit!" Jakkobb darted back to the door but the inside surface was slick and the crack was barely a fingernail's width. "Find the switch!"

Carak's fingers combed over the walls and the door itself. "Nothing, nothing."

"I guess they never forgot how to lock intruders inside, either," Der said dully.

Ten more minutes produced no results. The wall remained stubbornly a wall and not a door.

Der pointed down the hall. "Since we're trapped, we should at least see what they're hiding. Come on!"

"Fine," Jakkobb growled. He swung his axe up on his shoulder.

They ventured into a high ceiling chamber with a slick black floor. Plain pillars supported a dull gray ceiling. Dozens of giant glassy ovals hung from thick arms that disappeared through the ceiling. Each translucent egg boasted some object sealed inside.

"It's a trophy room," the knight-captain breathed.

Carak trotted over to the nearest one and rose to his toes. "Eh, elf, can you read chemmen? They've labeled it." He tapped a finger against the oval. "They're crystal."

Der looked over his head. Through the crystal, she saw what appeared to be some sort of necklace. She couldn't tell if it was silver or gold in the gray. Someone had affixed a tiny plaque to the base of the oval.

Jakkobb frowned. "That's not chemmen. That's Palls." He looked up, perplexity dancing across his features.

The dwarf coughed. "What?"

"*Monile lapideum*. Necklace of stone." He thumped a hand against his helmet. "Huh. Really makes you wonder who they didn't want reading this. Or, are they truly fancying themselves as scholars?"

"It's not stone." Der pushed her nose against the glass. "It's obviously metal." She looked at the plaque and saw that she could read the letters, but the order they were arranged in was gibberish to her.

"Der, I have no idea," the knight sighed. He moved on to the next egg. "Shoe of mastery. What the hell?" Sure enough, inside was an ordinary looking shoe, preserved forever.

"They're obviously not using these things," Carak said. He wandered around. "Now, this is what I would expect of the storm-readers." The bulb he pointed at bore a beautiful, ornate silver bowl with a half rotted head staring in sightless horror.

"What's it say, elf?"

Jakkobb bent down to read the inscription. "A leader should serve his people." His face distorted. "Ugh, you're right, that's what I would expect too." He shuddered and moved on. "Let's see. Golden chalice of golden wine. The emerald of eternity. A singer of dead beads. Crystal in crystal."

"But, they're just bones," Der protested, staring at the display. She leaned toward the tiny, gray fragments, recognizing the dried marrow patterns. "And tiny pieces."

Jakkobb shrugged and kept walking. "Summer's winter – looks like a pinecone to me. The cloak of retribution. My boot up this title maker's –"

"Which one is that?" Der interrupted.

The knight snickered. "Come here. I'll *show* you."

"Hey, elf, what's this?" Carak called from across the shadows. He pointed to a banner stapled to the wall.

Jakkobb frowned, but the light wasn't strong enough from his position. He walked closer and then stopped walking and cursed.

Der felt her heart shiver in her chest as the flag came into focus. She didn't know why. She'd never seen it before. The banner was ebony black with two opposite facing parallel swords lying horizontal across it. Intertwined between the swords was a serpent, but instead of a head on one end, it bore vicious striking heads on both ends.

Der felt bile slide into the back of her throat just staring at it. She really wished she didn't know that snake. All four eyes had been meticulously burned out.

The knight swallowed. "This." He swallowed again. "This is the Blackhound's banner."

"What!" Der yelped, and then lapsed into a wide eyed silence.

"Impossible," Carak muttered, shaking his head.

Der cocked her head. "Why in the corners of hell do the chemmen have this? The Blackhound wasn't around until *after* the chemmen were banished. Because Pallens helped the elves banish the chemmen, but that was centuries before the Blackhound, from what you've all told me about history."

"I don't know, Der," Jakkobb whispered, eyes still locked to the flag.

"I don't think they liked him either" Carak pointed to the eyes. "Each one burnt out."

Jakkobb frowned. "I was there, you know. I was part of the army that found this very flag flying on the palace of Pallens. We didn't get there in time. We only ever saw one flag, and we burned it. We couldn't stomach the sight of his victory. Only a few of us know what this looks like, and I've never told."

Der glanced back at the door. "I wish we could ask someone." She looked back up at the flag, and told herself that it didn't actually mean anything. She whirled her back on it faster than she'd nonchalantly intended and wandered back into the forest of crystal bulbs.

"The chemmen are certainly most confounding," Carak remarked. "Do you suspect that the infamous scourge of the old Empire had dealings with the chemmen?"

Jakkobb shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Der's right, the Blackhound didn't exist until after the chemmen were banished. He was human so he wouldn't even have been alive. And, well, you know the chemmen. He wasn't one of them so they'd never have given him respect. The chemmen don't have allies, they have toys and the Blackhound didn't play with toys." He finally broke his gaze away from the awful flag. "Besides, this flag didn't exist either until after the chemmen were gone. I don't know; it doesn't make any sense."

"I don't think it was the Blackhound who burned out those eyes," the dwarf said. "He may have made an enemy of them, perhaps even before he sought after Pallens herself."

The knight just shrugged and his hands hung limply at his sides. "Timing's all wrong."

"Hey!" Der called from across the room. "I found a sword!" She squinted, it was hard to tell through the grayness and it felt like she was staring through water. "It looks kind of like those pieces of Pallens art the prince showed us in Riverfall." Her hands scrambled over the oval like paws across ice. "Um, the sign reads *rex*. That's Palls for dog, right?"

That broke whatever dark dream was still haunting Jakkobb's eyes. He shook himself. "No, Der, it means king."

"Even better." She squashed her nose and hands against the crystal. The hilt was designed for serious warfare, made to protect the wielder instead of appear artful. A gem, she couldn't tell in the gray what kind, slightly smaller than her fist weighted down the pommel, as the metal curved around it in a circle. It came to a pyramid on either side of the pommel. A thin melted stream decorated the crosspiece in an elegant, endless trail, dipping into corners and into complex loops. There were gems on both sides at the end of the guard.

No nicks or burrs marred the edge, which shined even in the gray light. Below the pyramiding gem, the base bore the Dawn Sword emblem.

Jakkobb's jaw dropped. "Impossible."

Even Carak's jaw fell so low that his beard scraped the floor. "That's a..." He tried again. "That's a..." He finally just bowed his head.

"That's a weapon of Pallens." Jakkobb genuflected. "I never thought to see one again."

Carak also dropped to one knee. "In all my years, to see such a wonder."

Der shook her head. "But – but the Blackhound ordered all the weapons of Pallens destroyed. That's part of the legend. Everyone knows that!"

"That he did," Jakkobb said. "It's actual history."

She stroked the oval. "It's not stealing, right? I mean, the chemmen must have stolen it first because they were enemies of Pallens and all. So, we're like rescuing it, right?"

The knight closed his eyes and shook his head. He rose back to his feet. "We can't take it. Who knows what spells and traps the chemmen may have on these things? Oh, I wish."

She shook her head violently. "No, sir, we can't leave it!"

"Derora," he snapped with steel echoing in his voice.

"No!"

"If I have to tell you one more time, you will regret it."

Her face creased in agony, and as much as her eyes rang with defiance, she said, "Yes, sir."

Carak also regained his feet. "I wonder what other treasures this place holds. It brings water to my eyes to leave such a wonder." He hefted his axe in one hand and his torch in the other. He walked further ahead into the darkness, especially since dwarves could see much better without much light. It was also rumored they could see heat too.

Tears were also cornering around Der's eyes. "We can't just leave it."

The knight's glare seared. "You know, I used to do those things too, and I've lost friends who've tried. It's just treasure, Der, it's not worth your life."

"Yes, sir." She pushed out her lower lip and looked down.

"It's stupid, is what it is. Something horrible will happen as you try to break that glass, believe me, I've seen it."

"Yes, sir."

Carak came back waving his arms at them. He grabbed Jakkobb's arm. "How much do ye miss the reds and blues and the golds? Come see."

The back of the treasure room was set up as some sort of workshop. On the table was a half formed crystal bulb, and inside it, a slender, spiky crown. And it was in color. The platinum and gems winked brightly at them in defiance of the grayness. Drawn in the slender design, intricate endless ivy threads nestled comfortably between the gold and purple jewels. Crushed diamonds, emeralds and sapphires encircled the larger precious stones. The sleek metal rose above the patterns into sharp tips. A massive, sparkling golden colored gem burned in the light in the center.

Der sighed in relief, not in awe. Color still existed after all. She didn't try to fathom why for the same reason a man perishing of thirst doesn't ask why it rains. She discovered that she was breathing heavily. "I've never seen a gold gem, never seen anything like this."

"Sapu, the sun jewel!" Carak burst. "It's almost dwarf legend, it's so rare – rarer than diamonds or rubies – and to see one so large!"

Jakkobb bowed his head. "This is the crown of Arborn. They must have stolen it when..." He dropped his eyes. He reached his hands into the half formed crystal and pulled the awesome crown free. "Damn!"

"What? What?" Der demanded.

The knight swore again. "Nothing, I cut myself on this crown. It smarts." He blinked. "Who'd have thought the crown would be sharp?" He gingerly held the headpiece aloft using only the pressure on his fingertips.

Der's amazement fizzled across her face. "You said we couldn't take anything." She crossed her arms.

"This is different, kid."

"Why?"

Jakkobb sighed. "Because I said it was different." He started to lead the way back to the hidden entrance. The other two followed closely, taking in the crown's color as if it was the only light in all of Darkreign. They crested the small threshold of the trophy chamber. Finally, the knight smirked. "Derora, I remember being, well, the equivalent to your age, and you wouldn't believe the things I did."

"Good," she replied and stopped walking. "Then you know why." She spun on her heel and sprinted faster than the knight's shout of protest. She twisted and darted her way through the bulbs until she found the sword again.

She balled her fist and never stopped running. She hit the crystal at full speed and it shattered with brilliance. Gray light danced across the ceiling and everywhere the shards reflected.

The floor vanished. It was solidly there beneath her feet and suddenly it wasn't. Der flailed and latched on to the broken bulb of the Pallens sword with her left hand. She winced as the crystal sliced into her palm but she held and dangled. She didn't see another choice.

She thrust her other hand up and freed the imprisoned sword. "Yes!"

From the safety of the entryway, Jakkobb growled. It was long and low, much like a hunting predator's. Beside him, Carak goggled.

Jakkobb exhaled like a bull. "Well, how are you going to get down? What was your plan?"

She tried to shrug and when that failed, she just waved the sword around. "Yeah, this is the part of my plan where you rescue me."

"No." He glanced down to Carak. "We're leaving." He turned his back and disappeared into the darkness.

Der's jaw dropped. "You can't leave me!"

The dwarf merely stood there, unmoving.

"Jakkobb!" Mentally, she ran through every curse she knew as the knight did not reappear. She felt the hot blood oozing out of her cut palm, sliding between her hand and the crystal. Some of it dripped, but she never heard it hit any floor. "It's getting slippery here, sir, and not in a good way."

She lost her grip and for one horrible moment, she knew what it was to not know how to fly. Her fingers grabbed the jagged lip and she bit down hard on a scream. "Jakkobb!" This time, all the pride had fallen away from her voice.

"Alright, alright," he called. "After this, I reserve the choice to kill you whenever I want."

Carak looked up at him. "Do you know what to do?"

Jakkobb shook his head. He backed up a few paces. "We just need to think like the chemmen. They wouldn't devise anything that could harm themselves without an easy fix. And, secondly, they're arrogant. They would believe that all people would be trapped." He found a break in the stone wall next to the edge where the floor vanished. "Ah-ha. At least this one was easy enough to find."

He toggled the stone switch.

Der's grip finally slid too far and she fell. She felt only the air beneath her and she kicked out and threw her left hand toward the crystal bulb but missed it. She began to fall and then was rudely interrupted by her arse smacking against the very solid black floor.

She blinked. "Huh?"

Carak jogged over to her, but Jakkobb marched with stiff legs. "We need to go."

The dwarf snatched up her arm and started neatly tying cloth around her palm and fingers. She hardly noticed now that she had gained time to look at the Pallens sword. It was the exact size for her, in length, width and weight. She could feel the sword in her mind, like tendrils extending upward through her arm. It could have been an illusion, it was so perfect, but the weight in her hand reassured her.

Jakkobb shot her the look no soldier ever wants to see from an officer. "From now on, if you disobey an order, I will leave you. I am not joking. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." She didn't look down.

"And now you have two swords." He proffered his free hand. "Give it to me."

She shook her head. "No, sir."

"Derora, I am not joking."

She glared, but stuck the sword out toward him, point down. He snatched it up, but the weapon slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. Glowering, the knight knelt to pick it up. The sword stuck fast to the floor. He couldn't lift it.

Jakkobb grunted and attempted it again.

Carak retreated. "Is that a magical blade?"

"No," Jakkobb grunted. "Just an extremely stubborn one."

Der bent over. "May I try, sir?"

"Fine," he snapped.

She wrapped her fingers around the handle and picked it up. She frowned. "Well, that's weird."

The dwarf had elevated both his eyebrows. "Not magical, you say?"

The knight threw up his hands. "Fine. It doesn't matter, we have to leave. She can hold it, and since she's got the edge on us there, she gets to."

Der groaned.

"What?" he barked.

"You said –"

An angry fillip resounded from his fingers. "Shut it, Der."

"Yes, sir." She grinned as she pulled the sword back toward herself, and swished it around. The sword was too finely balanced. She experimented with a few moves. It felt like a dream. She shook her head. The sword was still in her hand.

"A real Pallens weapon," Carak said. "And the elven crown. I can't believe this fortune. You know, miss Derora, that may have been a paladin's sword, long, long ago."

She froze. "But, paladins don't exist anymore. They all died with the paladin empire." She paused, grinned, and then frowned. "Alright, why do the chemmen have it?"

"Do you want to go ask them?" The captain grinned without teeth. "It doesn't matter because we're leaving. We can ask these questions all we want with rosy glasses of wine in our hands under a blue sky, but first, we have to find somewhere where the sky is actually blue, so shut up and *move*."

"We don't know how to meet up with the others," Carak said.

Der grinned. "Let's cause a disturbance. They'll be bound to notice it too, or at least notice all the chemmen running – so they'll know where to go."

Jakkobb gave her a look as dry as the desert. "No. We're on our own. They're on their own."

"But –"

"It's cruel, but maybe this way we won't all die horrible deaths."

"We can't leave them to die."

Carak sighed. "No, the captain's right."

"So, that's it? We're not even going to try to rescue them." She looked up at the knight. "I thought you elves would have some sort of code – don't leave anyone to die. You're immortal."

"Of course we do," he snapped. "However, the only chance of survival we all have is to fend for ourselves. I'll wager that you don't want to die."

"No! But – but, I can't leave Kelin or Thalon." She glanced at Carak. "Or the dwarves. Or Fienan." She looked up at Jakkobb, the Pallens sword reflecting even in the gray light. "What about you? You're immortal, aren't you afraid to die too? You've volunteered for this fiasco!"

"You're right. I don't want to die, but I know how I don't want to live."

"What? You could – we could all die!"

She watched him grin as if nothing in the world was wrong. He patted her genially on the shoulder. "If we get out of this alive, kid, and you get to choose between doing this again and farming, then you'll understand."

She shook her head dumbly.

"Let's go, come on."

Soon, they once again stood behind the blank wall. "I hope no alarm sounded when we came inside," Jakkobb breathed.

As soon as he said that, the hidden door swung open. "This may be bad," the knight said flatly. He held up his hand and they waited. Nothing happened. After two entire agonizing minutes of standing motionlessly, he waved them forward.

They entered the corridor and behind them, the wall swung back into place. A snigger arose from the darkness. Gray torches flared up on either side of the corridor and Der saw the white flash off of chemmen teeth. She brought the Pallens sword on guard.

Jakkobb freed his axe. "Carak, Der, you take the other side. Back to back!"

And the fight was on. Der found that the Pallens weapon glided through the air and across chemmen steel like a fish through water. Gray and white sparks leapt up around her and steel screamed in agony. She found herself retreating a couple paces. She didn't want to sacrifice the space, but it was that or perish. The sounds of the swordfight bounced off the walls and accelerated back to the combatants.

Then, to everyone's surprise, a chemman in the back of the party fighting the knight-captain flipped his sword to the side and all sound vanished around them as he thrust it through the neck of another chemman.

The world hung motionless for one eternal moment. The chemmen standing near the one with the silent blade just stared. Jakkobb moved, and drove his axe down through a stunned face. Der yelled and she and Carak jumped forward, striking at their adversaries in their surprise.

Thistle grinned and slashed the sword again and again. In a matter of heart stopping seconds, only one chemman remained breathing.

Der breathed out, and felt like kissing her sword. It was amazing. She didn't even notice Carak charge past her.

Jakkobb caught the dwarf by the helmet. "No! This one's with us." He gazed at Thistle. "I think."

Carak kept his axe between himself and Thistle. "There are no chemmen traitors. An elf should know that more than a dwarf."

Jakkobb slowly slipped between them, holding up his hands. "Yes, we know, but as you saw, he took chemmen life."

"That's a sin to them." Carak's eyes still bored into Thistle. "I don't understand. He's chemmen."

Thistle shrugged. "Then call me a sinner. I don't have time to waste with you, not if we want to survive." He started to turn his back toward the dwarf. "I found another thin spot that they use, but I don't know where it leads. I'll show it to you, but then I have to find Thalon."

"You're not angry with us for losing him?" Der asked while stepping slightly behind the massive knight. She stared him up and down. "I don't know if I want to trust you again. You told the chemmen when we came through."

"Because my son followed us. I acted to save him. The chemmen like prisoners – I knew that they would not kill you immediately." Thistle leveled his gaze at her. "I blame his behavior on your influence, child. You have no comprehension of how angry I am. It's wasted to take it out here on you. It can wait for the chemmen and for those cultist bastards who murdered my wife."

Der gaped. "That's not the answer I expected."

He merely lifted a regal eyebrow. "Did you forget? I am a chemman, an immortal. I have had time to learn such considerations."

She didn't have an answer.

Carak still had his axe trained. "He's one of them!"

Jakkobb growled. "I'm not sure if I trust him either, but I've never witnessed a chemman willing to take another chemman's life."

Thistle began to walk. "I have also learned something of value. The chemmen king and commander..."

"Dis and Vlade," Jakkobb muttered. "I have not forgotten those names."

"Well, they're the same person now. They share the same body."

"What!"

Thistle waved his hand. "I don't know. There had been other savage experiments before the chemmen achieved immortality. Methods to salvage minds and souls when bodies wouldn't be repaired. I think that one of those must have gone terribly wrong. I don't think they know, but the other chemmen probably do."

They walked on in silence for a moment.

"Good," Carak snorted. "Just one head to cut then."

Der frowned. "Wait a moment. You were there, with the king? Why didn't you just try to end this war right there?"

"That would have been obvious," he replied.

"Yeah, the answer is obvious to me too."

Thistle covered his eyes with his hands.

Jakkobb rolled his eyes. "Obvious as in that's obviously trouble, Der. The king and commander can't go missing right now, or then the chemmen may do exactly what we don't expect. No, we need their leadership if we're still going to make this plan work."

"What plan? It was ruined when we told them where the princes are!"

Jakkobb stopped walking and sighed. "We lied, Der. I'm sorry, but we didn't know if you or Kelin would be strong enough. We knew we'd be captured. That's why we allowed you humans – humans that the chemmen knew that they'd tortured previously."

Der strained to keep from swinging her sword in his direction. She narrowed her eyes. "What? Why?"

He shook his head. "If we get out of here, alive, *then* I can tell you." Before she could say anything, he turned back to Thistle. "So, where's this escape path?"

"Nearby. I'm not sure where it goes, but the chemmen use spies and tree paths, so we'll probably end up there."

Twenty minutes later, they stood behind a stone altar, staring wide eyed at the people who were staring right back at them. The doubled headed serpent symbol dominated the room on the wall. Blood dripped off the altar and several animal and quite possibly human intestines and organs steamed on it. A man standing over them slowly lowered his curved knife.

Jakkobb brandished his axe. "I do hope we're interrupting."

Chapter Twenty One

Gladioli Fields

Prince Alsalon caught his older brother in the corridor. Late flourishing gladioli blooms were stuck behind his pointed ears and he grinned at Kaleb. The younger prince held a long gladiolus stem in his hand like a sword and stabbed randomly into the air. Hundreds of the sword-flag banners spun in the wind on the fields below.

"If only our army were as numerous," he murmured. "At least they're here instead of spread over the countryside where we cannot control them."

The stem drooped. "We can't control them here, brother."

He shook his head. "Here we at least have a chance. Come, we should see our fate." He pulled a couple of the flowers away from his brother's face, and then began to walk.

Lady Evelyn met them at the base of the central spire's stairs. She curtsied. "My prince, it was just as we expected. Their army has arrived, but I believe that they will wait until dusk."

The last flower slipped from the younger prince's fingers. "It's really happening."

Kaleb mused, "Of course, we're trapped, and they'll wait for the hour of the storm-readers' light." He stepped past the lady and marched up the stairs. Moonrise Castle's central spire rose twice the height of the rest of the fortress. A person could easily overlook every direction. Green shoots and buds curled around the ornate wooden railings and supports despite the chilly wind. Even a small babbling fountain spiraled around part of platform before disappearing into the floor.

Kaleb slowly popped his head above the floor and pushed the rest of himself up with only a grimace. He did not want to think about archers. Of course, the spire was too tall for most arrows. He hung back away from peering over the edge, and let his gaze fall to the valley floor below.

The chemmen army stood in formation; they seemed innumerable in their squared, endless ranks. Of course, they stood behind the rather bunched and disheveled ranks of as many cultists as they could round up. It looked about one hundred. But, in front of them, were howling, bucking piles of calvar. Their cries carried on the wind up to the spire. Currently, they were held in check by heavy leather harnesses, but it wouldn't last. The leather already looked like it was tearing.

The prince lowered his gaze to his army, hiding behind Moonrise's walls. They were so small in numbers. Perhaps two hundred. Right now, they were safe behind these stone walls, but instead of a fortress, it felt like a prison.

Their only hope rested in these walls holding. Behind him, the sun began to lose its fight and the earth began to swallow it. He turned back as the storm-readers' light with fog as its ally slowly crept over the land, obscuring the chemmen army in grayness.

He gripped the wooden railing and tightened his jaw.

"You look like your father," a silken voice rose like the evening star behind him. Lady Evelyn stepped onto the platform, followed by his brother.

He nodded, turning his eyes back to the fields below. "I can only hope that I am a quarter of the man. He wouldn't have needed to take such a risk to hope to win a war."

"I have faith," the lady replied.

Everyone still stared. Der, Jakkobb, Carak and the cultists. The blood dripped off of the man's still knife. Bits of liver clung to the blade. At least, everyone except Thistle, who was slowly beginning to smile. He stepped forward, orange eyes alight in the firelight. The cultists seemed to breathe deeply at them. One of them straightened his black robe and sauntered forward. "We were told only to give you as many soldiers as you needed. Now, the rest of us can continue our feast."

Der's hands gripped the Pallens sword as she glanced at the guts on the altar and made a face. Jakkobb moved slowly in front of her, keeping a straight face. She huffed and looked down and finally saw her sword in color. She stared at it, completely forgetting about the cultists for the moment.

In the back of her mind, she vaguely remembered what the prince had told her about Pallens using melted gems. The two lines that danced around the hilt and pommel had to be gems, one strand emerald, the other sapphire. The sword, sharp as an obsidian blade, shone blue and gold in the very orange torchlight. Her heart beat faster at its reflection.

Thistle snorted. "You call your men soldiers. They are weak."

The cultist's face froze.

The chemman took another step forward and pulled his sword free deliberately. The sounds around the sword went blank. He spun it over and around his wrist, almost lazily.

The man in front of him tried to speak, but the sword voided his voice. Thistle stopped moving his weapon.

"Because of you," the lead cultist snarled again, "Our brothers were exposed in Second Acron. We had to flee."

"But, we are leading you to victory. Over the elves. Something that you did not dream of on your own."

"Of course, of course. And you promised to rid us of the king of Thealith. Now, he's completely routed us from his city!"

"Because you exposed yourselves in your own stupidity. You exposed yourselves in Duelingar to some useless children."

"Hey!" Der yelled.

It fell on deaf ears. Thistle took another deliberate step forward. "That was not the only mistake that you made." He leveled the weapon. "You killed my wife." He thrust.

In that one horrible, silent moment, the cultist folded down onto the chemmen blade. His mouth gaped wide, his face raged red and they could all see his chest deflating as he screamed with all his might. And yet, there was no sound. After he had yelled out all his air, the cultist collapsed around the weapon.

Thistle pulled the sword back and brought it down again. The cultist finally hit the floor. Once again, the chemman heaved the sword into the body with a silent, satisfactory crunch that vibrated all the way up his arm.

The moment shattered, and the rest of the dozen or so cultists clawed for their weapons, most of them jagged and ceremonial. Der leapt over the altar, Pallens sword flashing against the torchlight.

Jakkobb rounded the stone platform and brought his axe into the fracas. Carak pushed his spectacles back up his nose, bellowed and leapt forward.

Der grunted and waited for her opponent to attack again, blocked his blow and when the momentum turned to her move, she not only riposted, but kicked his knee out at the same time. The perilous move endangered her precious balance as well. He swore as he lost his balance and missed his parry. She stabbed his chest.

Thistle, only a few steps in front of her, brought his bloody sword down again and again in a bubble of silence. Der could see them scream, and it seemed so surreal just to watch it and not hear it. She didn't have long to look though, and was drawn back into the fight. Once again, the Pallens sword flowed like sharpened silk at her command.

Suddenly, the entire room went silent. Der looked around. The last cultist fell from Jakkobb's massive axe. She knelt to wipe her sword clean on one of their robes. It still had no nicks or burrs along the blade. She smirked and thrust the sword toward the ceiling. "Yeah! You worshippers of an evil god have made an enemy of me! On this sword, I swear wherever I find the cult of Sennha –"

"Der," Jakkobb sighed. "Who are you talking to? They're all dead."

She lowered the sword. "Yeah, well..." She shrugged.

Carak smiled and his teeth obscured by his bushy beard. "Always a good thing to do to those bastards."

In front of them, Thistle just dropped to his knees, his sword clanging loudly on the floor beside him. His head tumbled forward until it too hit the floor. His shoulders began to quiver, and one drop of water slipped from his face to the stone floor.

Even Der purposefully looked away and kept her lips pressed together. Jakkobb began to studiously wipe his axe clean before sheathing it on its special harness.

The chemman's hand shot out and retrieved the sword. He rose to his feet as if pulled straight up by a rope. He spun. "Move."

Carak stepped aside.

"You're going back," Jakkobb stated. It wasn't an inquiry.

"I need to find Thalon."

The knight nodded, and then shook his head. "It's too dangerous."

"I am not under your command," the chemman replied in a deadpan voice. "I can walk through Zazocorma unhindered."

Der tried to sheath the Pallens sword, but then remembered that she didn't have a sheath for it. "Um, Thistle, he probably escaped with the others. You didn't hear that they were captured, did you? We don't know where he could be."

Jakkobb shook his head. "Your call, but we're leaving."

The chemman remained motionless.

The knight motioned and they headed up the creaking wooden stairs for a door. He pushed it open with a foot and instantly the air smelled sweeter. He stepped back inside. "Alright. Der, Carak, keep your weapons low. We don't want to frighten people, but we're in a hurry."

The three of them exploded into a large avenue. Stars shone overhead and only a few late night walkers strolled down the street. The giant knight bore down on the first people he saw.

A man and a woman who were holding hands gripped each others' hands tighter and squeaked. A dwarf wearing spectacles and a girl holding a very elegant sword chased him. The red knight smiled through the small open space of his helmet. "Good evening, good evening. Um, do you mind me asking where the hell are we?"

The woman had to open her mouth a couple of times before any sound came out. "Tenmar City."

The knight snorted. "Damn. No tree paths."

"Where is Tenmar City?" Der asked. "I've never heard of it."

"It's the capital of the kingdom of Tenmar," the woman supplied. She stared at them as if they had just arrived from the moon. "Are ye magic users?"

"Far east and north of Thealith, Der," Jakkobb said. "Well, lady, is there a reputable wizard nearby? There has to be. A powerful one."

"We can't afford a wizard," Carak protested.

"I'm a dragoon. He'll know that he'll be paid in full." He whirled back on the fidgeting couple. "Come on, lady, we're in a hurry!"

The couple pointed down the road, too dumbstruck to speak.

Der started after the others, but stopped and glanced over her shoulder. Behind them, with aching slowness, Thistle trudged behind them.

"I wish we could leave," Alsalon said. "I don't like it here."

"I know," Kaleb answered. "I don't either, but this is where we must be. I hope that they fight to death because I am not taking prisoners."

"They are chemmen," the younger prince said. "We've learned you can't trust even the prisoners, not even the little children."

Lady Evelyn closed her multi-faceted eyes. "At least they're here. They've stopped the slaughter of our people in the countryside where we cannot protect them."

"Because they're here for us." Kaleb bunched his fist. The chemmen army had disappeared into the oncoming mist. "We led them here. They chased." He whirled toward the stairwell as he heard the commotion of feet hammering up the stairs.

Duke Farallon and Sir Amthros exploded onto the platform. The duke tried to catch his breath. "I bring word. Fienan has returned."

Kaleb gasped. "With whom? Who else has returned?"

The duke shook his head. "Only Fienan and Kelin. The boy Thalon and a couple of dwarves."

"Dwarves?" The crown prince repeated.

"So the boy is safe." A small smile flittered across Evelyn's features.

The knight of Arbourn's face was also flushed. "They'll be attacking any moment. We must get you to safety." He brought his eyes around to the duke. "From what we know, my lord duke, you sent word to the chemmen that brought them here."

"What!" The duke roared.

The baroness retreated behind the knight. "The duke has always been favorable to us!"

Amthros stepped fully in front of the lady, his eyes locked on his target. "The chemman who claims to be on our side informed us. We do know that there is a traitor."

"And it is the chemman that we cannot trust!" the duke thundered, balling his fists. "This is outrageous!"

"You thought that you could be the king. You would be the one." Amthros shook his head. "Is that why you launched the chemmen at our royal family's throats?"

"I did nothing of the sort! I loved them! King Valladen was my dearest friend. I helped him build our nation!"

Kaleb marched up to his duke. "The traitor marked my parents for death! That's why they couldn't run!"

Alsalon slapped his hands over his ears. Tears had popped into the corners of his eyes. "No, no, no!"

"Yes!" Kaleb shouted, still advancing as the duke retreated to the railing. "Did you murder my parents?!"

Farallon raised his hands to his face. "No, my prin – my king! I did not! I loved the king and queen!"

"*I don't believe you!*" Veins glowed on his forehead and his neck.

Lady Evelyn, usually as graceful as a dove, tripped over the hem of her dress and tumbled forward, hands flailing to catch something. Her fingernails scraped across Amthros's cheek as he whirled toward her, and they dug beneath his skin.

"My lady?" The knight helped to stand her up.

"I just felt faint, sir knight. Thank you." Their attention immediately swept back to the prince and the duke.

Kaleb shoved the duke backward with all his might. He shoved him again, and the duke tripped over the stairwell. He tottered, but gravity won out, and he fell backward against the stone steps. Kaleb ran to the opening and screamed, "Guards! Lock him out!"

Growling and steaming, the crown prince stalked back to the railing. He gripped it with white knuckles. "Where in the corners of hell is Silver Dawn?"

"I was told at least a week out." Amthros grabbed his chest and wheezed. "Pardon me, Your Highnesses and lady, please."

The crown prince narrowed his eyes to slits at the knight. His head snapped up. "Send the survivors of the raid to me."

Lady Evelyn tilted her head, "Are you quite cer —"

"I need to hear what they have to say. Do it!"

Amthros pressed a hand against his chest. Sweat had begun to slick his forehead. "Excuse me, my princes and lady, I am not feeling well in this moment." He ran for the stairs, and an explosive cough escaped from his lips.

Prince Alsalon peered over the railing above the entrance. "A fine time for him to fall ill."

"Perhaps he's just nervous about the battle," Kaleb snorted.

Moments later, Kelin, the dwarves, Fienan and Thalon hustled up the stairs to the vaulted platform. Boison's and Striggal's beards dragged on the stones and they each held a fat wooden mug in one hand.

The princes blinked. Kaleb cocked his head. "Why are there dwarves here? And, what's that?" He suddenly discovered his hand had already pinched his nose.

Golden-brown liquid sloshed over the sides and Boison proffered the mug. "Drink."

Striggal took a deep sip and said something that sounded like gravel rolling down a hill, and Boison nodded beside him.

Evelyn hid her expression behind her hand. "He says that he's not stupid enough to fight chemmen sober."

"You can understand them, my lady?" Fienan folded his hands in front of himself.

"Yes, of course."

Striggal downed the rest of his mug and began to rattle off words at an alarming pace.

Evelyn nodded and said something in return. She turned to Kaleb. "They say that Clan Heavyaxe will be our allies, and that they know that you will be the new king. They only regret that they cannot send for an army for this battle and they fear that we might not win."

Kelin knotted his fingers together. "He's not the only one." He'd glanced over the fields and saw the screaming calvar and the ranks beyond. Fear swelled in him like cancer. Thalon peeked over the railing and then just sat down and stared at the floor.

"How did you arrive here in such haste?" the crown prince growled.

Fienan bowed. "We were being chased by chemmen. I honestly thought that we wouldn't escape. We ran through a field of dead wheat and lost our pursuers there."

"We got lucky," Kelin added.

Kaleb scowled. "People don't get lucky, not in these situations."

Fienan shrugged helplessly. "We did, my prince. I espied the chemmen and much to my surprise, they fled through a thin spot. I assumed they thought that we escaped through it already and were continuing the hunt."

"So, they left it? Unguarded and open?"

The other elf nodded. "Yes, Your Highness. We waited until nightfall and they didn't return."

"It took *forever*," Thalon interjected.

"Then, we decided to chance it and Amiery smiled on us. The chemmen had only left one to guard the thin spot and there was a tree path right there. We came here immediately. We slipped through the ranks easily enough."

Kaleb exhaled and ducked his head. "Well, I pray that you may be so fortunate again." He strode over to the railing. "You may rest instead of fight. You have been through enough."

Fienan bowed again. "No, my prince, we will defend this castle for as long as we are able."

"Good." The sunlight slipped away from his face as the sun finally lost its own battle and darkness began to stain the world. The distant stars flickered coldly. There was no moon yet. Overhead, dark fingers of clouds clawed at the sky. The wind encouraged them to expand. Silent spiderwebs of lightning began surrounding the horizon. The gladioli snapped like whips in the wind on the field below.

"Do you see through my eyes, Dis?" Vlade said aloud to himself. "Do you see what glory we will have?" He looked into the horizon. "There's a storm coming with us." He took a fragment of the obsidian mirror he had taken great pains to cut out carefully.

"Or coming for us," a tiny voice from the mirror said.

He glanced down to the king, wondering if it really looked like he was talking to himself. It wouldn't matter, he was high on a natural rock outcropping, overlooking his army. He doubted they'd see it. The mirror continued, "Something feels suspicious, Vlade."

The commander smirked. "Don't worry, Dis, it's just different. We've never had victory over the elves before." He gazed over his troops. The dark army had rolled onto the field, crushing the flowers beneath their feet. He had spent millennia building this force from the fragments of the chemmen after the Banishment. Like forging a new, stronger blade from the broken shards of other swords, he had made this army better, and instilled with the hateful memories of the past. He and the others had made waste of their homeworld, but he didn't care. Here was a new, fruitful world for the taking.

In the moment, over the ranks of the chemmen, past the mingling cultists, he watched the calvar lashing out against their leashes. He admired the horrible beasts. They could just charge the world and bite whatever they could. They needn't worry about tactics and timing and bloody patience. They were pure, they were free.

Of course, he didn't have his silent sword. That was sore. In the mental portrait of his victory, in his mind's eyes, a giant scratch interrupted the picture because of it. He scowled.

"We have well over a thousand." Vlade licked his lips. "They have very few. We will break down their castle like a flood."

The mirror snorted. "Or break like a wave."

The chemmen commander snarled and shoved the mirror into his pocket.

Across the field, Spike, Jakkobb's massive warhorse, cantered on to the battlements, whinnying like a lion's roar. The lightning intensified and lit the heavens like a battle itself. The armored figures on the wall stood motionless against the oncoming storm. They could have been metal statues in the fractured electric radiance.

The wind calmed, and the world around them became too silent and still. Only the lightning glowed, and the thunder chased.

Overhead, a solitary raven, one of many that made their nests in the castle, took flight and arched over the motionless armies. The bird screeched. Below, the calvar lunged and lunged and the leather straps holding them finally stretched and strained too far. Some of the beasts broke free. The handlers let go of the rest and ducked for cover.

The calvar charged at the castle, broken leather streaming with them. The elves on the wall stood motionless. The beasts threw themselves against the walls, not even noticing how they wet the stone with their own blood. Their sharp hooves bit into the stone, scattering chips all around. The falling pieces came larger and larger as their narrow hooves mined deeper into the castle.

The cultists ran screaming behind them, armed with the ladders the chemmen had provided.

Finally, the elves on the wall pulled their arrows free of their quivers and they lanced down at the mining calvar and the cultists like steel rain. But, their arrows were far fewer than their attackers.

Several of the ladders banged against the wall and the enemy began to rise. Below, the calvar tore through stone, the wooden ladders and even the flesh of the cultists with total abandon. The elvish arrows peppered the white beasts, much more so than the cultists, most of which just stuck out at odd angles. The calvar screamed ecstatically and smashed into the castle as if the arrows were only insect nibbles.

Spike whinnied savagely and galloped across the battlements, and once he had reached the end, he jumped. He fell so far that it looked like he should have splashed once he hit the battlefield below, but his dinner plate hooves touched the ground as gracefully as a fleeting seed on the breeze.

On the side of the castle, out of range of most of the arrows, he brought his hooves up and down. The skin of the nearest white horse-beast, which withstood arrows and stone, ripped open to Spike. He bit down on the back of its neck and squeezed. Bones crunched between his teeth.

High above the warhorse's head, several cultists slipped through between the elvish archers on to the battlements. The first one up raised his sword at an elven archer's back.

An arrow took him through the throat as the nearest archer turned toward him and let fly. The cultist staggered forward and then folded down on to the stone. The archer shot off three more arrows rapidly and two other cultists spilled down on to the battlements. The third collapsed on the ladder, taking out the other climbers as he fell.

He whirled back to shooting the calvar. Several of them had clubbed deep holes in the wall already. He gripped his quiver for more arrows, and patted his hand around it. Not many remained. The storm-readers light crept all around them now, as it normally precedes such a storm. They kept loosing their few, precious arrows.

He felt his body flinch and paused to wonder why. His ears heard the groan again. Slowly, he let his gaze fall. The cultist he had killed with the arrow moved at his feet. Without half a second to spare, he placed another arrow into the cultist's back.

It continued to groan and move, clawing with its fingernails toward him. He stared, and the cultist raised his face and moaned. The elf swallowed when he saw the other's eyes. They were sightless, and fixed on a point not visible in this world.

The other two corpses he had just slain also began to unfold themselves from the floor. He felt the gasp of panic die in his throat. He dropped his bow and yanked at his sword. His jaw and eyes both hung wide.

He swung the sword toward its head and finally found his voice. "Watch the cultists! The chemmen magicked them!" He felt hands, still warm, grabbing at his clothing.

More cultists crested the battlements and blades crossed with deadly music. The cultists were no match for the elves' skill, but the chemmen's puppet numbers never decreased. The few elves on the wall fought brilliantly, from centuries of skill and sheer desperation, but the chemmen army continued to rise like water to consume the castle.

Finally, in the back of the field, Vlade motioned the chemmen troops forward. He had seen how they spared their arrows where left and the elves were too occupied with the cultists and calvar. There was still a little risk, but they had waited too long for this fight.

Behind the armies, Der, Jakkobb, Thistle and Carak opened their eyes. Der blinked and rubbed her face. She was absolutely certain that her eyes had been open all the way, but all she could remember witnessing were blazes of color and things that looked like exploding stars. She tried to shake away the wave of dizziness. She looked around and then shook the Pallens sword in front of her, once again soaking in its colors and brilliance.

She had never heard the sounds of battle before, but recognized them all the same. She held out the sword. "We have to save the prince!" Dirt flew out from behind her feet as she began to run.

In the next few steps, she was nose deep in the ground. She lifted her head and saw the gleam of armor in the lightning that she had tripped over. Hard eyes, like diamonds, turned at her and grinned beneath a helmet.

She opened her mouth to yell to the others, but someone grabbed her from behind and the Pallens sword tumbled from her hand.

The calvar punched through the stone of the walls and the wood of the gate. They streamed into the castle with vicious glee and struck sparks on the stone floor with their hooves. The elves in the courtyard retreated behind other walls, and those on the battlements turned and released their remaining arrows inside.

Most of the cultists had been slain, but still moved with an unstoppable hunger. Those not slain on the battlements lurched inside the castle through the gate.

Behind them, came the chemmen. They ran. They had saved this run for over three thousand years. Their swords leveled any surviving or undead cultists and calvar that stood in their way. They funneled through the broken gate and squeezed into the courtyard. They had come to demand their victory.

Kaleb ran his hands through his platinum hair, and with red rimmed eyes, turned away from the railing to Lady Evelyn. "It appears that we've lost so quickly." His hand strayed to brush the pommel of his own sword on his hip.

"You should meet your guards, my prince," she replied softly. She set a bowl made from a gigantic emerald before her. It contained only a single drop of water. A ring of candles of every color surrounded her.

The prince stood outside the ring of candles. "That order failed when my parents gave it. My place is with my people. Send the signal."

The baroness nodded.

He bowed in return. "My lady, you are more valuable than I am this night. I will lead any chase that may come." He disappeared down the twisting stairs.

She closed her eyes and lowered her face. Light erupted from the candle flames, changing from yellow to moonlight white. The radiance spilled over the sides of the vaulted tower, curling around the ornate railing and down to the armies below.

It touched the courtyard and fell into the doorframes and window-wells and filled them completely. The battle had almost stopped as everyone's eyes were blinded by the brilliance. Several chemmen had even retreated from the light, but it did not pursue and instead continued over walls and doors.

Whether from the press of bodies behind them or their battle-lust, they pushed forward into the light.

Their screams resounded around the courtyard.

Those fortunate enough to have crossed the thresholds beyond the courtyard before immediately found themselves dozens of unfortunate swords of elves hidden in the corridors and adjoining rooms off the courtyard.

The remaining calvar took to new frenzies and the undead cultists stumbled toward the elves, heedless of their kismet.

High above on the battlements, a second rank of archers ran on to the battlements and blankets were uncovered to reveal thousands of new arrows. Kelin ran along the battlements, yanking the covers off the arrows.

Sir Amthros hissed and collapsed in a pile of arrows. He stared and wondered why no one had told him about the hidden archers. Of course, that wasn't his duty. The prince had made it his duty to stay at his side.

Kelin nearly tripped over him. "Sir, where are you wounded?"

The knight's finger sluggishly brushed the fresh scar on his cheek. His tongue was leaden and he tried several times to speak. "I'm not." He pushed himself to his knees and hands, and despite Kelin's protests, he crawled forward to a staircase. He tucked his chin up to his chest and rolled and thudded down into the belly of the castle. Kelin watched him go and then ran back to his duty.

Amid the cloud of arrows, the chemmen threw up their tiny shields and as one unit, spun back toward the smashed gate. It remained uncovered by the light.

Outside, in the back of his army, Vlade almost dropped the sword he'd been holding. He gripped it and snarled. "Good attempt, but I'll still send you all to hell." He growled and watched the ripple spread through his army. Didn't they see that they were turning their backs on their victory?

He saw the face of the chemman next to him, who had already turned to run back to the thin spot. It changed. The man slowed. His orange eyes were all the way open.

Vlade threw a glance over his shoulder. The trees shimmered against the storm's lightning and vanished. Where the trees had stood so realistically now stood the Knights of the Silver Dawn, the most famous of the dragoon orders. They almost entirely surrounded the castle.

The first rank was mounted on horseback and lowered their lances at the chemmen. The lightning flashed against their armor, but it was the knights who thundered forward. The storm-reader army did its best to squeeze under the gateway to the castle. Those inside tried to flee outside, and those outside tried to run inside the gate.

The knights crashed into the spine of the chemmen army. Those chemmen had no choice but to turn and try to fight. They forced themselves into some sort of formation and the battle was finally joined.

Der bounced from foot to foot, watching the battle from behind in the forest. Rows and rows of foot soldiers marched steadily forward. "Come on, we're going to miss it!"

Thistle sheathed his sword, folded his arms and leaned against a tree.

"Why not?" she gasped. "What about Thalon?"

"I'm no good to him dead." His flat voice held no tremor of the fire that blazed across his face.

Carak tugged at Der's free arm. "Leave him. He'll be safest here."

Jakkobb nodded, still cradling the crown in one arm. "Of course, he won't be confused as an enemy here. Thistle, you impress me."

The chemman shrugged. "Unlike the rest of my ilk, I've had to learn to think for myself."

"Fine!" Der forcibly took the delicate crown from Jakkobb's hands and shoved them in Thistle's. "Can we go now, sir?"

The elf gasped. "You don't know that crown's value!"

Thistle all but let the crown fly back into the knight's hands. He stared at it as if it was poisoning him.

"Is it more valuable than just a life? Isn't that what this battle is about?" She waved the Pallens sword in the direction of the castle. "Let's go! Now!"

"Fine, you go. Just stay in the back." Jakkobb raised his hand as Der and Carak sprinted off toward the back of the line. "And don't forget to grab a helmet!" He snorted and glanced at Thistle. "Kids."

Carak kept pace with Der, his legs running twice as fast as hers. She hadn't heard what Jakkobb had shouted after her. The two slotted into place at the end of a line in the last row, and the dragoon foot soldiers nodded to them. They didn't seem surprised.

Der found her jaw swinging open in awe of the dragoons' skill, and of the way they moved with shoulder-to-shoulder confidence. She instantly realized the basics and importance of staying in a formation. It was so natural to her eyes. If she stood here, that meant her shield partner was there, you protected the person on your left with your shield. It all made perfect sense, and she didn't realize that she didn't actually have a shield. The warriors around her towered over her, but she didn't notice that either.

She glanced around she saw that Silver Dawn boasted warriors of all major races, and all positioned so the Order was stronger for it. It so easily could have been a weakness, but they made it a strength, a stronger weave of warriors. The dwarves covered the bottoms for the taller warriors, because their opponents' swords couldn't be both high and low at once. Those on the high side covered the heads of their comrades.

She grumbled after a minute of straining forward on her toes. Not a single one. There was the clash and roar overhead, and suddenly, ahead of her where she couldn't see, the roar intensified.

"Hole! They're driving through! They're driving through!" The shout carried down the ranks by many voices.

Suddenly, one wheeling, disoriented chemman punched through the ranks and tackled her. Her shoulders slid into the dirt. She dug her sword into the storm-reader's thigh. It was the only place she could reach.

Above her, Carak roared and pushed a stubby finger up into his ancient helmet to adjust his spectacles, and then smashed the axe down on her attacker's back. The axe still clung to the body and the dwarf had to kick it out.

Der scrambled to her feet, having completely lost her place in the formation. She silently admitted to herself that maybe training wasn't such a bad idea. But, her blood was pumping and she sprang back on guard.

Not a heartbeat too soon, as more chemmen ran past, pausing only to fight those who impeded their way. Der stuck her sword out, trying to catch one in the gut. A passing blade parried the Pallens sword. She thrust, and was denied the killing blow again. Abruptly, she found herself on the defensive. She felt her enemy's experience through the bladework, and she struggled to keep up.

Carak jumped beside her and went for the knees. The chemman jerked back a step and swung at the dwarf. The storm-reader sword got through his guard. The dwarf staggered back, his grip on his axe loosening. His free hand shot up to his throat.

And Der stuck the chemman in the chest. "Carak!"

"Me beard! He cut me beard!" The dwarf's whiskers were thick until right below his chin, where it was sheared in a sword-straight line.

"Is that *all*?!!" Der kicked the corpse off her blade.

And then, the storm-readers' light came. The world dimmed to the light just as the cusp between dusk and darkness and faded to gray.

Carak cursed steamily beside her.

Der squeezed her eyes and reopened them. She still could only make out some gray movement. The lightning above still flashed white and gray. But, in the absence of the blinding light there was only grayness.

"I can't see!" she yelled. "Not again!" Around her, she heard many similar cries.

Far above the battlefield, Lady Evelyn hummed to herself. Colors still glowed into the world here, above the chaos. She lit one massive orange candle that sat in front of the emerald bowl with one drop of water. She sighed and inhaled deeply.

Then, the baroness raised her hands above her head. The air rushed up the sides of the tower and through her hands. Her forest green dress and long hair caught the wind like sails. The stones beneath her feet shook. A cold blue fire ignited between her fingers.

Above the frenzied field, the castle vibrated and shook as if in an earthquake. Wind exploded out of the tower and down the walls of the castle. The physical wall of air hit the battlefield at a full sprint.

It blasted by people, many of whom it pushed to the ground, elves and chemmen alike. The wind ripped trees out, tearing them apart from their roots. Water jumped out of its stream banks and flew with the wind. It continued to travel beyond the battlefield and out to the world, even possibly the circumference of the earth.

In the vaulted tower, Evelyn held up the bowl and tipped it over the orange candle. The single drop of water slid down the side of the bowl, paused on the rim and then trickled toward the candle. It burned away before it ever hit.

The lady dropped the bowl. "May I never do something so wretched again." She fainted.

More chemmen ran past, more than the lines of soldiers could stop through the widening gap. The storm-readers had made a small, perilous corridor, with only limited threat from the soldiers on the sides. It wouldn't last long, but it might last long enough for many of them to escape back into Darkreign.

Der felt herself sliding along the edge of the chaos. Her Pallens sword still shone. The blood slipped off of it like water. She tried to call for help but a physical wall stole her voice and tripped her feet. She rebounded off a soldier, ears ringing in the massive wind.

The chemmen that had made it through the dragoon lines never glanced over their shoulders. They ran for the gateway home. On earth, it appeared as a simple granite, circular boulder.

The first chemman to reach it ricocheted in total shock. He held his nose as best he could through his helmet, and tasted hot, fresh blood. The others pushed him back against the wall in their attempt to escape.

The stone remained adamant and just a stone. It had been touched by the baroness's wind. The ranks of the dragoons closed in around the chemmen.

Der gaped. She'd gotten used to the storm-readers' light again, so it wasn't hard to just stare at the stone. It was solid stone now, not a gateway.

A female chemman exploded in her way. A crescent-moon hook slammed her blade down. Der ducked with it and nearly lost her head as the chemman's sword, held in her other hand, barely missed. The human backpedaled, but slipped against the dirt. She shoved the Pallens sword above her head, but the hook jerked it out of the way and disarmed her. Der kicked herself backward and tried to roll away.

She dodged. The chemman followed with another cut the girl wasn't able to squirm out of. She yelped and grabbed her arm and managed to kick her attacker. The chemman merely sidestepped and thrust downward.

Blades crashed. Sparks flew across Der's eyes. She didn't look up but scrambled away. She snatched up her sword off the ground and leapt back to her feet. Then, she glanced behind her to see who saved her life. Her jaw dropped. Even in armor, he was still recognizable.

The armored man attacked with speed and viciousness, and with athletic control that was envy of some immortals. He drove the chemman back a step, who attacked widely with her sword. The elf dodged to the side and thrust, but his sword was caught in the crescent hook blade. The elf took a hard slap of metal on his armor. He retreated and she hastened to advance. He did not even try to launch a counter attack. With vicious glee, the chemman continued to advance, her two blades whirling.

Too late she realized his trap. He'd baited her! She folded over his sword, weakly swiping with the crescent moon blade. The elf yanked the weapon back.

Duke Farallon nodded once to Der. She just stared. He yelled, "Where's their commander?"

She still just stared dumbly. Then, it began to rain as if it had never rained before.

Hiding against the suddenly dripping castle wall, out of sight of the archers, the chemmen commander spit and cursed. He cursed the moon, the lightning, the earth, color, Dis, the princes, the former elvish king and queen, arrows in general, cowardice, elves, humans, dwarves and on and on.

This was supposed to have been his glory. His revenge. His redemption from having to hide in that wretched realm of Darkreign for so long. He was supposed to have the silent sword. This was supposed to be his victory.

He hardly moved when the stones beside him groaned and a small section of the wall, unmarred by the calvar's hooves, swung open.

Chapter Twenty Two

Hail to the King

Prince Kaleb thrust his head out of the window. The rain instantly soaked him, but he didn't care. He felt fifty stone lighter and like he could fly. The dragoon soldiers had boxed in the last of the chemmen, who by now, were easily outnumbered five to one. Alsalon quivered behind him, clutching a gladiolus to his chest. Kaleb's tears mixed with the rain.

"We did it. We won."

The crown prince smiled and spun to find himself facing a mirror twice his size. It was the same mirror that he'd stared into before the battle, but it looked different now. He scanned over his reflection, and he thought he looked a little older. Not in any physical signs, of course, but in other aspects, like the way he stood a little straighter.

"I think we should call this the Battle of Gladioli Fields," his younger brother said.

Kaleb smiled a little. "Much better than Battle of the Pansies, which is what a gladiolus is."

A knock sounded from the door. Kaleb hesitated, but the door pushed open anyway. Sir Jakkobb entered.

"You survived!" Kaleb exclaimed. "Thank the gods."

He grinned. "It'll have to be something worse than a chemman to take me down. I have something that is yours." He brought the crown of Arbourn around behind his back. The gems glittered brilliantly around the slender metal piece.

Holding his breath, Kaleb took the artifact by his fingertips. "Where did you find it?"

"In the treasure vault of Darkreign, Your Highness. Although, entirely accidentally. The chemmen stole it when they stole the king and queen's lives."

Holding back tears along with his breath, the prince could only nod.

"Put it on," Alsalon said abruptly. "It's yours now, brother."

Kaleb glided across the floor and placed the crown on the windowsill. He shook his head. "No."

Jakkobb coughed into his hand. "Regardless, you should meet your guards. It still is not wise for you to be alone."

Kaleb's blue eyes flashed. "I respect your advice, captain, but I am honestly exhausted of everyone telling me to do that."

The knight did not duck his eyes, but he kept his lips together. "Well, you are in command, Your Highness."

"And, as one of the highest ranking members of your order here, I suppose that you are needed on the field."

The knight bellowed a laugh. "Indeed." He bowed to each prince and his hand pulled open the door.

Sir Amthros spilled into the room and tumbled over the knight-captain's foot. His features had shed all their colors to absolute gray. Jakkobb rushed to stand between the fallen knight and the princes. Alsalon also darted forward.

Kaleb stuck out his hand. "No, my good captain. I want to have a word with him."

"Go ahead, Your Highness." He stared over the fallen knight without moving a muscle.

The prince frowned. "I strongly suspect that those duties on the field must be urgent."

"Not as urgent as they were half an hour ago," the captain replied coolly.

Amthros crawled to the wall and propped himself up against it. He groaned something incomprehensible.

Alsalon covered his mouth with both hands. "He looks like the walking dead."

The older prince frowned slightly. "Indeed. I suppose we now know what that looks like."

Jakkobb towered over the fallen knight. "What do you want here?"

"You...you haven't completely had victory, still be mixed," Amthros muttered.

"Mixed?" Alsalon repeated.

"We may lose someone dear," Jakkobb said. He straightened. "Where's Evelyn?"

"I don't know," Kaleb replied. "She sealed all the thin spots by her spell up in the tower."

"Is she by herself?" the knight-captain demanded. He rose to the balls of his feet.

"Go to her," Kaleb said. "This man can do us no harm, and I have private questions for him."

The captain looked between the prince and the door.

"Captain."

Jakkobb bolted through the door.

The knight of Arbourn pressed a hand against his chest and wheezed. "Did you poison me?" His wizened voice barely bled through the air.

Kaleb squatted in front of the stricken soldier. "No. That would mean that we put something in you. We took something out."

"What?"

"Your water of life, and no one can live without a drop of life. Our Baroness Evelyn used it as the key when she locked away Darkreign. To open any path between our worlds now, one must have your water of life – wherever it has gone in our great circle of a world." He sighed. "Your death will be far easier than what you gave many other good people. I don't know if there is an afterlife, but if you fail to discover oblivion, may your soul get what you truly deserve."

Amthros tried and failed to wet his lips with his tongue. "But, the chem... traitor said Farallon."

Kaleb steepled his fingers. "To save his own life. You were right there, you could have denied his words. You even tried to kill him before we escaped on the river." He shook his platinum head. "Thistle later told us the truth. That it was you who betrayed us."

"Before that foolhardy raid?" Amthros rolled his head.

"Yes." Kaleb pressed his fingers so hard together that they turned white. He ground his teeth. "It was you who marked the king and queen for death."

Alsalon shrieked, "Our parents! Our parents! You murderer!" He threw himself at the dying elf. Kaleb hauled him backward.

"Alsalon, no! He's already dying!"

The younger prince's voice had to fight through his sobs to be heard. "He marked our parents! He's why they're gone forever and we'll never see them again!"

"And we took his life for it! Get back!" Kaleb flung his brother across the room by his waist.

A sound emanated from between the knight's lips like paper crackling in a fire. He laughed. "Yes, I am a murderer. I have been for a long time."

"What do you mean?" Kaleb whispered.

"The children. The storm-reader children we held as prisoners."

The older prince held his breath for an instance. "Do you mean the children that my father ordered spared in Darii? The children who escaped and very nearly slew all the elves at that fortress? They led the attack. You were defending yourselves."

Amthros trembled. "No. Didn't matter. They were children. We sinned. We need to pay for that sin. I needed to pay for the evil I did."

"So, you betrayed your own to an even worse evil."

The knight shook his head. "I didn't know what to do. They are wicked, but so were we. They are our punishment, nature's balance."

Kaleb pursed his lips and knotted his fists as tightly as he could. "You could have killed me and my brother whenever you wished."

"You weren't born. Wasn't your fault."

"Ah. Even though the chemmen wanted to kill us anyway."

"Because they're wicked."

Kaleb rocked back on his heels. "Well, in all this mess, we have you to thank for our victory."

"What?" Amthros creased his brow.

"We couldn't have brought all the chemmen here without you. You were an invaluable source of information to them. We couldn't strike out against all their scattered forces – we needed them to be all together to crush them. If you hadn't told them we were going to be here, they would have destroyed many, many more innocent lives."

"Because I told them..."

The prince nodded. "Yes, you. Oh, and Der and Kelin, of course. That's why we decided that they should go on the raid after all. Two humans, mixed in this chaos who had become sort of pets of the crown prince and who had been previously tortured by the chemmen..." He smiled softly. "Well, the storm-readers would certainly believe how easily they could give up some priceless information that they accidentally learned."

"And then there is the matter of Thistle. A chemman, married to an elf, with a half-breed son. He was also believable to the chemmen because he was one of them. There are no chemmen traitors."

The knight tried to nod, but his head just fell forward. "So, the raid... you knew..."

"Yes, everyone who went knew that they would be captured. We told Vlade exactly what he wanted to hear and needed to learn for himself. It got his blood excited, didn't it? He needed to come here, didn't he?"

"Yes. You all knew..."

"No, only Lady Evelyn, Duke Farallon, Sir Jakkobb and myself. And Thistle – we had to take that chance. Because of you, we couldn't trust our own. Not even poor Der and Kelin. I do owe them an apology and an explanation, because I do trust them, but the chemmen are amazing at torturing for information. And, the chemmen needed to hear their honesty." He rocked back on his heels. "We thought about just telling you about going to Elloan – especially since the chemmen with all their magic and directions could not find Riverfall – but that just wasn't convincing enough. They needed to discover for themselves as well. They needed to see their victory dangled in front of their orange eyes. So, we gave them their discoveries."

The knight's voice seemed to come from a long way away, and his eyes weren't focused on anything in the room. He had wasted away in hours to look like he'd been dying of thirst for weeks. "It's alright now. I think... our debt's been paid. My sin's been paid." He closed his eyes and exhaled for the last time.

"Derora Saxen!" Kelin didn't jump at her. Instead, he remained sitting at the table. He looked too exhausted to be scared anymore. He relaxed at the bench. Thistle followed in the room. Thalon hopped and bounced across the room to his father and latched on to his leg. He rested a hand on the child's head.

Kelin, the boy and the two dwarves had made themselves at home in a large dining hall, full of empty tables.

She grinned, still holding the Pallens sword in her hand. Even after the battle, there wasn't a mark on it.

"Pallens," Boison wheezed. "Pallens!" He pointed as if she had stolen it from his own hand.

Kelin slid right off his bench and on to the floor. "What! A Pallens sword? That's impossible!"

Thalon shook his small head. "The Blackhound ordered them all destroyed, even I know that." He squeezed his father's leg even tighter.

Der pulled the weapon closer. "He must have not found this one. Probably because it disappeared before the Empire was destroyed."

Kelin shook his head. "It's still impossible, because —"

"Carak!" Striggal stepped forward and shook his head, suddenly ignoring the magnificent artifact. "What Carak? What Carak?"

"Where's Carak?" Der blinked. She glanced back through the door. "He's right here."

The other dwarf rounded the corner with his eyes studying the floor incredibly intensely. His beard ended in one straight line one inch below his chin. Boison and Striggal choked and broke into suspicious coughing fits.

Carak bunched up his face, turned cherry red beneath his skewed spectacles, and burst into tears. The other two dwarves ran up to him. They eventually began to share Carak's tears.

Der opened her mouth to say something, but never got the chance. Kelin saved her life. He leapt up from the table, despite his exhaustion soaked bones, and yanked her forward. The sword whistled through the air where she was just standing.

Vlade screamed like a wounded calvar and kept stabbing at them. Kelin pulled Der behind a table. The dwarves tried to untangle themselves. The chemman's sword caught Boison across his face and the dwarf died instantly.

"Thistle!" Der yelled and brought up the Pallens sword between herself and the crazed chemman. "Thistle!"

Carak and Striggal caught Boison's falling body. Striggal screamed something in his native language.

Vlade had paused long enough to stare at Thistle. And then at Thistle's sword. And then at the boy quivering behind Thistle. The point of his sword dipped. "But, there are no chemmen traitors." His voice echoed hollowly inside his mouth.

And then he said, "You see, Vlade, I knew it. Your sword proves it. But...this...is impossible, Dis. You've lost your mind, Vlade, you were the one who suspected —"

Der and Thistle lunged at the same time. The sound surrounding them deadened as Thistle's sword moved. Vlade slipped like a fish out of the grasp of their weapons. He backed away from their onslaught, his sword strong and fast enough to counter them both in the moment.

Thistle moved his blade higher and higher against the commander's chest. "Stay low!" he hissed.

Der realized his plan. If she attacked low on the chemman's body she would force his blade to be level with hers. But, Vlade would also have to counter high at the same time. She struck for his thighs, going as low as she dared without opening herself to attack. Thistle thrust at his neck. But, Vlade's sword was in time to parry everything.

Thistle pressed his attack faster. Der strained to keep pace. She moved as fast as she could but her sword couldn't match their speed. Vlade's sword found an opening, and licked along her arm. Snarling, she rolled her body out of the way, but thrust anyway. She felt her sword scrape through his clothing, but caught on nothing substantial.

Then, Thalon lunged with one of his knives at the back of Vlade's legs. The long knife went deep into the back of Vlade's thigh.

His sword swung around behind him immediately, and messed the top of the boy's hair. Then, the chemmen commander screamed and fell to one knee.

It should have ended right there. Carak and Striggal and Kelin brought forward their weapons alongside Der and Thistle. But, Vlade curled up in a ball and rolled forward. Their blades and axes struck nothing but each other.

Der spun and thrust at Vlade's back. He was too fast, and had already gained several table-lengths despite his limp. She leapt into the chase. Her foot immediately caught against a table and she fell so hard her chin split open.

Thistle easily hopped over her to continue her pursuit, but Thalon shrieked, feeling the top of his head. His light brown hair was shorter in some places. His father nearly dropped his sword and ran back to the boy. He swept up his son in his offhand.

Kelin took his turn chasing Vlade across the dining hall. Carak ran to the other door. "Raise the alarm! Raise the alarm!"

Kelin had reached the other end of the room, where wide corridors split off in three directions. "He's gone! I don't know which way!"

"Doesn't matter," Thistle snapped. "Raise the alarm!"

Der grimaced, and her hand fumbled to stopper the blood on her chin. "Find the princes!"

Kaleb pressed his ear against the door. Along with the desperate shriek of the bell, the edges of the room where the floor met the wall, where the wall met the ceiling, where the door met the wall began to pulse with a fiery green light. "The alarm's sounding! Alsalon, quick, get ready to run!"

"Where?" The younger prince squeezed his hands together, his face shedding color.

"To the army! To anyone on our side!" His hand slipped to his sword hilt.

The world swelled into an ugly gray. The green alarm hushed to dullness around the space. The door exploded into the room and Vlade limped inside as a splinter of lightning lit the room. His sword point licked the stone floor and vulgarly whistled when he stepped forward. Behind him, a trail of blood marked where he had come from.

Kaleb realized he was backing away, and tripped over Sir Amthros's corpse. He felt his younger brother's hands on his shoulder blades. He licked his lips. "They're coming to save us."

"Yes, they are," the chemman replied in an oddly calm voice that betrayed none of the wildness sprinting through his orange eyes. The older prince noticed how Vlade fingered and clutched a piece of jet black mirror. "Let them come. Do you think they'll be quick enough to save your hides?" He swung the sword's tip up and limped forward another step. "Your hides. I think I will take your bodies and skin them." The chemman's eyes jerked up and refocused. "No, Vlade, just kill them and we can escape. No, I still need my victory! Be silent, you will listen to me for I am your king!" He barked a laugh. "Now? Right now? You wish to order me around now? Yes, you've finally gone too far! Just kill them and depart!"

"What's going on?" Alsalon whispered, his breath hot on his brother's ear.

Kaleb shook his head. His hand slowly began to pull his sword free of its scabbard. The chemman continued to stare into space. The prince lunged.

Vlade or Dis parried with snake speed, his sword in place like a divining rod. Kaleb held his breath and tried to determine the rhythm of the fight. It changed almost instantly: slow-fast, fast-slow, slow-slow, fast-slow-fast. The combatants' slower moves were by far faster than most swordsmen could manage. The only reason they slowed their moves at all was to trick the other. It wasn't about being the fastest, he reminded himself, it was about being the smartest.

Then, the chemman dropped his point, dodged the prince's swipe and cut the elf on the knee. Kaleb fell to the floor. The chemman raised his sword, and Kaleb barely brought his own over his head to parry, and the chemman forced his blade all the way to the top of his head.

Prince Alsalon crushed his teeth together and pushed himself off the wall. He didn't have any sword or knife, but his fingers began to crackle with their own lightning. The light swirled between his hands and sweat instantly beaded his forehead.

Vlade, it must have been Vlade instead of Dis because the swordplay was instantly tenfold greater than it had been, dropped the fragment of the obsidian mirror. Before it had even passed his waist, he grasped the pommel and twisted. It came free to reveal a small double edge blade.

The obsidian shattered against the stone floor. The knife scraped across Alsalon's forehead. The younger prince yelped and staggered back. He stumbled into the wall by the crown. The light in his hand extinguished into smoke.

Vlade paused and slowed his sword. "Where did you get that?"

Even Kaleb took a fraction of a second to glance at the crown.

"I know that I stole that already." He whirled both blades back toward the crown prince. "Oh well."

"Run!" Kaleb yelled, still fighting against the chemman. "Alsalon, get out of here!"

The elf's bright eyes glinted like his blade. He threw his whole weight into his attack, barreling into both blades. He beat aside the sword but he riposted into nothing more than shadow. He parried wildly, but the chemman's sword cut his shoulder.

Alsalon dove through the open doorway. "Help! Help! Alarm!"

He swiveled his blade around the sword, but the pommel knife blocked his strike. After a furious minute, the prince's sword flew free from his grip. It rebounded off the wall and landed on Sir Amthros's body.

Kaleb threw himself back against the wall. "They're coming! They'll be here!"

"Soon enough, princeling?" He thrust again.

Kaleb tossed himself to the side, banging his head against the wall of the windowsill. He cried aloud and barely propped himself up in the deep seated sill. "We defeated you! Your army is all dead!"

The storm-reader snarled and his face melted into an unnatural smile. "We are chemmen. It doesn't matter who perishes. The chemmen survive."

"Even if all of Darkreign wastes away and you've no way out? They told me how it was dying!" The prince reached toward the crown, slicing one of his fingers on a point. The gems reflected the storm's unsteady light harshly, and threw it back out of its many faceted surfaces in chaos. "Even you? What if you die?"

"Even me." The chemman shrugged.

"Am I talking to Vlade or Dis?"

He shrugged again. "Does it matter?"

Kaleb laughed. He pulled the smooth side of the crown to his chest and laughed. He could tell by the chemman's face that the chemman was as surprised as he was. "Then, you never understood immortality."

The chemmen leader scowled and dangled the sword tip in front of the prince. "Of course we do, it's the natural ascension of our race. Now, we rule Darkreign, and soon, your world. There will be another chance for us to take it if not today."

Tears slipped free from the corner of Kaleb's eyes. "No, you don't. Being immortal is being an individual. And I refuse to believe you when you say it doesn't matter if you die – either one of you – because you've been immortal too long." He cradled the crown. "You killed my parents! They were individuals and you stole them from me!"

Vlade, probably, smirked at the elf and stepped back. "Yes, yes, I did. You know, they just let me. Of course, they couldn't escape because no matter where they ran we were told. And, I was so close to killing you and your brat brother that day too."

Kaleb felt his saliva burning in his mouth and his breath singed his throat as it flew in and out.

A figure appeared in the doorframe. "I guessed which room correctly." He held a magnificent black sword in his hand.

"Help us!" the king screamed.

Thistle calmly shook his head. He brought his weapon on guard toward the other chemman.

"*What!*" He gasped. "That's my sword! That's my sword!" He stuck out with the blade he had in hand in an overreaching thrust.

Thistle parried the clumsy move with ease. The blades very distinctly did not ring out. Kaleb stared in amazement as the two began a furious dance with no accompanying music.

The chemmen leader suddenly dropped his point and scrambled backward. Thistle held the sword still. "You're one of us and you're saving an elf? You know what they did to us!"

"Not to me, Dis. I've never been to Darkreign before this war."

"But, you're one of us! *There are no chemmen traitors!*"

"No, I'm not one of you. Not for three and a half thousand years. You see, I remember being human."

The chemmen leader's face twisted into a snarl. "I shall destroy you for those words alone. Now, give me back my sword!"

"Take it – if you can."

Vlade was a far greater swordsman than Dis. Even wounded, he held his own.

Behind them, Kaleb pushed himself up the wall, still clutching the crown to his chest. He watched the combatants through some sort of daze. He had never imagined these concatenating events that would have ever led to the moment of two chemmen fighting over him. He must have shouted something because the chemmen both glanced in his direction for the merest fraction of a second.

Vlade turned back first and shoved his sword at the other chemman. Thistle's parry scraped Vlade's blade to the side, but not far enough. The sword dug deep into his side.

"No!" the prince yelled.

Thistle collapsed, dropping the silent sword. He grabbed at his side, and his chest heaved. The standing storm-reader spun to the prince.

"Enough of this, Vlade! Kill him and let's be done with this! We have to go! Can you hear me?" The chemman's face darted to glance at the open door.

Those were the last words the chemmen king ever spoke. Vlade continued, "You, boy, have been more trouble than you're worth."

He thrust. Kaleb jumped to the side. The chemman's arm and blade were both fully extended, and the elf was inside his reach. Kaleb slammed the crown and its spiked points into Vlade's neck.

The chemman commander tried to inhale and staggered backward.

Kaleb jerked the crown back and slammed it into Vlade's face.

All motion evaporated from the body and it fell to the floor. The chemman's face contorted and softened. Then, the corpse slackened.

Kaleb wrenched the crown out of his face and neck. He lifted it with calm fingers. His heart beat fast enough to explode, but his fingers weren't shaking. Reverently, he rested the bloody thing on his head.

That white hot moment churned with glory, vengeance but mostly just the effort on the edge of exhaustion's cliff. It slipped away from him in a heartbeat. He braced himself against the wall, reeling from sudden dizziness. His moment of triumph was tempered by total fatigue.

Help finally dashed into the room. Jakkobb stood over the dead chemman, weapon at the ready. Some more elves rushed to Thistle who squirmed on the floor. Kaleb's eyes blurred and he sagged against the wall and finally exhaled. Then, he looked up to see who had arrived. The knight-captain, Der, Kelin, Thalon, two dwarves – he squinted, one of whom must have decided that the beard was just too much – and many, many guards clustering the door behind them. Every one of them hovered away from him. He breathed, "Is Alsalon safe?"

"Yes," Jakkobb replied immediately.

He sagged further on the wall, listening to his breath rattle in and out of his mouth. He looked up again. "Der, why do you have a sword with Pallens art on it?"

She met his gaze. "Kaleb, why are you wearing a bloody crown?"

Thalon pointed. "It's...dripping..."

Kaleb slowly lifted the crown from his head. He stared at it. His sword clattered to the ground.

"Kaleb..." Der began.

"No, call me Edillon. Please. I think I've earned the name my parents gave me."

The dawn had chased away the storm. The rain had washed away much of the gruesome effects of the battlefield. The sun glistened on the remaining gladioli. The colorful sword-flags stood battered and ragged, but turned their heads toward the rising light.

Der covered her face against the early sun with her hand. She and Kelin had slept on the stone battlements. They hadn't meant to. They just taken a turn on guard like everyone else on the walls, and when that turn was done, they'd collapsed.

Her mind nudged consciousness. Something lifted her arm. She groaned and rolled over, falling back into bliss. Then, her ears recognized the metallic scrape of someone moving a blade across the stone. Her eyes flared open and she fully awoke with the force of sitting person leaping to a full sprint in one motion. Blindly, she grabbed at the something.

Peyna, the physician, pulled his arm out of her hand. "Don't fret, girl. The battle ended last night."

She stared at him until the trickle of memory flowed into a pool. Oh yes. The surgeon from the first encounter with the elves. She grumbled. She tried to remember last night after she'd met up with the prince. Carak and Striggal had gone off to do something with Boison's body. Jakkobb had started yelling at Spike, and the horse had started arguing back. She swore she heard words in the exchange, and the horse had danced and jogged around while tossing his head. Of course, it may have been just a dream.

"Try not to move," he sighed. "Some of those cuts are going to open up again the moment you stretch." He rubbed something into a fresh scar on her arm, still pink with pain.

"Wassat?" she slurred.

"Yarrow and cobwebs. They'll clot the blood when they open up."

She frowned. "That's what we use at home. I thought the elves would have some ultimate healing ointment or something."

"Of course we do," he snapped. "It's just that I'm saving that for those who truly need it. You don't."

Der squinted in the brilliant sunlight. "Oh." She retracted her arm and tried to roll back over.

The physician snatched her shoulders. "No, stay awake. You can rest again after you're healed and have a bath." She kept her eyes closed as she propped herself up against a battlement. She wasn't ready for the bright sun yet.

"Once again, you've been lucky." He held her elbow. The skin beneath his hand warmed, but the spectacular scrape and bruise disappeared as if they were drawn in windswept sand. The surgeon sighed. "I don't know why when you're so bloody stupid."

"I'm brave, not stupid."

"Well, if you're brave then you are stupid. You can't really separate the two."

She smiled. "Ah, but you can omit one."

The physician rolled his eyes and turned his attention to the sleeping Kelin. "By the way, Derora, the prince has requested an audience with everyone today. He's, of course, quite busy."

Der rubbed her neck. "Breakfast first."

He nodded. "Absolutely. The prince wouldn't be able to see you now anyway."

"Did you ever doubt me?" Thistle stared directly into the knight-captain's true blue eyes.

Jakkobb ran a hand through his hair and looked down at Thalon, still clutching his father's leg. They stood in an empty, open corridor, but it wouldn't be empty for long. The castle vibrated with busyness. He started to shake his head, but Spike, standing behind him, kicked his armored calf with a hoof. The elf exhaled. "I suppose I do owe you honesty after all this. Yes, yes I did."

"And still you trusted me enough to attempt such a plan?"

He nodded. "Although, you were too convincing. And Vlade and Dis were your own."

The chemman snorted. "No, Vlade was far too trapped in his victory, far too passionate in the moment to be a good leader. I supposed he was still too human after all." He hinted at a smile. "Why did you believe me? Truly?"

Jakkobb chuckled. "You don't really need to ask that, do you?"

The horse coughed exactly like a person clearing his throat. He raised one hoof. Jakkobb spun around. "Oh, alright. You know that you both are still prisoners of the Silver Dawn Dragoons. It's my duty to keep you as such and to make certain that you are not mistreated and get fed and all that, but I'm quite busy after this battle. Quite busy."

"Busy making sure the lady's alright," Thalon quipped.

Spike snickered, if a horse could do such a thing. Perhaps he just cleared his throat. Jakkobb kept a straight face, but flushed. "I could just delegate some of my duties and have enough time to keep one eye on you."

Thistle placed a hand on his son's head. "He'll be good."

"He'd better be. Well, I'm leaving to attend court when I should be watching you. *Mea culpa*."

Kelin rubbed his cuts. He leaned against the wall outside of Lady Evelyn's court. Edillon had taken it over as his own for the day. He ran his fingers through his curly locks and exhaled. "Derora, thank you."

She nodded. "Yeah. You're welcome." She closed her eyes and rested. "Thank you, too. Hell, I wouldn't be alive without you." She grinned.

He returned the smile. "No, you wouldn't be. I've been thinking, perhaps adventures aren't so bad after all."

"Yes, and now that you've had one, you may go back to your village." Duke Farallon breezed into the antechamber trailed by several other elves. "If you don't want to wait for the snows to melt, we can send back sooner."

Kelin bowed his head. "You are generous, my lord."

Der swallowed and let her eyes drop to the floor. She scratched the back of her head and pushed herself away from the wall. She lifted her eyes to the piercing gaze of the elven lord. "Um, your dukeness, I have to admit that, um, well, to you, I was wrong, and I'm sorry. And, I'm also sorry that I wished that you were the traitor."

Farallon snorted and crossed his arms. "At least you now understand that you were wrong this entire emprise."

Der's mouth fell open. Kelin smothered a smile with his hand as the duke and his entourage swept past her into the court.

When they had curtly snapped the lacquered doors back into place, she finally managed to make a face.

Jakkobb emerged from around the corridor's smooth curve, moving incredibly silent for a large man in plate mail. He chuckled. "Der, you must've eaten a plate full of lemons."

Kelin shrugged. "She's fine."

"Oh. Good."

She shook herself free. "Where are Thistle and Thalon?"

Jakkobb shrugged.

"What does that mean?"

"Don't ask is what it means."

"Oh." She deflated.

Kelin rubbed his neck. "I can't help but think, sir, that perhaps some chemmen are still out there. Like, they'd been outside of Darkreign but not at the battle."

The knight shrugged again. "It's possible, but we'll be watching for more holes, and if there are chemmen out there, they'll have to learn to be people instead of chemmen."

"Before this," Kelin sighed, "The chemmen were just another campfire story."

"So, were the cultists." Der made another sour face. "They're another problem. We never knew that they were truly real. We need to hunt them down too."

Jakkobb slapped her shoulder. "You need to get trained first." He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Do you honestly think that you can be warrior, Derora?"

"Yes," she said. "Why?"

He frowned. "Let me ask you this, ask both of you this. Many fighters aren't actual warriors at heart. Both have the experience and memories, but the thing that truly separates the two is the willingness to do it again. If you were given a choice, would you go back and do it again? You can't change how things happen, the torture, the deaths, the betrayals, the victories and the defeats. Every wound made bright again and every bitter emotion resurrected, but this time you know how much those hurt. Would you?"

Kelin's eyes widened and flinched against his memories. "I – I don't want that."

Der bore the same horrified expression. Her voice was dredged from the back of her throat, as if she was dragging her tongue the same way a person drags his feet. "Yes."

"Well, that's something." The knight nodded. "If you don't mind spending the next few years in the most hellish training that can be arranged, we might make a warrior of you yet."

"Years?" Der repeated. "What about now? Hasn't this already been training enough?" Her grin became hopeless. "I want to fight now. I'll already be eighteen when next summer comes round."

Jakkobb blinked. "What? And you went on that raid? Eighteen? That's too young!"

Kelin scratched his head. "You must've known this. We are human."

"You children today are insane! When I was young and stupid, it was goblin lairs and brigands!"

Der held up a finger in defense. "Most girls my age in Riversbridge are already wed."

The knight ran a hand over his face. "Marrying infants. What next?"

"Um. Do you want me to answer that, sir?"

"No." He clapped his hands together. "So, have you a thought about what you're going to do with your sword?"

Her hand shot to the pommel of the Pallens sword. "You're letting me keep it?"

He nodded. "Yes. You found it, you can pick it up. Not everyone in the holy empire could even do that. Also, we do not know of anyone who requires it."

"It's probably a paladin's sword," Kelin chimed. "It's from the paladin empire."

Der's face flushed red and then white. "I know. Carak thought that too!"

Jakkobb laughed. "Probably not. It's amazing enough in the fact that it's from Pallens."

"But, it still could be?" Der's eyes glowed as bright as the moon.

"Paladins don't exist anymore, Der," Kelin remarked. "Not since Pallens." His tone softened. "Then again, the gods know you're stubborn enough."

"Who knows?" Jakkobb tossed up a hand. He lowered his head. "Well, I am going to vanish before these proper proceedings begin. I've got too many things to do right now."

"So, you're not going to the coronation? When will that be anyway?"

The knight laughed. "No, that won't be for at least a century, and that's rushed for the elves. There's never been a coronation before. But, don't be mistaken, as of now he is king." He straightened. "I hope to see you again, Derora, Kelin, and under much better circumstances."

"What? You're leaving?" Kelin stepped forward. "Just like that?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "Best time." He turned and nearly ran into the dwarves coming up the hallway.

Carak hid behind Striggal. Wisps of beard could be seen poking out from behind Striggal's back. The first dwarf grunted. "Well meet."

"Well met," Kelin replied, trying to peer through Striggal's body.

Carak stepped out, with a beard. It was far too silky and wasn't the same color as the rest of his hair. He even had the string tied around his ears.

Kelin and Der both slapped hands over their mouths, while Carak's face reddened to a bruised color. Kelin bit his tongue so hard it hurt and straightened his smile flat. "I'm glad to see that you're well. What are you going to do now that the chemmen have been vanquished?"

The dwarf shrugged. "Don't really know. Return to War'kiln."

"What's that?" Kelin persisted.

Carak's eyes lit. "'Tis the great dwarven stronghold, deep under the mountains. Oh, its halls are glorious and much larger than these skinny elven buildings. And, it's carved from the earth instead of built upon it, like you see here."

The humans' eyes glossed.

"Well, you are welcome to come with us after this celebration."

Now, Kelin didn't hide his grin. "I'd love it! By the gods, this is amazing! You are the best smiths in the world!"

The dwarf wagged his massive eyebrows expansively. "You are most welcome. Come, celebrate Candlebright with us." Every winter solstice, it was the one holiday that every civilized race celebrated.

"Oh, maybe," Der said. "Kelin, you should go. I don't know, I might want to stay here, or, well, I don't know."

Then, the lacquered doors behind her opened of their own accord. Inside the room, a fountain of flowers moved exactly like a water fountain, displaying an endless stream of colorful patterns. Above them stood a glass dome that let the sunlight inside. Above that was a stone dome with large glassless windows that allowed the light to the interior. Beyond the fountain, a simple wooden throne sat on a small dais. Today, Lady Evelyn stood to its side.

Farallon and the duchess stood on the opposite side. Other elves began streaming in from behind them. Finally, the princes entered from a door behind the throne. Alsalon stood to its right and Edillon took the wooden seat. He wore the spiky, beautiful crown of Arboren. His voice slid through the air like silk. "My thanks to you for coming here. Without you, neither my brother nor I would have survived. I know that lives have been lost and we will never again meet our loved ones, but we stand here today in victory, not in defeat." He paused. "I have much to say today, but I know that we are all weary."

He bowed his head. "To our friends that we've failed to truly speak with since the wars, the dwarves, I wish to extend a new hand of friendship."

Striggal and Carak shuffled forward and bowed.

Edillon raised a hand. "We certainly cannot replace your friend. I am sorry for his loss – as sorry as I am for one of my own. We both lost people, but we've gained new friends."

Carak bowed, his fake beard touching the floor. "Yes, Your Highness, we have. The chemmen have made enemies of both our peoples." He raised his head and melted back into the crowd.

Edillon's face stayed stern. "I need to praise Lady Evelyn of Elloan for closing the paths to Darkreign. My lady, there is no gift that I can give you that will repay you."

She bowed her head and curtsied. "There is no gift that you can give me that I require."

He nodded and then faced the crowd. "I also need to congratulate those who put themselves in the storm-reader's power to bring them to this battle where they tasted defeat a second time." He looked around. "I do not see Sir Jakkobb today. I know that he's gone because that red armor can't be missed. So, I would call forth Fienan and Salinienn."

The two elves stepped forward and bowed. Prince Alsalon handed each of them a warm, glowing ring.

"These rings will keep you warm, no matter how cold the world around you is."

They closed their hands over the rings. They bowed and turned back into the mass of people.

"Kelin, come forward," the prince commanded.

Trembling, Kelin approached the throne. Edillon looked different, he looked older, much more like a prince and an elf of legend rather than the friend he had come to know. Prince Alsalon came forward and offered him a single edged slightly curved sword. It looked like the sword that Sigard gifted him with when he left Riversbridge. No, he corrected himself, that sword looked like a child's drawing of this one. The blade was glowing in silver light and held the same weight as a feather.

"Thank you," he stammered and hastily retreated back to the dwarves and Der.

Edillon smiled. "And, what could I give the ever insolent Derora Saxen?"

She shuffled forward, grinning manically. "I don't know, Your Highness."

"How about something to go with your Pallens sword?"

Alsalon thrust out his hand; it held a small, silver necklace. She fingered the slender medallion and stared. "I don't know what this is."

"That is the Dawn Sword," Edillon said. "It is made of absolute silver, so please, guard it well. That is the father-god Carenth's warrior symbol, and also used as the symbol of a warrior of Pallens." It was a complete circle, bisected down the center by the outline of a sword. It looked as if it could snap in her fingers, but it felt sturdy at the same time. The sword shone brighter than any real sword, and the circle surrounding it was the most perfect circle she'd ever seen.

"No one in this new age carries a weapon of Pallens. May you serve it well." He smiled slowly, like the sun rising.

The prince turned his face to everyone. "As we've resurrected the Dawn Sword today, I am reminded of King Midan of Pallens's words once. 'I have never been a believer of the divine right to rule. One may gain a throne by divine appointment, but he can only retain it through his own wits and worth'. I think we've shown our wits and proved our worth on this battlefield.

"I have learned how this kingdom is worth more than one immortal's life, even a king's. I solemnly promise to be a leader worthy of your devotion, like my father and mother. Their leadership cannot be replaced, like the people we've lost, but we can learn from it. My parents, however, did not give their lives for this kingdom. They died for my brother and me. Throughout this adventure..." His voice became a liquid whisper, rippling gently through the air. "Death, that which we have once again forgotten to know, is bittersweet. I still love my former king and queen, and I love this land that they built, and I still celebrate this love, even though it is so painful to bear. My

pledge is to always bear this burden of love and to always serve my kingdom. A king's duty is to serve, not to be served."

Around the new king, the cheers as loud as a storm bounced off the towers upward toward the sky. Above him, light shone down through the glass dome and illuminated the room like a thousand dancing prisms.

Epilogue

People scrambled like ants in the fields. They hefted huge bushels or racks of lumber and scurried back to the village. The summer solstice drew nigh, so the new year approached.

Inside the village, the river still flowed, the mill wheel still turned and life plodded onward. The town had even been quieter than usual this past year. A sergeant arrived in the early spring, quickly ordering the construction of a palisade and trained the growing militia. He had already moved on to the next village to do the same thing.

Erb, the forester and carpenter, was aiding the mayor's brother in building Riversbridge's first inn. The decision to build one was a hasty response to the arrival of a dwarven merchant caravan. There had only been two or three wagons in it, but the dwarves traded fairly with the locals and sold them things the village wanted. No one could explain why they came. But, they promised to return, and so the inn sprang up on the riverside.

Donley walked with Avice over the bridge. He often casually left his hand resting on the pommel of his sword, just because he could. He felt like real military. He glanced over at her. She blushed and looked away into the brown water.

She'd never blushed at him before. Not until the start of their trial marriage anyway. They still had most of the rest of a year to decide if this was right.

Movement caught his eye. Through the gates, he could see a rider coming into Riversbridge over a fallow field. His eyes watered at the shining armor.

"A knight," Avice breathed. "What next?" It had to be a knight in that armor, even if the rider was a bit shorter than imagination usually provided.

Don took a step forward, but she grabbed his arm. He shook his head. "It's my duty. I have to ask why he's here."

"We'll go together."

They met the knight at the front gates, where the stranger reined in the horse in front of them. Don craned his neck upward to look at the closed visor. "Uh..." His eyes slid over the knight's equipment. The mail was absolutely flawless as far as he could tell, and the saddle was inlaid with multi-colored embroidery that he was sure would make Avice cry. His gaze locked onto a sword hanging off the side of the saddle.

The pommel was imprinted with the black rose on a yellow field, the Saxen crest. He choked and coughed. "Sir knight! What happened to the owner of this sword?"

Laughter answered him. "I'm no knight, Don, at least not yet." Derora lifted off her helmet. "I just found a sword that fits me better." She patted an elvish longsword. "And this other one too, but it's all wrapped up."

"Der...?" Don's voice came from a distance.

"You get off that horse right now!" Avice stamped her foot against on the ground. The young woman nearly tackled Der when she dismounted. The majestic helmet fell to the ground like a bucket. "You've been gone for half a year!"

"You look so much older," Don said. He blinked again, staring between Der and her horse. "Where have you been?"

Der grinned. "You won't believe —"

"Where's Kelin?"

"With the dwarves —"

"Dwarves! Where have you been?"

"Got tangled up with the elves —"

"Elves!"

"And chemmen! There was this war —"

"War?"

"*Chemmen!* They don't exist!"

"Oh yes they do. And there were magic swords and crowns and enchanted castles and dragoon knights —"

"Dragoons!" Donley yelped.

Der nodded enthusiastically. "The elves are still celebrating, and it's been three seasons!"

"Where's Kelin?" Don asked.

"He went to the dwarves — to see their underground cities. I have a letter from him to his parents." She took the reins of her horse and started to head into the village. She made one step.

She whirled on the couple. "Alright, the palisade was certainly weird, but you're building an inn! And you, Don —" She thrust a finger forward "When did you start carrying a sword?"

"I'm a corporal now, in our own militia." He grinned and patted his weapon. "I'm the best in town."

"We'll have to match blades." She smirked.

He shrank just a little. "We will. We'll see who is better now."

She looked at him with an expression very akin to a certain knight-captain's. She raised an eyebrow. "Don't boast until you know actually how good you are."

Don blinked and exchanged a glance with Avice.

Der smiled hastily. "I learned that the hard way." She began to lead her horse through town. "I have to see my family now, especially my father." She looked back at the sword tied to her saddle. "I went through a lot to retrieve this thing."

She found Riodan in the harvested fields. Her father surveyed her as she approached. His voice was soft in wonder. "How did you...?" He straightened his shoulders. "I see you didn't take service with the king."

She shook her head. "Not with Thealith's king. I'm in no one's service now."

"Then how did you afford such extravagant equipment?" His eyes narrowed. "That's elvish mail!"

"And a sword too. I brought yours back. I had to go back to an abandoned castle in the Wild Lands to find it."

"The count, and the king, cannot afford elvish equipment."

"Lucky for me that these were a gift then."

His jaw slipped open, and then he shook himself like a wet dog. "Who could possibly afford to gift you with those? And what could you have done for them to deserve it?"

"I'm not exactly certain, sir, but I think it's because I saved the elven race." She completely missed seeing his expression. She looked at the ground, suddenly remembering the years she'd spent harvesting it. "The elves tell it better, and I know the bards are coming. They would have been here sooner, but they take their time composing the music – in doing anything, actually."

"Elvish bards? So, you're not lying?"

Der dug her hands into the embroidered saddle. "Um, yes, yes. I got Kelin and myself rather caught in the middle of a war."

"What!"

"Well, I am a warrior, Dad. The bards will tell the story better! They'll even sing it too!"

Riodan ran a hand over his face. Then, he laughed. "If anyone else had said these things, I would not have believed them. I do want to hear your story from you though."

She smiled. "I'll go stable my horse and be inside then." She led her new horse into the empty stall next to the old plough pony. Der leaned on the wall and watched the small, bleary eyed creature meticulously chew its oats. She smiled as she remembered how she imagined the old pony looked. A year ago, it was a royal warhorse, and now, no matter how hard she tried, it was still an old dumpy plough pony.