

*The Valkyrie's Tale*

*By Jeff Fecke*

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THE VALKYRIE'S TALE

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*For Katie, in all her permutations*

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## One

### *The Warrior and the Blackguard*

She ran down the hill with reckless abandon like the child she had so recently been, reveling in the feel of the summer sun beating down on her auburn hair, the solid ground beneath her feet. She knew this land. It was her home. She had run down this hill dozens of times. Gracefully, she spun at the end, and looked back up the knoll to her house.

She furrowed her brow. That wasn't right.

The building was altogether different from any she'd seen before, a strange shape, a strange color. It was like no house she'd ever seen. And yet, somehow, she knew it was hers.

She began to walk up the hill again, slowly this time. No, that wasn't quite right, she thought. It wasn't her will that animated her decision. Her left hand

brushed against her side where her sword should have been, but it was not there—only an odd, rough fabric altogether different than the leather and mail she was accustomed to.

She felt her step quicken.

This wasn't right—and yet, somehow she knew it was.

As she approached, she saw an unfamiliar woman tending to a garden. The woman's clothes were as oddly off as the rest of this place, but when the woman looked up, there was recognition in her eyes.

"There you are!" the woman said, warmly. "Go on inside, dear. Brian and your dad are getting dinner ready."

Lorelei looked at the door. This felt so much like home to her. But she knew it couldn't be.

She didn't have a family. She never had.

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A violent thunderclap woke her back to reality. A late-summer storm was pounding down on the encampment, and rain was drip-dropping through a small hole in the yurt's seams. Lorelei sat up in her cot, and sighed. She rose, and slung her sword around her waist, and headed out into the storm.

Radulf whined as she reached the door. "I'm just going out for a moment, girl. I'll be right back," she told the wolf, as she slipped out into the deluge.

She walked through the center of the encampment. It was Ravenwood; this was her home. She had been brought here twelve years ago as an orphan. It was the closest thing to family she'd ever known.

Herja herself had rescued her from the temple orphanage. She had told the abbot that she would do great things, that she had the soul of a Valkyrie, and needed only the proper training to gain the skill of one. Herja had brought her into the fold, and had raised her to be one of the Daughters of Odin, the Choosers of the Slain. She had known battle since, and danger. But she had never again known the kind of aching want that she had felt as a child in the care of the church.

She let the rain pound down on her, let it wash over her. She hoped it would wash out of her the desperate desire for family—real family—that she thought must be behind the dreams.

"Lorelei! What are you doing?"

Her reverie broken, she turned and saw a figure approaching. The woman was slight for a Valkyrie, with short black hair that was already slicked down from the rain.

“Nothing, Miia,” said Lorelei, turning fully toward her friend.

“Don’t ‘nothing’ me, Lorelei. I’ve known you too long. It’s another dream, isn’t it?”

Miia was as close to a sister as she had. She had been adopted a year after Lorelei, and they’d been friends from the first. “Yes, it was a dream.”

Miia walked up to her friend and put an arm around her shoulder. “It’s all right, Lorelei.”

No, it isn’t, Lorelei thought. It wasn’t all right at all.

She wanted to break down, but a Valkyrie doesn’t cry. Instead, she let out a deep sigh and walked with her friend back to the tent.

“Come on,” said Miia, lying her friend down. “Get under the blankets. You’ll catch your death of cold.”

“It’s just so real,” said Lorelei. “It isn’t like a dream. It’s like I’m there. I can smell the grass, I can feel the wind. It’s real.”

“I know it must seem to be,” said Miia, calmly, putting another blanket on Lorelei. “I dream about my parents too.”

“It’s not like that,” said Lorelei, just softly enough so as not to wake the others. “It’s not a dream about what it would be like to have parents. It’s like I’ve stepped into the skin of someone who has a family.

“And I hate it. I already have a family here,” said Lorelei, trying and failing to convince herself.

Miia merely smiled. “Yes, you do. Now get to sleep. Alexandra will be waking us up soon enough. Best to be ready.”

Lorelei settled in, and tried to go back to sleep. After an interminable time, she even succeeded.

‡ ‡ ‡

Morning started early as it always did at Ravenwood. The rains of the previous night had given way to a sunny, muggy daybreak—it was a typical late-summer morn. No doubt the night would bring another storm; it was the usual pattern. The women awoke (save those who had just finished the night watch—they were getting to bed at last), and began the regular morning routine. They dressed, armed themselves, and lined up for breakfast.

It was the adepts’ week to cook, which meant gruel and a bit of pemmican per

woman; the adepts did not need to win favor with their underlings, and they had more important business to attend to. Indeed, most of the camp was simply glad that at last the lutefisk had been finished; comparatively, pemmican was a luxury treat. Lorelei brought out her bowl, thanked Alexandra with a slight bow, and walked to the large tent at the edge of the camp that served as the Valkyries' meeting hall.

Lorelei walked proudly into the pavilion, head held high as she walked to the table where the apprentices were gathering. The younger apprentices grew silent as she approached—not quite full attention, but deference to her senior position within the group. The elder girls knew Lorelei too well to come to attention, of course, but they too greeted her with respect, for the most part.

Miia smiled a greeting, but Lorelei's eyes locked instead on Annalie, who sat to Miia's left and directly across from Lorelei's customary seat. Annalie was not showing any more respect than custom dictated; indeed, she was showing quite a bit less. But that was neither unexpected nor unusual.

"So, nightmares again?" sneered Annalie, tossing her blonde mane frivolously. "The stress of the Trials getting to you at last?"

"She's rock solid," said Miia, staring down her friend's inquisitor. "And at least she knows the stress of the upcoming Trials. You won't know that until the seasons pass again, will you, Annalie?"

Annalie glowered back, trying in vain to hide her frustration; it was no secret that she blamed Lorelei for stealing the glory during the Battle of the Western Plains. Lorelei had been jumped ahead a year in her apprenticeship for that and made senior of the apprentices after Geiravör passed her trials. Annalie had never quite forgiven that success.

Lorelei kept her counsel. It was not that she needed Miia to fight her battles for her. It was simply that Miia enjoyed fighting them so much more. Besides, it was unbecoming of a senior to upbraid her juniors, even if she really wanted to.

Miia and Annalie glared at each other until someone spoke to break the standoff.

"Enough, you guys," said Satu. "I'd really like to make it through breakfast without a fight once in my life."

Annalie gasped, but Miia guffawed. "Now that's a leader, ladies. Sixteen winters, and she's backtalking those with eighteen behind us. Satu, you'll win glory yet."

"I hope so, Miia," Satu said, evenly.

Further discussion was forestalled as the gong was sounded, heralding Herja's

arrival. She was flanked by Alexandra and Reginleif, as always. Her face seemed much younger than the seventy winters it was said to have survived. Her short grey hair was crowned by the helm she had worn for sixty years, and her neck was wreathed with a simple silver chain. Lorelei had always been amazed at how they caught the sun—it seemed as if she was perpetually bathed in ethereal light.

Or perhaps it was simply the glow of Herja herself; it wouldn't have surprised anyone.

"Rise, fellow warriors," she intoned with practiced ease, "and sing."

As one, two hundred fifty warriors arose and sang the words of the ancient text:

*"Vindum, vindum  
vef darraðar,  
þars er vé vaða  
vígra manna!  
Látum eigi  
líf hans farask;  
eigu valkyrjur  
vals of kosti!"*

We course-choosing sisters have charge of the slain! Lorelei felt the surge of power each time she sang it. It eased her visions, her aching for family. It grounded her anew in the ways of the sisterhood. The song was more than her life; it was her destiny.

As the group sat, Herja remained standing. "Good morning, ladies," she said. "I trust we have all come through the rain. Summer's end is approaching, Daughters of Odin. And with it, this time of calm we have enjoyed of late.

"I have word that the army of King George has been turned back at Blue Earth; the army of Reginald Fowler has seized control of Two Rivers."

There was a gasp at this news, but Herja remained calm.

"We have not been called yet to battle, yet we know that the day that call comes will soon be approaching. Perhaps it will be Prince Wallace who approaches us; perhaps it will be Fowler himself, looking to buy us off.

"We shall go when Odin wills it; that moment may come at any time. You shall fight with honor, as always."

Herja smiled beatifically as the group roared their affirmation. "But before we move out, there is other business to attend to. Within one week's time, the time of the Trials will be upon us. Apprentice Lorelei Voss, rise."

Lorelei was on her feet before she realized it had been requested of her.

“Lorelei, the untimely death of your comrade Waltraud has left you alone to face the Trials. Are you ready?”

“Yes, mistress,” she said boldly, though her stomach suggested otherwise.

“No, you are not,” said Herja, eyes twinkling. There was good-natured laughter from the adepts and the warriors; Annalie’s snicker was more pointed.

“Nobody is ever truly ready for the Trials, and you, young Lorelei, are no exception. But you have fought with honor in your time with us. You have proven yourself worthy as a warrior. Now you must prove yourself worthy as a Valkyrie.

“As such, you shall begin to assume the duties of a full Warrior in the week preceding the Trials, as tradition demands. Let this be your first test: in front of your sisters, the Daughters of Odin, the Choosers of the Dead, do you accept?”

Lorelei had heard this speech every year, but somehow, she’d never accepted the meaning of it until now. All it had meant in the past was that someone had to leave the apprentices’ tent for night watch, or that an apprentice was sent on a mission alone. It was a snippet of a promotion, a taste of what lay after the Trials were completed successfully.

But now she realized that Herja was asking her to commit, even before her apprenticeship was concluded, to remain with the sisterhood. Lorelei did not have to; she was a free woman the moment she turned nineteen. Committing to Herja now before all her sisters was committing herself to the life of a Valkyrie, now and forever.

But it was the only life she’d ever known; it was not perfect, she thought, but it was a good life. And as she looked upon Herja, she knew there was only one answer.

“I do,” she said, proudly.

“Good,” said Herja. “Report to Reginleif after breakfast. You may be seated.”

Lorelei sat down, and was startled by the raucous applause that broke out. Miia beamed at her friend. “Congratulations!” she mouthed. Lorelei was glad and sorry; Miia was her age, but still had one year left before she would face the Trials. Lorelei hoped that Annalie would not take her ire out on Miia. Then again, knowing Miia, she was probably hoping Annalie would step out of line and give her an excuse.

Breakfast continued as was routine; Reginleif gave a report on the stores, Alexandra discussed the need for additional armaments, nothing the assembled hadn’t heard a thousand times before. By the time the morning report was concluded, and the gruel and pemmican consumed, most everyone



was ready to get on with their day.

As the dismissal gong sounded, and the bowls were collected, Lorelei turned to Miia. “Wish me luck,” she said, quietly.

“You’ll need it,” shot Annalie.

“You’ve got it,” Miia said. “And Annalie? If you say one more word, you’d best hope your fighting skills have improved.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Reginleif was waiting patiently by the rostrum as Lorelei approached it. She was young for an adept, perhaps forty—Lorelei had childhood memories of her being a playful young woman who loved to engage the toddlers. But her sportiveness seemed to have disappeared in the same battle that took her left eye, replaced by a flinty determination that had propelled her to third-in-command.

“Apprentice Lorelei Voss,” she said, impatiently. “So, you believe yourself ready for The trials.”

It was not a question, but Lorelei nevertheless answered.

“I—I fear that Mistress Herja is correct, Madame Reginleif. I just felt that I should not begin afraid.”

This elicited a raised eyebrow from the commandant, and the barest hint of a smile. “Indeed. Your ability to accept un-comfortable truths has been one of your strengths, Lorelei. You are right; you’ll have enough cause for fear without creating more for yourself.

“At any rate, your success or failure has been placed in my purview; and so I would advise you to be prepared. Mind Mistress Herja’s phrasing: ‘Within one week’s time.’ The Trials can begin for you at any moment. They could begin as soon as our conversation ends; they could begin in the middle of the night. For all you know, your Trials may have already begun.”

Lorelei swallowed hard at that, but simply nodded.

Reginleif looked distant for just a moment. “Lorelei, I have an assignment for you. It’s nothing much—a trivial matter, really. Just a need for you to travel into Pipestone to secure two dozen swords from Jarlath O’Shea. He has already been contracted for the work, and they should be ready; it is simply a matter of you bringing an apprentice and a horse-and-cart, and giving Mr. O’Shea a hundred gold—that’s the balance owed. Do you think you can handle that assignment, Apprentice Lorelei?”

Lorelei bowed slightly. “Yes, m’lady.”

“Very good. I assume you’ll be bringing your friend, Apprentice Miia Aalto, am I correct?”

“If that pleases you, Madame Reginleif,” Lorelei replied, hoping that her sudden vision of a trip into town with Annalie was just nerves.

“Oh, that’s fine; just be aware of your mission first, Lorelei. Remember, you’re not just choosing a traveling companion. You and she will be on your own. You’d best trust Miia in a fight.”

“I trust her with my life.”

“Good. I hope your trust is not misplaced. Return in one hour, and Margarethe will have your mount and your money ready. Dismissed.”

Lorelei turned, her head swimming. She’d never left the encampment except to accompany a senior Valkyrie; she’d never been entrusted with any significant amount of money before.

A hundred pieces of gold was an awful lot of money to entrust a still-training Valkyrie with.

Wait a minute.

This could well be part of the Trials, she thought. This was an easy mission—no hacking or chopping involved. Hopefully, at least. But it was a big responsibility. How easy it would be for her to take the hundred gold pieces and abscond, and start adult life free of burden....

Yes, she realized quickly. This was a test—a test of her commitment to the group. She quickened her pace toward the apprentices’ yurt; she wanted to be on the way the moment Margarethe hitched the wagon.

‡ ‡ ‡

“Show me again.”

“All right,” said Lorelei, opening the coin purse just enough to display the unmistakable shimmer of gold.

“So there are two pieces just for us?”

“One hundred for the swords, two for us. That’s what Reginleif said. Now, mind you, that’s just in case we need to stay the night in town, and I don’t intend to do that. If we need to stop, we’ll camp just outside of town; I’d like to come back with two coins in my hand.”

“I know, I know. But could we at least get dinner at The Drunken Pig? I’ve heard it’s a bit of an adventure.”

“Miia, we’re going to Pipestone to recover swords, not to drink mead and flirt.”

“Hmpf. I’m not sure I like this whole ‘responsibility’ thing you’ve got going, Lor. Next thing I know, you’re going to tell me to get along with Annalie.”

Lorelei had to laugh. “That’ll be the day. You’d think she’d find a way to just be happy for once.”

“Never. She’s got nothing but hate for you, Lor. When you go through the Trials—check for booby traps.”

The two friends dissolved into laughter, until they were silenced by a growl from the back.

“What is it, Radulf?” asked Lorelei, her eyes not diverting from the road ahead as she eased the horses to a stop.

Miia’s sword was already drawn, and as the cart stopped, Lorelei armed herself as well. She rose and surveilled the forest path, but saw no one.

“What is it, girl?” said Lorelei, following the blue eyes of the wolf into the woods.

“An animal, you think?” questioned Miia.

“Maybe,” said Lorelei, quietly. “Here, take the reins. I’ll go in and check it out.”

Lorelei leapt from the cart gracefully, immediately crouching low, moving quickly-but-silently into cover behind a large oak. She slid along its trunk, and exited into the cover of a maple. She continued this movement, from tree to bush, bush back to tree, slowly moving deeper into the woods.

Presently, she found it—an abandoned campsite. The ashes of the fire were still warm. This place had been inhabited recently. Lorelei looked carefully for tracks, and heaved a sigh of relief as she saw them moving out and through the woods, away from the main road. She listened, and thought sure she could hear the sound of someone or other departing further into the forest.

Still, she took no chances, moving backward toward the cart in the same manner as she’d left it. She reached the road, and sheathed her sword. “Someone was camping, but they’ve left. Radulf must have heard them go.”

“Good,” said Miia, following suit. “The last thing I want is to get involved in a battle—not that I won’t fight.”

“I know.”

“Because I’ll fight, you know I will.”

Lorelei rolled her eyes. “I know, Miia.”

“I mean, I’ve killed several dozen men. And I’m quite fine with killing a few more. It’s just that I’d just prefer not to have to when I’m planning to take a nice, fun trip into town with my friend for the first time

in my life.”

“That’s fair,” said Lorelei. “But still, Miia—be on your guard.”

“I always am,” said Miia. “That’s why I’m still alive.”

‡ ‡ ‡

The woods opened up almost right on top of Pipestone, which was a city in the same sense that a kitten is a mountain lion. The sleepy hamlet was the center of what passed for commerce in this region; there was a smith, and a baker, and a miller, and of course, The Drunken Pig, which owed its name to an unfortunate incident involving a farmer, his pig, the Baker’s wife, and two hogsheads of mead—a story that had grown to Brobdignagian proportions in the two generations since the name had been affixed.

Lorelei guided the draft horses down the dusty path, which sort of expanded to become a dusty road; she was guiding them toward the swordsmith’s, which was exactly where Reginleif had said it was, at the end of the strip in a small shack with a scimitar hanging loosely above the door.

“All right, this should only be a minute,” said Lorelei, looking back over her shoulder at the setting sun. “It took longer than I thought it would to get here; we probably will seek a room at the inn. It would be best not to have a hundred gold worth of swords just lying about while we sleep.”

“Shouldn’t we come back here in the morning, and get them then?”

Lorelei considered. “You know, if we did that we could camp outside of town....”

“Come on, Lor! That wasn’t what I was saying!”

Lorelei smiled. “I know. Actually, I think we should stay at the inn—it gives us a place for the smith to find us. But before we rent a bed, it’s probably best if we alert Mr. O’Shea of our intentions. Don’t you think?”

Miia beamed. “See? This is leadership!” she called, as Lorelei descended from the cart with a chuckle.

“Wait with Radulf and the horses,” she said, simply, and she approached the shop.

She ducked through the door and headed into the small shop. A bell tinkled as the door slammed shut. “Hello?” she offered.

“Just a minute! Blast it—Meallan! I’ve got a customer—get a move on, damn ya! ’Sblood, put the daggers down and come give me a hand with these swords. The Amazons are comin’ for ’em tonight or tomorrow, and I’ve got to get ’em together! No, damnation...not those swords—well fine then! Never mind! Come up when you’re blasted good and ready then!”

From the back room came a soot-stained man who looked to be about a thousand years old by face, but much younger given the bulging physique he sported. Lorelei couldn't quite determine if he was seventy or thirty. He was a large man, but he still looked up slightly at Lorelei.

"Jarlath O'Shea, I presume."

"Aye, and you'd be the one of the Amazons, I suppose. Well, your swords are done, and a good lot they are if I do say so myself. Here, I'll have my boy fetch one for you—Meallan! Bring one of the short-swords! Now, damn ya!"

A blandly handsome younger man, perhaps seventeen, emerged from the back carrying a gleaming sword. It was not bejeweled or festooned, and bore no device other than a simple arrow pointing away from the hilt—the sigil of Tyr, God of War. The boy seemed familiar, but Lorelei put it out of her mind.

O'Shea wiped the blade, spun the sword and presented it, hilt-first, to Lorelei. She took it without comment, and taking a step back, lifted into a parrying position. It was nicely balanced, she noted; O'Shea may have been disorganized, but he did not lack skill. Lifting the blade to her eye, she saw it was sharpened to razor-fineness. Dropping the sword toward the ground, she handed it back to O'Shea, hilt-first.

"Very well done, Mr. O'Shea. Ninety gold, then?"

"Actually, lass, it's one hundred; I hope that's not a problem."

"No problem," said Lorelei, smiling evenly. She'd not wanted to deprive the smith, but she had wanted to make sure that he didn't suggest the swords were one hundred and ten.

"Mr. O'Shea, may I ask a favor?"

"Ask away," said O'Shea.

"My friend and I intend to sleep at the inn tonight. Would you be so kind as to have these ready for us to recover in the morning?"

"Well, of course, lass, but why would you want to spend a coin at Drunk Piggy when you could sleep for free here with Meallan and me? We don't lack for room"

"I couldn't trouble you so," said Lorelei, smiling. "But thank you."

"Oh, lass, I insist. Indeed," said O'Shea, his voice lowering, "there might be a way for you to receive a discount on the swords themselves, if you catch my meaning."

Lorelei's smile faded; she had caught the meaning of what O'Shea was saying before he had suggested there was a meaning to catch. "Well, Mr. O'Shea," she said, calmly, "there's just one thing I can say to that."

“Yes, lass?”

She was upon him before he even could react, spinning him around and pulling his right arm nearly out of its socket and throwing him against the wall before drawing her own sword and placing it at his neck. She tugged with her left arm at his right, and he cried out in pain.

“Mr. O’Shea,” said Lorelei, coolly, into his left ear, “did you actually suggest that I would trade myself for a few gold coins?”

“Aargh! Ye beast, I was just thinkin’ of the way you all live up in your camp, with no men around to keep you company. I thought you’d want—”

“You thought very wrong, Mr. O’Shea. I might give my love; I would never sell it. Tell Meallan to get the swords together, and I will gladly pay you fifty for them as long as they’re loaded in my cart before my patience wanes.”

“Fifty! That’s robbery!” O’Shea sputtered.

“Think of it this way; I could simply slit your throat.”

O’Shea closed his eyes, and nodded slightly. “You heard the lass, Meallan. Load their wagon.”

Lorelei looked over at Meallan as he gazed upon her and his father, mouth agape, when suddenly, the world dissolved.

The memory flashed into her mind, filling it fully and taking the space of the very world. She knew it to be a memory. She knew it was not her own.

Meallan was still there—he was closer now. On top of her. Forcing her. No, she had to stop him. She’d told him no. Why wouldn’t he stop?

She’d loved him!

The world swam away, and Lorelei kept her sword from bobbling. If Meallan or O’Shea had noticed her spell, they gave no indication. So Lorelei simply repeated O’Shea’s directive, shocking Meallan into action.

As he quickly began to gather swords haphazardly, Lorelei released O’Shea, but kept her sword high.

“You’ve made a big mistake,” he said. “You’ll never get as much as a dagger from me.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” said Lorelei. “After all, if you refuse to sell to my sisters, I can always come back and avenge my dishonor. And then the rest of them can avenge my dishonor as well.”

O'Shea looked down, beaten. "Please, give me at least fifty-five. The Kobolds have been merciless—they charged me sixty for the metal for your swords. I didn't have but twenty—and they demanded I pay them fifty-five when they return. They'll kill me. They'll kill Meallan."

Lorelei was patiently counting out her money while she listened; after a moment she handed sixty coins to O'Shea. "There, you blackguard. So that you can continue to make swords for the sisterhood. Pray you, save your best blades for us."

"Thank you," he said, falling to his knees. "For your kindness, please, you may take any sword in the shop—any at all."

Lorelei scanned the shop; most of it was disordered, but one blade shone out. It was slightly longer than the swords O'Shea had created for Reginleif, and lighter. She lifted it, and felt the balance; it was perfect, like an extension of her arm. Like it had been waiting for her alone.

"This blade will do, I think," said Lorelei, looking closely at the Sun of Mithras inscribed at the hilt.

"You've a good eye," said O'Shea. "I made that blade for Prince George himself—may God rest his soul. Take it, lass. And a thousand apologies for my behavior."

"Our debt is squared," said Lorelei. "A pleasure doing business with you."

And with that, Lorelei exited.

## *Two*

### *The Madman at the Inn*

There had just been room for twenty-five swords, one wolf, Lorelei, and Miia in the tiny room they'd rented above the tavern at The Drunken Pig. It had cost them three silver pieces, leaving them forty-one gold and three silver after dinner. Lorelei was quite proud of herself—she'd handled her first foray alone into the wider world with aplomb, and she wanted to simply savor the moment. She'd even let Miia order a flagon of mead in celebration, though she herself had stuck to cider. And they were eating a roast of some sort, and potatoes, and spinach—truly, a finer meal than they'd enjoyed in months.

All should have been good, but Lorelei could not shake her reverie in the shop.

It had been the first vision she'd seen, about a year ago now. She remembered waking, screaming, at what she'd thought was an incredibly vivid nightmare.

The flashback in the shop, though—that was something new, and something that she was not entirely sure she owned. A part of her thought that it was not

her own mind that called the memory back in such detail.

Regardless, it shook her. And she found herself dwelling on the memory, and the memory of the first vision, the memory of the memory—replaying it over and over, unable to shut it out.

She had heard echoes of a voice that sounded like hers, felt like it was coming from her, but it was not hers.

“Allen, stop it! Stop! I said no! You’re raping me!”

Rape. It wasn’t a word she was unfamiliar with—a female warrior has to be ready to deal with the consequences of being captured, however unlikely that may be—but it was a word she’d never dreamed she’d say. After all, she’d long believed that a man would have to kill her to force himself upon her; indeed, that was all but certain—and before dying she would certainly ensure that he’d enjoy precious little pleasure from that day forward.

Certainly, Meallan—a strong boy, obviously, but no fighter—he could no more rape her than he could leap to Blue Earth in one jump.

But it had been his face, clear as day, clear as the face of her friend across the table. There was no doubt in her mind.

And she pondered the other weirdness of the vision. He wore a blue tunic with numbers inscribed on it, covering the entire front of the shirt. The style was alien to her, as alien as the feeling of the pants in her dream the previous night, or the mother she’d never had.

And yet it had flooded back to her as real as if it had been her own.

“So, why are you so down?” Miia asked, causing Lorelei to start. “You just destroyed a guy who threatened your honor, and saved the sisterhood forty gold pieces; I can’t imagine this little mission going any better. If this is your Trial, you must’ve passed with flying colors.”

“That would be nice,” said Lorelei. “But I think—”

“NONE OF YOU EXIST!”

Well, that was enough to stop most-anyone mid-sentence, and it had just that effect on Lorelei (and the half-dozen others drinking that night). The man who had shouted that line was staring, wild-eyed; his stool had flown backward with his sudden ascent.

“Ian, calm down,” said the man next to him, quietly—but loudly enough to be heard by everyone, given the entire tavern was holding its breath.

“No, James, no! This world—this whole world is wrong! We’re supposed to have, uh...kars. And kom-pew-tors. And—those candles! Torches! That’s not right! There are lights that are supposed to



light with the flip of a switch. That's the real world! This is just a fantasy land!"

"Go on, Crouch, get your brother out of 'ere. 'E's gone off again," said the innkeeper, approaching the table sternly.

"Of course, Peter. Of course. Just give us a second, please, he's just out of sorts."

"Ad another one of 'is 'spells,' 'as 'e?"

"They aren't spells! My God, why don't you understand? I can see it like it's here—there's a box that shows pictures, plays, music...it exists, confound it, and that's where I'm supposed to be, not trapped back here in medieval land!"

"That's it," said the innkeeper. "If you don't get 'im out of 'ere, Crouch, I'm going to have to get Johann."

"No, no," said James, plunking down a coin and grabbing his brother. "Come on, Ian. Before things get even worse."

James dragged his brother behind him, Ian sputtering all the way. They passed by Lorelei, and her eyes locked with the madman's. And Ian gasped.

"You! You—you know! You have the sight! You have seen what I've seen! Please, tell them! Tell them it's real! James—no, James...stop!"

Lorelei watched James drag his brother out of the inn, and pausing nary a second, rose to follow.

"Lor, what are you doing?" demanded Miia, as she rose.

"He's right," said Lorelei, quietly. "Just now, back in the shop—I recognized the swordsmith's son. He was the rapist, from my visions."

Lorelei let the statement sink in. Her friend's eyes were wide. "How can that be?"

"I—I don't know, Miia. But it was him; it was a face I'd never forget, that's for sure. There has to be some sort of connection." She gestured to the exiting man. "I need to talk to him."

"He's mad. And I think you might be, too."

"Maybe," averred Lorelei, "but I have to get answers."

Lorelei walked out the door, and Miia followed quickly after. Ian sat slumped on the ground, while James spoke to him quietly and earnestly, trying to calm his spirit. Those efforts were quickly made useless as Ian spied Lorelei.

"You came," he said, smiling, and rising unsteadily to his feet. "Ian Crouch, nice to meet you."

“Lorelei Voss. How did you know about my dreams?” she asked, directly.

“The sighted can often tell someone has the sight. You’ll probably soon be able to recognize us, too. There aren’t many, Mithras knows. But it’s good to meet someone who has seen the world as it truly is.”

“I don’t know that I have,” said Lorelei, quietly. “I know I have been a Valkyrie since I was seven years old; the world I’ve seen in my dreams is...different.”

“Yes, different. And better. Nobody dying of gout, no civil war, no bloody Kobolds, that’s for sure.”

His eyes seemed to calm somewhat. “But...no magic. No chivalry. No gorgeous Amazon warriors walking around—begging your pardon, but it’s true.”

Lorelei smiled weakly. “This is not the night to try a line, Ian.”

“No, it’s not,” he said, soberly. “It never is.” He heaved a heavy sigh.

“Look, that world is a different one, to be sure. But it’s predictable, comprehensible. This place...it’s like a giant vomited out half the myths mankind ever dreamed. There’s no balance here, no firm ground to get your feet against. That’s all I want—balance.

“You—in your dreams, what do you see of the world?”

Lorelei thought quite some time before slowly answering, “I have a family. A mom, a dad. A brother, I think. I’m not as strong as I am here, though. I have a memory of being attacked—I could have fought him off here. Not there.”

Ian nodded, soberly. “It’s not a perfect world, sadly. But neither is this one. Maybe you were attacked in that world—but you don’t have to fight marauding vandals there.”

“Do you know why we can see the other world?” Lorelei asked.

“No. Not that I haven’t tried to suss it out. I studied at Neri—oh, you wouldn’t know it to see me know, but I was a bright boy. One of my professors there, Zvonimir Pasternak, taught us about the idea of parallel worlds. I started having the visions then, and I asked him whether I was seeing reality, or if I was just insane.

“‘Mr. Crouch,’ he said to me, ‘I have peered through the curtains myself, though with only middling success. You are seeing another world—one specific world. A permutation of your existence lives there.’”

Lorelei paused, before asking, “What does that mean?”

“Haven’t the slightest idea. He tried to show me using mathematics—something about  $n$  possible worlds and  $x$  possible gateways, but it was beyond me. Well, it shouldn’t have been, but by then the visions were coming more often, and I was starting to get confused.”

Lorelei's heart sunk. As if reading her mind, Crouch said, "Don't worry, my dear. I'm far worse off than most. I've met a dozen—well, now a baker's dozen—people who have these visions. And all save yours truly have been able to accept and adjust to them. I've no doubt you will too."

"I hope so," Lorelei said, quietly, as she watched Ian seem to collapse inward, his emotion spent.

"I should get my brother home," James said, lovingly stroking his brother's hair. Then, sotto voce to Lorelei and Miia, he added, "Thank you for calming him down."

"Don't mention it," Lorelei said, thinking that she was now more confused than she'd been before. Well, at least the madman seemed placid. "Good night James. And good night, Ian. It was good to meet you."

"Good night, my dear. Madam," he added, nodding to Miia.

They had no sooner turned to the inn when suddenly, Ian cried out, "Voss! Voss! Dear Mithras!"

Miia wheeled, hand on hilt. "What are you on about now, madman?"

"Not you, her! You must be the Fox!"

"Excuse me?"

"?There came a Valkyrie with second sight/The Fox would take the worlds and put them right.' You're her! You're the chosen one!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You must go to Neri. Seek out Zvonimir. Zvonimir can help! Oh, please, you must!"

"I can't," said Lorelei. "I'm needed back in Ravenwood."

"There are other Valkyries. Her, that one for example—she can do it! She can tell them why you had to go. You have to go! Listen, the Sacred Tome of the Gates foretells you—?Voss' means ?fox,' and Valkyrie—well, there aren't many of you running around with the sight. Look, it must be you. You have to go to Zvonimir! I'm too addled, but he is brilliant. He'll be able to tell you what steps you must take to end this world, and bring back the true world!"

"I can't, Ian," said Lorelei. She started to say more, but sensing the futility in reasoning, she concluded, quietly, "Fare thee well."

"You can't escape your destiny!" he cried out as she turned and returned to the inn. "You must go to Zvonimir! Please! I can't take another day without Burger King!"

"Ian," they heard James ask as they disappeared back into the inn, "who in Mithras' name is the Burger King?"

“I don’t know,” said Ian, plaintively. “But I know his food was delicious.”

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Lorelei lay in the bed, feeling the straw in her back, staring at the ceiling. Radulf was dozing quietly in the corner, and Miia slept soundly, but Lorelei couldn’t help but replay the madman’s words.

Her destiny? To go to Neri, to seek out...Zanzibar? Zasparrilla? Zoetrope? The name escaped her. Pasternak. Professor Pasternak. That she remembered.

Did “Voss” really mean “fox?” She didn’t know. The name had been given to her at the orphanage—a family name for a girl without a family. They had named her for her hair, they’d said. (She’d known her name was Lorelei. It was one of the few words she was willing to say when they found her. They wouldn’t change that.)

Well, foxes did have red fur; it could be. But she couldn’t be sure. For all she knew, “Voss” meant “strawberry” or “sunset” or even “grass.” She had no idea of whether the nurses even knew what her name meant, or if they’d just come up with a reason to answer her question.

But even if it did mean “fox”—why should she give up her life to go to Neri, of all places? There was nothing there but a university, and even that was a small one; everyone knew of the great schools at Blue Earth or Two Rivers. Neri was something of an afterthought.

And yet he’d been so sure, and dead on in what he’d said, at least that which had been coherent. He’d known of her dreams. How could that be? Perhaps he was right. Perhaps she was chosen.

No, no, that couldn’t be—he was by his own admission confused. Could she trust him to remember some old saying accurately? The actual book probably spoke of a blacksmith named Buffer, who would take the worlds and make them suffer. Lorelei sighed, and thought it very possible that there was no Zvonimir Pasternak at all, only the insane ramblings of a lunatic.

No, she couldn’t abandon the sisterhood. Not now. Not ever.

She finally decided that when she returned to Ravenwood, she would meet with Herja. She would tell her of her dreams and visions. She would tell her of the madman and his revelation.

Herja would know what to do. She always had before.

Content in that thought, Lorelei allowed herself, finally, to drift off to sleep.

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“What are you up to, Lori?”

She turned to the voice. He was young, tall, relatively handsome, with black hair cut short, an odd white shirt with some sort of heraldry emblazoned on it, those odd blue trousers that she’d felt in her last dream on her own legs.

“Not much, Brian, surfing,” she heard herself answer in a voice that was both her own and not her own.

“What’cha looking at?”

“Wikipedia,” came the odd word.

“Good,” he said. “I was worried you were reading the news.”

“No. God no. I’ve had enough of the press for a lifetime. No, I’m looking up Valkyries.”

“Valkyries? Like Ride of the Valkyries?”

“Something like that.”

“Why? Have you been listening to Wagner?”

“No way! That’s worse than the nerdcore stuff you’re into.”

“So why Valkyries?”

“I don’t want to tell you. You’ll laugh.”

“Come on. I’m your little brother. Would I laugh at you?”

“Yes.”

“True,” said the boy—Brian—smiling. “But I won’t laugh about this. Probably.”

Lorelei felt herself roll her eyes, and turn them back to a box that was glowing with a strange light. There were words and pictures on the screen. What magic was this? “I had a dream I was a Valkyrie.”

“A Valkyrie. That’s kinda cool. They were warriors, right?” asked Brian.

“‘The choosers of the slain.’ Really, I was more a shieldmaiden than a Valkyrie, I guess. At least, I don’t think I was a goddess. But I could definitely kick ass.”

“That must have been some dream. You watching Xena reruns? Or just dreaming of ways to kill Allen?”

“I don’t know where it came from,” her voice said. “Not that I’m opposed to Allen’s death.”

“But it was such a clear dream—the only reason I know it was a dream is that I’m not a Valkyrie. At least, I don’t think I am.”

“You were a backup keeper; I can’t see you marauding through France.”

“Iceland. At least, that’s where they were from, originally. Anyhow, I’ve surfed enough for the day. You going to see Brittany tonight?”

“Yeah. Lori?”

“What?”

“You know I would kill him.”

Lorelei felt the long sigh. “That’s sweet, Bri. It really is. But I’m not having you wreck your life over him; I’m not going to. He’ll go to jail, and that’s enough. Anyhow....”

Lorelei didn’t hear the rest of the sentence. The world suddenly collapsed inward on itself, and she found herself sitting bolt upright in the bed.

Radulf rose quickly, and gave her a quizzical look.

“I don’t know either, girl,” Lorelei said, shaking her head. “I need to get back and talk to Herja.”

She scooted backward and leaned up against the wall, looking out the window into the night. She sat there silently until the sun rose.

### *Three*

#### *The Meeting With Herja*

The journey back to Ravenwood was traveled in silence. Lorelei looked over her shoulder often. Often enough that Miia finally felt compelled to say something.

“He was crazy, Lor. You do know that, right?”

“He knew about that other world,” came the numb reply

“Yeah, well maybe you’re crazy too,” said Miia, before quickly correcting herself. “Look, Lor, I know you think you see what you see is real, and maybe it is—but that doesn’t mean he was someone worth paying attention to.”

“I dreamed last night about the box with pictures on it,” Lorelei said, absently. “I was reading about Valkyries. I had dreamt I was one.”

“You are a Valkyrie!”

“Am I? Or am I dreaming this?”

Miia shook her head. “Lor, snap out of it. You’re a Valkyrie Apprentice, you have taken the heads of three dozen men, you’re soon to become a full-fledged Valkyrie, and at the rate you’ve ascended, you’ll be an Adept in a dozen winters.”

“I know, Miia,” said Lorelei, heavily. “I really do. It’s just—you haven’t seen the visions like I have. They’re not dreamlike at all. They’re...” she fumbled for the word, before settling on, “...real.”

“Well, maybe you do have second sight, and maybe you have seen another world. But you can’t trust a madman on what to do about it. Talk to Reginleif. Talk to Alexandra. Talk to Herja. But you can’t go off to Neri—not without their blessing.”

Lorelei sighed, and gave a smile. “You’re right, of course,” she said. “It’s what I’m going to do. I’ll talk to Herja. She’ll know what to do.”

“Good. Just so we’re clear, no matter what, I’m going with you. I’m not going to suffer Annalie’s attitude while you’re off on some misbegotten quest.”

Lorelei laughed at that. She was lucky, she thought, to have a friend like Miia. “Don’t worry, Miia. I’m not going without Herja’s blessing. I am a Valkyrie, right?”

“You will be soon.”

“Right. If Herja tells me to go, I’ll go—but I’ll bring you with, and I’ll come back. I have duties to attend to. And don’t worry, Miia. No matter what, I’ll be around. And soon, Annalie will have to obey my orders.”

“Ooh...that’s something I hadn’t thought about. That’ll be fun. I can’t wait to see Annalie choke back some snide comment. Please, tell me you’ll make sure to give your first order to her when I’m around? Pretty please?”

“Miia, I wouldn’t let you miss it,” Lorelei replied, idly daydreaming about the look on Annalie’s face when she had to salute her. By the time the cart reached the blind turn toward the encampment, she was lost in a pleasant daydream, and her concerns about visions had almost faded away. Had she been paying more attention, she may have caught a lone growl out of Radulf; as it was, the cart continued on its bumpy path.

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It was late in the day when they finally reached Ravenwood. Of all the places they’d set up camp, Lorelei thought this was the prettiest. It was a large clearing in the middle of a forest of oak and pine, with a creek running north of the encampment that led a few miles down to a smallish lake full of pike. She was saddened to know they’d be leaving soon; Herja’s comments had said as much. In a few weeks, perhaps a month or two at most, they’d be striking their

yurts, loading the carts, and sallying forth into battle on the side of those who Odin had moved to ask for help. Lorelei prayed that they'd find their way back here when they were done, or that their next home would be as pleasant.

At any rate, where the Valkyries lived, that was Ravenwood; it was not the land, or the tents, or the sacred scrolls, but her sisters that made it so.

Reginleif strode purposefully to the cart as they entered the center of the encampment. As Lorelei pulled the reins, Reginleif simply said, "It is good to see you again, Lorelei. Apprentice Aalto. I see you have the swords."

"Yes, m'lady. And I have forty-one gold for you in return."

Reginleif smiled at the news. "I imagine there's a story behind that."

"It's a good one, m'lady," said Miia.

"It's not that good," said Lorelei, modestly. "Mr. O'Shea acted up a bit, that's all."

"Oh really," said Reginleif. "I assume you didn't kill Mr. O'Shea, because if you did, I expect more than forty-one of those back."

"We just...came to an understanding."

"Ah. Good. Can't have the best swordsmith in a hundred miles dead, even if he is a lecherous old fool. I assume he blubbered about the Kobolds?"

"Yes, he did," said Lorelei, feeling suddenly a bit taken.

"Well, he should. With what he owes them, he'll be lucky to survive the winter. But by then, we'll be on the march. Let's see—ah yes, all twenty-four...and another?"

"He gave that to me in gratitude. I'd like to keep it for my own use...with your permission, of course."

Reginleif smiled broadly. "I think you've earned it, Lorelei," she said, handing the sword to her. Lorelei placed it on her belt, removing the sword she'd carried as an apprentice and laying it to the side of the others. Reginleif nodded, and said, "Apprentice, you are dismissed—report to your quarters. Lorelei—with me."

Lorelei nodded to Miia, who was giving her friend a broad grin. Lorelei wanted to return the expression—Reginleif hadn't smiled that warmly at her since she was eight. As it was, Lorelei simply said, "Miia, can you please get Radulf something to eat? I'm sure she must be hungry." Lorelei and Reginleif headed to the adepts' quarters; she hoped this was a good sign.

"You'll need to return the coins to Margarethe, of course."



“Of course, m’lady.”

“You’re sure there weren’t fifty at some point?”

“No, m’lady! I should say, there’s also two silver left; I’ll give those to Margarethe as well.”

“At your convenience. You wouldn’t have brought back forty only to hide ten; if you were dishonest, you wouldn’t have brought back anything.”

They reached the entrance to the quarters. Reginleif turned to Lorelei, and said simply, “Herja has asked me to bring you to her as soon as you return.”

“M’lady?”

“I’m not sure why, to be honest. She seemed concerned about you, Lorelei.”

“Concerned?” Lorelei felt her heart sink. Maybe she wasn’t doing as well as she’d thought.

Reginleif smiled tightly. “Don’t worry, Lorelei. She’s concerned about you personally, not about your performance. I daresay, you passed my test.”

Lorelei’s head snapped up. “Your test?”

“I had told Herja that if O’Shea was his usual idiotic self, you’d end up taking twenty off the price for the insult; forty is a spectacular performance. Getting a sword off him—and a fine one at that—you must have scared him but good.”

Reginleif clapped her right hand on Lorelei’s shoulder. “You’re going to be a fine Valkyrie, Lorelei. I’ve no doubt of that. Now go on and talk to Herja. I’ll see you later tonight.”

Lorelei bowed slightly, and could not keep the smile off her face this time. She turned, and headed into the tent.

Herja sat in the center at a small writing desk, which was bathed in light streaming from an open flap above. “Please, sit,” said Herja, without looking up.

Lorelei approached cautiously; she loved Herja like a daughter loves her mother, but that didn’t mean she’d spent hours on end with her.

She felt the force of Herja’s personality as she always had; it was a tangible thing, a force that flowed about the leader, supporting and embracing those who came into contact with it. Lorelei sat in the chair, in the midst of Herja’s presence, and said quietly, “Madame Reginleif said you wanted to see me.”

Herja looked up, her crystal blue eyes sparkling as always. “Yes, child. I did. More to the point, I should say that I knew you wanted to see me.”

“How did you know?”

“I have my ways, my dear. You have been having visions.”

Lorelei couldn't help but answer, “Yes, I have.”

“They seem real to you—as if you are experiencing them.”

“Yes, they do. It's like...it's like I'm living another life.”

Herja bowed her head a moment, and said, “Tell me of them.”

Lorelei told her of the dreams, of the vivid vision of the assault, and the visions that followed. She told her of Ian and his pronouncements, of his claim that she was chosen. She told her everything she could think to, and repeated anything she considered important. Through it all, Herja simply listened, impassively, occasionally nodding or asking a question here or there. Herja had lit the candle on her desk by the time the story was done, and the dinner gong had come and gone.

“Am I insane, mistress?” asked Lorelei, finally. “Am I going to end up like Ian Crouch, hysterical and mad, unable to accept her reality?”

“You're too strong for that,” said Herja, crisply. “Besides, I have seen no indication that you are in denial about reality.”

“Well, I'm having visions.”

“Yes, child. And they are visions of reality. A different reality, perhaps, but reality nonetheless.”

Lorelei looked at her supreme commander, mouth agape. She didn't know quite what to say, so Herja spoke.

“I cannot tell you these visions will go away; indeed, I sense they may grow stronger. Simply know that you are peering through a darkened window at a place that you can never truly belong to—a reality that is altogether different than this one. It is neither better nor worse. But it is not yours.”

“What of Ian? He said I should travel to Neri, to seek out, uh...”

“Zvonimir Pasternak. I know of him. He is said to be a brilliant, if odd man. I do not know what it is Ian thinks you will do, other than unlock this other world to him. If that is what he wills, he will be truly disappointed. As for you...it is likely our journey this fall will take us by Neri. I shall endeavor to set camp near enough that you and I can travel together to meet with Professor Pasternak. Would that be acceptable to you?”

Lorelei's heart jumped. “You mean it? Oh, thank you, mistress! I—I hate to say this, but there was part of me that almost thought I should go straightaway. I apologize for those thoughts.”

Herja smiled. “Child, I would be concerned had you not considered going. All of life is weighing the consequences of our actions. You had to consider what your options were. Only by considering and rejecting the wrong path could you prove yourself worthy of the right one. Lorelei, you have chosen well.” Herja stretched, and said with finality, “It’s getting late; you should get some hardtack and jam from the kitchen. It seems we’ve missed dinner, unfortunately”

“Yes, mistress,” said Lorelei, starting to rise.

“One last thing,” said Herja, eyes gleaming. “You are no doubt concerned about the Trials. I want to let you know something.”

Lorelei froze, and then sat back down.

“You have already guessed, I think, that the Trials are not about your fighting ability. If you were not a skilled fighter, you would be dead by now; you have come through twelve battles, if my count is correct, since you reached womanhood.

”The Trials are about facing temptations and choosing the sisterhood over yourself. You passed Reginleif’s test, I am sure. I had a lovely challenge planned for you as my test, but it occurs to me that by returning against the desire to see your questions answered, you have already proven yourself to my satisfaction.

“Alexandra must be consulted as well, though I expect she will take my word for it. It isn’t official until then, but I see no reason not to tell you now—you have passed the Trials, Lorelei. You will be a Valkyrie.”

Lorelei had to restrain herself from hugging Herja. As it was, she found herself crying tears of joy.

“Mistress, I don’t know how—”

The rest of her sentence was drowned out by the sound of the alarm gong.

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Lorelei and Herja burst out of the yurt, swords at the ready. They walked into a scene already in chaos. Dozens of black-clad men were engaged with the Valkyries at the edge of camp, and more were rushing on both sides. It was obvious that the camp had been caught unaware—and obvious the situation was already grim.

“Go to the front lines, and take command of the Apprentices!” barked Herja.

“Mistress?”

“Get them into position to take the attack. If the Cadre wants Ravenwood, they’re going to have to kill us all to get it.”

Lorelei was already on the run as she tried to process this information. The Cadre? Who was the Cadre? And why were they attacking?

But she knew now was not the time to answer those questions. Now there was only following orders, giving orders, parrying, fighting, and if need be, dying for the sisterhood and for Odin.

The Apprentices were lined up haphazardly at the periphery of the front lines. "Dress that line! Archers to the front! Are we Fowler's army, or are we Valkyries?"

"Why are you giving commands?" asked Annalie.

"Because Herja has ordered me to take command of the Apprentices. Miia, Satu, Annalie, Hrund, each of you take charge of two of the juniors. We're going into the battle. Mist, take the younger archers, join Margarethe's line and do your duty. Hrist, take charge of those too young to fight, rally them by the armory and start running weapons to the front. Come on!"

The Apprentices broke into their contingent groups, not one of them questioning orders. Lorelei and the others ran behind the lines to fortify their weakest point. Along the way, Lorelei leapt over the fallen body of Alexandra, not pausing for a second. She saw Reginleif, and shouted quickly, "M'lady, orders?"

"Unto the breach!" Reginleif replied, pointing. Wordlessly, Lorelei led the platoon to a break where the black-clad warriors were starting to pour through.

"All right," said Lorelei, "Stand your ground and prepare for attack!"

And then they were battling, swords flying. Lorelei dispatched two quickly, one with a stab to the heart, another's head cleaved from his body on the backswing. A third was upon her almost instantly, bringing his sword down hard on her shield; she absorbed the blow and leg-whipped him, bringing him down to the ground; she quickly eviscerated him, and leaping his body, brought her sword through a fourth's eye.

"There are too many!" called young Svipul from Miia's left. "We can't hold them off!"

"Then we die fighting!" shouted Lorelei, steel blazing. She spun around, and saw a dagger flying through the air, closing too quickly for her to dodge, aimed right at her heart.

Suddenly, a blur of blonde hair flew into her vision and fell to the ground.

"Annalie!" Lorelei called out, as a sudden spray dyed the hair to magenta.

The warrior had seen the dagger flying and had done her duty, protecting her commander from harm, no matter the cost.

Lorelei looked up at the man who had thrown it. He stared back soullessly, eyes too dark to read. Leaping over her mortally wounded comrade, she came at him hard. "I may die today," she said, as she approached him. "But you will pay dearly for that before I do!"

In seconds, she had disarmed him, literally; she removed his head with a twirl as she turned to face the line. To her horror she saw that it was obliterated, replaced by a hundred charging enemies. Reginleif lay fallen, a sword through her stomach; Satu had lost her left arm and was lying pained on the ground. There was no sign of Miia.

She turned tail and ran, calling out an order to fall back, concerned that hers was the only voice calling. She hoped to find enough Valkyries that they could regroup and make a final, desperate stand. They would die, but not before they took as many of these bastards as they could.

It was seconds later that she felt the strike of the staff against her head.

She fell to the ground, head aching. As she slipped from consciousness, her last thought was that she was glad she'd died a Valkyrie.

She was ready for Odin to take her.

‡ ‡ ‡

"So tell me about the attack."

She was sitting in a chair, facing a woman who looked remarkably like Herja. She would have thought it was Herja if not for the odd outfit she wore. It was a vision, like the others. Odd that she should have one now, here, at the end of her life.

"Well," said her voice that was not hers, "we were just...making out a bit. I'll admit, I was willing to do a bit more than nothing, but...I didn't want to go any further."

"You told him no?"

"I told him he was raping me."

The woman leaned back in her chair, and put her fingers to her mouth. "And it was not long after that you started having these dreams."

"Yes. I...well, I started dreaming I was a Valkyrie. Really vivid dreams, almost real. And I know what you're going to say; they're a subconscious reaction to the powerlessness I felt. And that's great, except it doesn't tell me how to stop them."

The woman smiled at that. "You're very self-aware."

"Yeah, I try."

“Well...you’ve done all the right things. Your attacker was arrested, right?”

“Yeah.”

“In the last three months you’ve been volunteering at a rape crisis hotline—helping women who’ve gone through the same things as you.”

“That’s true, but—”

The woman cut her off. “And you haven’t shied away from publicity. An all-state quarterback arrested for rape—the media would have kept your identity private, but I’ve seen you on television more than once.”

“I don’t have anything to be ashamed of. I didn’t rape anyone.”

“Well,” said the woman, smiling just as Herja had smiled, “it seems to me that you’re plenty strong already. You just need to believe that yourself. After all, even a great warrior loses a battle now and then, right?”

And with that, the vision slipped away.

‡ ‡ ‡

“Do you think anyone’s left alive?”

“Who cares? If anyone is alive, they won’t be for very long.”

“Should we start looting the corpses? That one there has a nice sword.”

“Looting isn’t Oz’s style. We’ve got enough weapons. This was a tactical strike, Jake. Get them before they can get us. Besides, if anyone comes across this mess, Oz would want them to see that all these great warriors died with their weapons at the ready. He likes scaring the piss out of people.”

Lorelei was aware of immense pain in her skull; she didn’t want to be awake. Indeed, she was surprised that it was still possible for her to be so. But she was, and she listened intently to the two men, and gripped her sword tightly. She’d go down swinging.

“You sure? Some of them might have money.”

“I’m sure. Crikey—look at that one, eh? Shame she had to die.”

“Steve, you’re always thinking with organs other than your brain.”

“Yeah, well, occupational hazard, mate. I’m around too many Myrmidons and not enough women. I’ll be happy when we get out of this hellhole.”

She heard boots approaching her head. “So pretty. Such a shame. Ah well.

Charges set?”

“Yep, we’re ready to light the fuse.”

“Great. And the officers?”

“Already moved out.”

“Bonzer. Let’s get back to the gate. Ozymandias will be pleased.”

The boots walked away, and there was silence.

Lorelei lay on her back, not moving a muscle. She heard horses in the distance, but nobody else. She waited patiently. As dearly as she wanted revenge, she knew she alone could not deliver it. But perhaps, if there were others....

Deciding to chance it she opened her eyes and sat up, and immediately regretted it. The world swam dizzily, and the flames of the bonfire—half-collapsed though it was—seemed to sear her retinas.

But far, far worse was what she saw by the light of that fire.

They were all there—Annalie and Satu, Reginleif and Hrund, Margarethe and Svipul—she stopped naming them as she got to ten, stopped counting them as she got to twenty; she saw at least two hundred of her sisters, dead.

She got up wobbly but determined, and carrying her sword in a defensive position fell back slowly; she had to get to the armory and see what had happened to the children—and what’s more, she had two people and a wolf that she had not yet seen; she had to know their fate.

She kicked her way through debris, staying close to the cover of the broken yurts, until she reached the armory. It was a disaster area; she turned away after she saw little Brunhilde laying, throat cut, in the arms of Hrist, who had been run through with a spear. The other children’s corpses littered the entryway.

They had died warriors, too.

Weakly, Lorelei went on. She continued to the stable; she had understood the men meant to burn the rest of the camp. Perhaps she could at least free the animals. That was all she had left.

Don’t let me be the last, Father, she prayed. She reached the entrance to the stables, and there were the two people she had most dearly hoped not to see.

Miia lay slumped up against the canvas, holding Herja’s head in her lap.

Neither was moving.

Lorelei didn't want to approach them, didn't want to know for sure. But she knew she had to do so, owed it to them. She saw in moments that Herja was dead, her eyes open, dull, and uncomprehending. She gave a quick bow of her head, and winced at the pain.

Miia's mail had been run through, her tunic stained the same magenta as Annalie's hair. Lorelei looked away, and saw Radulf, laying with her head on her paws, with blood on her muzzle, staring at Miia. The wolf let out a low whine.

"I know, girl," said Lorelei, tears clouding her vision. "I know."

Suddenly, she heard a stirring behind her. "Lor?"

She whirled, and saw Miia's eyes opened, slightly. "I—couldn't stop her bleeding," she said, gesturing weakly to their commander.

"I know, Miia. It's okay."

"Where are the others?"

Lorelei looked down, trying to hold it together. She didn't want to say it, but she knew it to be true.

"There are no others, Miia. We're the only ones left."

Miia leaned back, and closed her eyes. "You've got to go. I'm not gonna last long."

"I won't leave you here, Miia."

"I'll be dead by tomorrow."

"Then I'll stand in prayerful vigil for you. Can you walk?"

Miia grimaced. "No. Lorelei—"

"Then I'll carry you."

Lorelei moved Herja off her friend's lap, and lifted Miia carefully. She walked into the stable, placed her on the cart they'd returned in but a few hours and a lifetime ago, and whistled to Radulf. "Come on, girl. You stay back here with Miia. Keep her company."

The wolf jumped onto the cart and lay down next to the injured apprentice, licking her face once.



Lorelei hitched up the wagon more quickly than she ever had before, and within ten minutes they were leaving Ravenwood for the last time.

They were not two minutes out when the explosions came, shaking the ground and spooking the horses momentarily. Lorelei kept them driving forward, not wanting to see Ravenwood, engulfed as it was in flames.

She did not know where they were going, or what they were to do. All she knew was that the life she had led was now over.

#### *Four*

##### *The Uruisg*

They had ridden eastward for hours, and Lorelei wanted desperately to rest. She had considered turning south, toward Pipestone, but she'd decided against it; there was no healer there who could help her friend do anything but die.

Instead, she'd swung into the rising sun, and driven the cart overland until they'd reached the Low Road, which would take them to Lavender, then Spring Glen, and after that, Neri.

She knew it would be nightfall before they reached Lavender, and then another two until Neri; she knew also that Miia probably would not last that long. But she had to try.

Of course, Neri was also home to Zvonimir Pasternak; whether Miia lived or died, Lorelei knew she would have to seek him out. She had nothing else to do. She had no family, her comrades (save Miia) were dead, and aside from two horses, a cart, a sword, and forty-odd gold pieces, she had nothing.

She had nothing at all that she truly cared about.

"Lor," came a hoarse croak from behind her.

"Yes, Miia?" Lorelei, replied, trying to keep her tone even.

"If you can...find some water...I'm...really thirsty. It's...no...rush..."

"I'll get some now," said Lorelei, cursing her haphazard preparation; she should at least have grabbed a full wineskin and some pemmican.

Fortunately, it wasn't too much farther before she heard the whoosh of running water. Pulling off to the side of the road, she bade Radulf to guard Miia. She looked over her shoulder at her friend, who lay still, her breathing nearly imperceptible.

“Can I get you anything else?” she asked. “Maybe some berries?”

“Just...water. Thanks, Lor...glad I get...to die with you.”

“You’re not dead yet, Miia,” said Lorelei, smiling and gripping a small flask, avoiding even thinking that it wouldn’t be long.

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei walked the hundred yards or so into the forest, to a slight clearing where a small babbling brook flowed. It wasn’t big, but the water was clear, and that was all she cared about. It was a good four feet or so down to the creek; she dropped her shoes by the side of the stream and sat down on the bank, preparing to jump in.

“Watch it!” a still, small voice called out.

It’s not easy to leap to your feet from a sitting position with your legs dangling, and Lorelei certainly didn’t make it appear so; nevertheless, she was on her feet as quickly as possible, head throbbing, sword drawn, far more ready than she had any right to be. “Show yourself,” she growled, “or prepare to face death.”

This fearsome display was met by peals of derisive laughter. “Ah, lassie. That’s the funniest thing I’ve seen in a long while. A wee bit jumpy, aren’t we?”

“Show yourself, coward!”

“Better a coward than a corpse, I say.”

Lorelei dropped her sword slightly. “Look, I’ve got no time for games. My camp just got annihilated, and I’ve got a friend dying back there who just wants water before she passes. All I want to do is to give it to her. So please, don’t cross me today.”

There was a short silence, before finally, the small voice said, “I’m sorry, lass. I did not know. You’ll have no problem from me.”

Lorelei raised an eyebrow at this. Sheathing her sword, she asked again, “Where are you?”

“I’m at your feet. And I’d appreciate it if you’d forego the snide comments; I’ve heard ’em from your kind before.”

Lorelei took a step back, and looked down at a foot-tall man. Well, “man” wasn’t exactly right, though he was male. His hair was ragged and his beard long, red, and scruffy. He was dressed in a plaid, blue-green tartan that had seen better days.

“You’re a brownie,” observed Lorelei, as she kneeled down to get a better look.

“Brownie?” I’ll thank you to not conflate my kind with that lot. A bunch of wanton hedonists, them. Nay, lass, I’m an uruisg, and I’d ask you not to forget it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Lorelei, “I meant no offense.”

“None taken, lass. They’re a good lot, really, just a bit foolish. Where are you bound for?”

“Neri.”

He smiled at this. “Neri, you say? Interesting. Ah, but where are my manners? Malcolm MacChaluim, at your service,” he said, with a deep bow.

“Lorelei Voss. Listen, I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. MacChaluim, but my friend—”

“Yes, yes, your friend. By the road you say? Go and fetch your water, lass. I’m sorry to have delayed you.”

“No worries,” said Lorelei, rising to her feet. “Safe journey.”

“Aye, lass. And the same to you and yours.”

Lorelei stretched, and walked back to the stream.

It took her some time to get down to the water, get the flask filled, and get back up; she hoped Miia had lasted long enough for her to get at least one last drink.

“Lor?”

She heard the yelp about twenty yards away, and broke into a dead sprint which she did not break until she reached the cart.

“I’m here, Miia. I have the water.”

“I think...I’m hallucinating.”

“I’m the one who sees things, remember?”

“Yeah...but...Radulf is...growling at...tiny man.”

It was true, Lorelei saw as she walked around the edge of the cart. “Malcolm?”

“Aye, lass. If you could please ask your dog here to not eat me, I’d like to take a look at your friend’s wound.”

Lorelei frowned, but said, simply, “Down, Radulf. He’s...well, I don’t think he’s

dangerous. You're not dangerous, are you?"

"Only to those who cross me. And milkmaids. Ah, accursed milkmaids—but that's a long story. Now, let's see here. Quite a wound you've sustained, lass. Half as long as I am. Hmm." He reached inside the gash in Miia's side, and she gasped in pain.

"Don't hurt her!" cried Lorelei, preparing to pull the man off her friend. But Malcolm simply held up one hand.

"I'm going to need palmarosa, rosemary, peppermint, and...yes, violet, dearie."

"For what?"

"Well, I assume you'd like your friend to survive the next hour. Perhaps I'm being presumptuous."

Lorelei did a triple take. "You're saying you can heal her?"

"I'm saying I can try, lass. Do you know the plants I'm talking about?"

"I—think so."

"Good. Gather as many as you can. The violet and the rosemary are the ones I'm most interested in. And then, I've got—" he looked into his jacket, and cursed. "Oh, damnation. That can't be right."

"What?"

"Well, I suppose it just can't be helped," he muttered. Turning back to Lorelei, he said, "It seems, lass, that this potion will use the last of my whisky. Somehow I'll survive, I suppose. Well, get going! This potion won't make itself. Now, you my large wounded lassie—you don't go falling asleep on me. I mean it—I won't be able to move if you do."

Lorelei moved quickly back to the woods, not knowing or caring if Malcolm knew what he was doing. She knew in her heart that he was right: Miia would probably not last the hour without attention. If he failed, well, he failed. But if there was any chance he could succeed....

Lorelei cast her memory back to her training. Rosemary, she knew—they'd gathered it by the bushel; Herja said it was good medicine, and she had no reason to distrust her mentor now. She tripped across some violets while looking for the mint, then tripped across mint while searching for palmerosa. Palmerosa, of course, was difficult; she finally came across something she thought might possibly be it, and rushed the gathered plants back to Malcolm.

He was stirring water in a small pot over a small fire, occasionally sticking a finger in, swearing, and retrieving it. "Ah, lass, what have you got for me? Rosemary, good, spearmint—well, it'll do. Violets, excellent. And—lassie, is this sandalwood?"

“I don’t know. I thought it might be palmerosa.”

“Well, it isn’t. But it’ll work in a pinch. Well done.”

The next few minutes were spent in virtual silence, with Malcolm furiously pummeling ingredients into powder and tossing them in. Lorelei looked back and forth from her friend to her wolf to their strange companion, hoping beyond hope.

At last, with a satisfied chuckle, Malcolm announced, “Now, just a little whisky, and a little bit of something special....”

He reached into his bag and removed a smallish pouch, which he emptied almost completely into the pot. There was a rush, and suddenly a six-foot-high pink flame jetted from the cauldron.

“Whee! Now that’s a potion! Here, lass, I’d pick it up, but I’m inclined to believe you’ll be able to handle it easier.”

Lorelei took his suggestion, and using her sleeves to blunt the heat, lifted up the pot and waited for instructions.

“All right, quickly, to your friend’s side. Pour this over the wound—steady now.”

Looking at Miia’s closed eyes, she offered up a prayer to Odin. “This one’s not ready yet, Father. If we are the choosers of the slain—I do not choose her. Please. Help me.”

And then she began to pour the inky liquid.

Miia tensed and howled in pain. “That’s to be expected! Keep pouring!” urged the uruisg, pointing intently at Miia’s broken side.

Lorelei continued to pour, up and down the wound, until the balance of the contents were gone. “All right, now what?”

“Watch,” said Malcolm, with a satisfied smile.

Lorelei looked at the gash in her friend’s side, and gasped. It was healing. Healing so rapidly she could watch the skin knitting itself back together. The gut that was visible was also rerouting itself, finding its way to its proper junction. Lorelei gasped as it suddenly disappeared from view, with the skin covering it again as it was supposed to. Within minutes, the wound was gone, save for a pink, z-shaped scar and a hint of bluish smoke, and a large gash in the chainmail and tunic of Miia.

Miia’s eyes snapped open. “Ouch! Odin’s hat, that hurt!”

"I bet it did," said Lorelei. "But look."

Miia did, and here eyes widened. "Sweet Odin, I'm not dead, am I?"

"There's always life in a living man. Or woman in your case, my dear. You'll need to be careful, you won't be full-strength for a few days. Best to take it easy, drink lots of water. This potion was meant for urusks, and while I know it to work on humans, it does take a bit longer for you biggies to get back up on your feet."

"How can I repay you?" asked Lorelei.

"Pay? Lassie, we urusks do not take payment. We give out of the goodness of our own hearts."

Lorelei smiled, just a bit. "Well, Malcolm, at the very least I'd like to buy you some whisky to replace that you used on my friend—a gift, of course."

"Well...no, I can't keep you. I'm on my way to Neri to meet with the Council."

"Neri! Lor, we should go there. Your guy is there, right?"

"Right," said Lorelei, smiling broader now. "Well, Malcolm, since it won't be a bit out of our way to take you there, I insist you come with us to Neri."

"Well...if it won't put you out."

"It won't."

Malcolm murmured an incantation, and the pot dwindled in size until it fit neatly in his pack. "Well, then, I'm grateful. May I trouble one of you for a boost?"

‡ ‡ ‡

They stayed in Lavender perhaps a bit longer than they would have otherwise. Lorelei insisted that they secure less conspicuous clothing—as theirs drew attention to the fact that they were part of a marauding army, which was good, but only when you were part of an extant marauding army.

That wasn't all they did, though. Lorelei threw herself into trying to prepare for the upcoming journey—and to prepare herself and Miia for life afterward. She sold the cart and the draught horses to an aspiring teamster; it wouldn't take much more time to walk to Neri than it would to ride the long, circuitous Low Road there, and besides, Lorelei was used to marching long distances. When Malcolm complained, she quietly offered to saddle up Radulf, which brought quizzical looks from both uruisg and wolf.

It was a week they spent in Lavender, sleeping in cramped quarters at the Tulip & Rose and eating bread from the bakery in town, and as they prepared to

leave that day, Lorelei was secure knowing that they had more money than they'd had when they'd arrived.

"So, Malcolm, are you ready to head overland?" she asked, frowning at her reflection in the mirror. Civilian dress didn't suit her, she mused, and she wasn't sure that yellow was her color.

"Moreso than your mate, I imagine," the uruig replied. "I'm worried about her; she still seems withdrawn."

"I'm worried about her too," said Lorelei, shifting uneasily. Miia had been unusually quiet since her miraculous recovery, and while she had ample reason to be down—the death of 250 of her closest friends being at the top of the list—Lorelei was still concerned. Miia had always been more the kind to take out her frustration by sucker-punching Annalie, or flirting defiantly with obnoxious men. For her to be withdrawn just wasn't normal.

"Tis not uncommon, though," Malcolm continued. "I remember when I was a child, they brought an uruig to my mother; he was hurt bad, his leg bent up when the house he and his were staying in caught fire and collapsed. She used the ambrosia potion, healed the leg right up. But he didn't say a word for two weeks. Finally after a great deal of coaxing, he started talking. Seemed he'd been having a wee nip, and had wanted the whisky warm, so he'd started a small fire. One or two nips turned to five or six, then nine or ten, then the whole bottle. He'd gone to sleep, but the fire kept burning. His wife and daughter died, along with the humans in the house."

"That's awful," said Lorelei. "But it's not like Miia got drunk and set the camp on fire. It wasn't her fault."

"Nay, but still, she survived while others didn't. She may blame herself, lass, even if she shouldn't. Give her time. The man my mother treated went on to sire eight tots—and never drank another drop."

Lorelei sighed. Frankly, she wanted to break down, too. She wasn't quite sure why she hadn't. Maybe it was the fact that she still had Miia around—she was still operating in command mode. Maybe it was the fact that they were journeying to Neri—the visions had continued unabated. Or maybe it was the fact that she hadn't yet let herself accept that Ravenwood was gone.

There would be time for that soon enough.

"Anyhow," said Lorelei, and she began to ask a question, when the door swung open, and Miia entered, and the conversation ended.

Her friend was beautiful, Lorelei thought. The yellow tunic that she questioned on herself melded perfectly with Miia's darker hair. Unlike a few others in the camp, Lorelei's interest in her sisters had always been purely sororal—as had Miia's, for that matter—and that was unlikely to change. But Lorelei rather thought that she'd do best not to search for a mate while Miia was around; she was unlikely to win that competition.

"Well, I'm ready," said the erstwhile apprentice, morosely.

“You feel up to walking?”

Miia gave a half-shrug, half-nod. “I feel fine. It’s like I was never....well, good as new, anyhow. I’ll hold up.”

“Right. Well, I suppose it’s time to get our packs together and go then.”

“Should we wear our swords?”

It was a good question; they’d attract less attention with swords stowed in their packs. But Lorelei’s instincts were to stay armed and dangerous. She nodded.

Without more discussion, the group left Lavender, bound for Neri—for whatever good that would do.

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They made good time; they marched over hill and dale at a steady clip, for hours on end; Lorelei and Miia had marched much further before, of course. Malcolm did indeed ride Radulf, or occasionally on the shoulder of Miia or Lorelei, but even he had gone quiet. Miia’s countenance did not encourage idle chitchat.

It was on the second day that they reached the battlefield. Lorelei had almost fainted as they came over the rise, disbelieving that she could be seeing what she did.

It was a vast area—a hundred acres if a square foot—where the grasses refused to grow. Tarry muck was interspersed with dried gunk, which ringed a pool of fetid, blackened water. This was a dead land, a waste land.

Lorelei remembered when she had seen it last, three years ago as an apprentice, at the Battle of the Western Plains. It had been beautiful then, a field filled with tiny wildflowers and heather. They were there fighting on the side of King George against Fowler; George had given Herja five thousand gold and a ten-gold bonus for each man the Valkyries slew that day. They’d come home with thirty thousand altogether.

She still saw the vandal with his poleaxe, riding at top speed toward Reginleif’s blind side. She had rushed to attack him, and had caught him unaware just before he could strike the killing blow. She’d lopped off his right arm, and then disemboweled him.

It had been her eighth kill that day, but it was the one that had earned her glory.

She remembered later—perhaps two or three hours later, it was always hard to tell during battle—Annalie had thwarted an attack against Alexandra. The



archer had Alexandra in his sights—it was a clean, clear shot. And Annalie had dispatched him with a dagger to his throat, thrown from twenty yards, a magnificent shot. She had done so even as a marauder approached at full tilt, forcing Annalie to drop and spin, lest she be run through the forehead. A split-second more, and she would have been.

Lorelei had seen her comrade's bravery. It was no less than hers.

So why had she reserved comment? Why hadn't she gone to Herja, to Alexandra, to Reginleif?

Was it because she was the golden child that day? That she had earned her promotion, and didn't want to share the glory with anyone else?

She had told herself she hadn't kept Annalie from promotion—not exactly, anyhow. There was one report of her heroics from Satu, who was running weapons to the front; though she was young, it could've been enough. It wasn't Lorelei's fault. No, the adepts should have listened to Satu.

Lorelei told that lie to herself, but she couldn't believe it. She knew she could've confirmed Satu's story, could've provided more detail, could have insisted that Annalie was her equal. Annalie had been as deserving as she.

No, thought Lorelei, Annalie was more deserving. When it had been Annalie's time to sacrifice for her, she'd done so.

Lorelei tried to move forward, and found she couldn't. Instead, sitting wearily, she finally allowed herself to cry.

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It was about a half an hour later when they heard the groan.

Lorelei had just recomposed herself; Miia and Malcolm had given her a wide berth, and while Radulf had come and lain by her feet, she wasn't generally very talkative. Indeed, the first words anyone in the party had spoken since entering the battlefield were spoken in unison, as Malcolm, Lorelei, and Miia all said, at once, "What the—"

None of them could complete the thought, as there was a sudden tremor, followed by a tremendous quake that dropped them all.

"Swords!" called Lorelei by reflex, bouncing up and forcing herself to hold her feet, even as the ground rolled beneath her. Miia was a bit slower on the uptake, but soon enough she had risen to a defensive position.

Malcolm, for his part, was being bounced away from the two Valkyries, hollering bloody murder—until his howls were replaced by a terrible roar.

Out of one of the tarry places a huge tendril, thick as a tree trunk, had suddenly shot forth, twelve feet high at least. It flowed upward, and stopped in place, a pitch-black column of tar.

And the column rotated.

“On your guard,” Lorelei called out. “I don’t like the looks of this.”

“You think?” Miia shouted. “What is it?”

A deep rumbling thrum came from the monolith.

“Lassies!” shouted Malcolm, trying in vain to remain upright. “Get away! He’ll kill you!”

The top of the column slowly distorted into three divots. Two at top. A larger one below.

Eyes and mouth.

“Hhhhhhyyyyyyooooouuuu!” the beast cried, and threw a tarry tenticle out of what would have to have been its chest, grasping Miia before she had time to react, lifting her five feet off the ground, her sword clattering to the ground.

“Go, Lorelei!” she cried out. “Save yourself and Malcolm!”

“Like hell,” came the reply, as Lorelei strode defiantly forward. “Drop her!”

The beast roared out something like a cross between gales of derisive laughter and a small earthquake. It then shot out tendril after tendril of tar, which Lorelei had to bounce and run and scurry away from, until she reached cover behind a rock, where Malcolm was also cowering.

“He’s not scared of you, lass.” said Malcolm. “Your swords can’t hurt him.”

“What is he?” said Lorelei, dropping to a crouching position.

“He’s a huge tarry monster.”

“I can see that.”

“He’s an ardbeg!” continued Malcolm. “What’s left of a shapeshifter after he dies.”

“Shapeshifter?”

“Tis deep magic, lass. Concentrated ambrosia is just part of the potion involved. The person taking it is mortal—all things are. But the residue of the spell remains for years after the creature dies.”

The conference was broken up by a piercing scream from Miia.

“All right, enough chitchat. What kills it?”

“Nothing, lass. ’Tis already dead.”

“You’ve been a lot of help, Malcolm,” said Lorelei, leaping to her feet and accelerating toward the beast at full speed, ignoring the uruig’s calls.

She looked at the creature, spinning her sword idly, looking for a weakness. Seeing none, she did the best thing she could; she leapt, and struck at the tendril that was holding Miia.

The ardbeg roared in protest as the tar cleaved partially. Unfortunately, Lorelei’s sword remained stuck fast.

“That’s a problem,” she muttered, falling back, hand searching the ground as another tendril shot out.

Lorelei dropped and rolled away as the tar impacted the earth, shaking the ground. She kept her eyes up; the ardbeg’s grip on Miia had loosened just enough that her friend was slowly working her way free.

Another tendril shot at her just as her hand touched pay dirt; she grabbed and rolled away, springing up and swinging Miia’s sword with wanton abandon at the trunk above.

The ardbeg screamed as the tendril dropped and hit the ground, bringing Miia in tow with a sploosh.

Lorelei rushed to her friend, who was already busy extricating herself. “Get the steel!” Miia called out, and Lorelei immediately obliged, seeing happily that both swords had stuck to the fallen side of the tentacle.

Miia pulled herself free like a kid pulling taffy—she stretched the tar until it broke. She and Lorelei then rushed back to where Radulf was dutifully propping Malcolm up.

“How are you?” asked Lorelei, as she tried to think of some sort of defense.

“Well, I’m sticky and oily,” said Miia. “But not in a good way.”

“Lasses, I hate to repeat myself, but let’s go!”

The beast shot forth an arcing tendril that landed behind them, and it slowly began to suck it back into itself, pulling itself toward their position.

“No, I think this one wants to dance,” said Lorelei, spinning her sword slowly. Then, suddenly, she paused, and smiled.

“I’m going to owe you another bottle of whisky, Malcolm,” she said. “Miia, get the flint ready.”

“What?”

But Lorelei was already at her pack, pulling out a bottle of tan liquid and the blue tunic she’d purchased; she hated to lose this already, but there wasn’t time to debate. She doused the tunic, careful not to use more than she needed. She pushed it into the bottle, and shouted, “Spark!”

Miia had realized what she was doing; she struck the flint and the shirt ignited.

Lorelei rose and tossed the flaming bottle to the foot of the ardbeg. “Grab Malcolm,” she said, “And run!”

Miia grasped Malcolm around the middle, paying no heed to his protests, while Lorelei urged Radulf into a dead sprint. They dove behind a rise just as the bottle exploded.

The ardbeg screamed out in a dull roar as it was overwhelmed by the flames. Quickly, they crept up and down every tendril of the beast, until it slowly melted into a pool of black, which soon cooled to obsidian.

The party had watched in fear and fascination; it was just as the beast was starting to cool that Miia spoke up.

“Well, that explains it,” she said, pointing to a bit of charred cloth and a partially molten bronze ensign in the shape of a cannon.

“He was one of Fowler’s men,” said Lorelei, laughing. “One of your kills, I’ll bet.”

“Trying to return the favor, I guess,” said Miia, smiling in spite of herself. And for the first time in over a week, she laughed.

‡ ‡ ‡

Many hours later, as the campfire burned itself to embers, Lorelei was awakened. She stretched, and looked up.

“Lor, I have to talk to you.”

“Yeah, Miia?” said Lorelei, trying to shake out the cobwebs.

“It’s about something I heard—during the attack on Ravenwood. I didn’t...I don’t want to tell you.”

“What?” said Lorelei, suddenly and completely awake.

“Maybe I shouldn’t...”

“Miia,” said Lorelei firmly, “is this why you’ve been so down?”

“No. Yeah. Lor...we led them there.”

“What?”

“The Cadre...it wasn’t long after Herja died. I was leaning up against the tent where you found me, just waiting for death to take me, and a couple of them walked by.

“The first one says, ‘So how’d they find this place?’

“‘Wasn’t easy. Oz had scouts looking for weeks. Luckily, a couple of ’em went into town to get some swords. Steve followed them back.’”

Lorelei felt a knot slowly twisting its way through her gut.

“The first one says, ‘Man, Steve knows how to get on Oz’s good side, don’t he?’

“‘Yeah,’ the second says. ‘What’s best is that they almost caught him out on the way to town. He thought he was a goner. But he moved out just in time—the redhead found his campsite, but not him.’”

There was nothing but the silence of the evening, and the breathing of Miia and Lorelei. Finally, Miia said tearfully, “It was our fault, Lor. It was all out fault.”

Lorelei thought back to fires and houses, and closed her eyes and wished, briefly, that the blow to her head had been a bit firmer.

“I can’t believe he got off,” she said.

She looked around. She wasn’t in her camp anymore. She was back in the room with the woman who was not Herja, but could have been.

“It was a tough case to prove,” said the woman, calmly. “It came down to your word against his. Without any physical evidence....”

“Look, for the nineteenth time, I’m sorry I didn’t make sure that the EMTs ran a rape kit. I was more concerned at the time about the fact that I’d been raped. I couldn’t be concerned that they do their goddamn jobs!”

And the person she inhabited started to cry, sobbing uncontrollably. Lorelei felt the sadness, and wished she could sweep it through her, and relieve this person’s burden.

“I should’ve, though,” she finally said. “I should’ve made sure.”

“Lori, it’s not your fault,” said Herja’s doppelganger. “It’s not. You can’t be everywhere, you can’t check everything. He deserved to go to jail, and he didn’t, and that’s awful and unfair and wrong, but that isn’t your fault.”

Lorelei involuntarily wiped her eyes, and said, "So you're saying I did my best. That's all you can do, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, that sucks."

"I know."

"Lorelei?"

Reality snapped back into focus, and Miia was looking at her, concerned.

"Maybe it was our fault. We shouldn't have been followed. I should've found the bastard."

"But we did our best, and we fought like hell. That's gotta count for something. We just...we have to learn from our mistakes, and not repeat them."

"Tell that to Satu and Annalie and Reginleif and..."

"Do you think that they'd want us to give up, Miia? We are all that is left of Ravenwood. We can't hate ourselves. We have to find a way to soldier on. It's what they'd want us to do, I think."

Miia dried her eyes, and looked thoughtful. She seemed about to say something, then stopped, and smiled. "Herja was right, you know; you're a hell of a Valkyrie."

"No, I'm not," said Lorelei. "But I'm doing my best. That's all I can do." She only wished that she believed it.

### *Five*

#### *The Council of the Urusks*

The next day broke early, and Miia seemed more like herself than she had in days. Malcolm had smiled after Miia related a particularly graphic war story and said, "Lassie, I don't believe I've made your acquaintance, and I'm sorry for that; do remind me to stay on your good side."

"Don't worry, Malcolm," said Miia to the uruisg, who was riding sidesaddle on a wolf, "I figure until I save your life, you're permanently on my good side."

"You don't call yesterday saving my life?"

"No, that's Lor's kill. I still owe you."

"Well, that's good to hear. I've got enough trouble without a bloody great Valkyrie being after me, and that's for sure."

“You know,” Lorelei said, contemplatively, “you never have told us why you have to meet with the council.”

“Oh, ’tis nothing,” said Malcolm, shifting uncomfortably. “Just a wee spot of trouble I got into a few years ago needs mending. Better not to trouble you with it.”

“Really? Because we’ve got time, and we’re probably never going to see you again after tonight.”

“True enough, lass. But if it’s all the same, I’d rather keep my own counsel about this one.”

“Suit yourself.”

Presently, they reached the outskirts of Neri. The sun was low on the horizon; it was time for humans to sleep. They bade farewell to their friend; Miia even planted a kiss on his tiny left cheek. “For luck,” she’d said.

“Aye. I’ll need it, lass. Thank you both for your hospitality.”

Then, he seemed to consider for just a second, and added, “You know, lassies, I was hoping you’d just make my journey here an easier one. I didn’t look forward to traveling here myself—lotta things out there a wee one like myself isn’t fit to take on.”

“And—truth be known—I was getting lonely.”

“But—lassies, I’m glad I got to make this trip with you. You’re a right pair, you two. I’m glad I got to meet you before...well, before we parted ways. I hope your journey is safe from this point.”

“You know,” Lorelei said, “I imagine we should be in Neri for some time; you’re welcome to visit when you’ve concluded your business.”

“Nay, lass. I’ve quite a lot of business to attend to. I wish I could. At any rate, good luck to you. May all evil sleep, may all good awake in thy way. Safe journey.”

“To you and yours,” said Lorelei, as Malcolm turned and faded into the forest.

The two watched silently for a while, and then began to set up camp for the evening. It was not too much later that Miia said, “You know, I’m not sure about this.”

“What?”

“Malcolm. I don’t know—I mean, didn’t he seem a bit odd to you?”

“Well, yes, pretty constantly.”

Miia rolled her eyes. “Make jokes if you want to, but I’m serious. He just—well, he seemed really worried about whatever was coming up.”

Lorelei frowned. “It is true. I mean, if this was ‘just a wee spot of trouble,’ why was he so sure he couldn’t see us before we left Neri?”

“Exactly! I’m telling you, Lor, I don’t like this.”

They sat for a moment, until Miia said, quietly, “Let’s follow him.”

Lorelei leaned back, and with a wry smile, replied, “Okay.”

Miia seemed surprised to have won at all, much less without an argument. “You sure?”

“Look, they’re all a foot tall. How much trouble could we get in?”

Miia smiled. “Let’s go before you smarten up. Stay, Radulf.”

‡ ‡ ‡

The citizens of Neri had never paid much attention to the redundant name of the forest that lay on the outskirts of their town. Woodsylvania was simply the large, impenetrable territory that nobody much went into. Oh, slowly they’d chipped away—an oak here for a table, a maple there for a bedframe, a few more oaks for a house—and the woods had retreated, reluctantly. But the villagers had taken just a small fraction of the forest; the interior was dense and rough and overgrown, and filled with passes too narrow for an average human to penetrate.

Lorelei and Miia were not average humans; it was a testament to their skill that they’d managed to reach the depth of the forest they had. Nevertheless, half an hour into their journey, they were exhausted, Miia’s left leg was bleeding profusely from a nasty gash, and Lorelei thought mosquitoes may have taken an equal amount of blood from her.

“So do we give up?” she panted, looking beyond their position into a part of the wood as dark as night.

“I don’t know,” said Miia. “At what point does it get impossible for us to get out?”

“Oh, nothing’s impossible. It’s just a question of when it gets too hard to imagine doing,” said Lorelei, brightly. “I’d say we hit that point ten minutes ago.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, so I’m thinking we may as well just go on.”

“Lead on.”

Lorelei looked forward. “I’m open to suggestions.”



“Well,” said Miia, looking around, “I suppose we could go up.”

Lorelei shook her head. She was an idiot for having approved this. “All right,” she said. “Up it is.”

The two ascended the nearest tree, and saw quickly that this might just work; the trees were close enough together that they could move from one to another easier than they could between them. True, Lorelei did almost drop to her death from forty feet up, but that only happened once, and aside from that slight scare the two Valkyries made good time—not that they knew where, precisely, they were going to.

It was a good hour later—long after sunset—when they saw the first hint of torchlight up ahead. Indeed, a hint was about all the light there was. The two squinted into the darkness; they had to double-check to make sure what they were seeing was real.

As their eyes adjusted, they realized it was. The torchlight itself was a small campfire, burning in the center of a series of what appeared to be dollhouses. A number of figures were assembled in the clearing, tiny figures dressed in blues, greens, and reds.

“There!” whispered Miia. Lorelei followed, and saw Malcolm standing near the fire, pacing and speaking to an elderly woman. She embraced him, kissed him on the cheek, and strode away, leaving Malcolm on his own, with a bubble of space between him and the crowd.

The Valkyries crawled as close as they could without exiting the canopy, and strained to hear what was going on below. There was the murmur of any crowd, diminished to scale. And then, there came a trumpet blast.

“All hail his Highness, King Domhnall the Second, Lord Emperor of Woodsylvania, Prince of the Western Plains, High King of the Urusks, and his wife, Queen Maura!” called the sentry, as the group of tiny men and women turned, and dropped to one knee.

Save for Malcolm.

A tall, broad-shouldered uruisg strode forward, a silver diadem ringing thinning gray hair, regal robes in blue and green tartan plaid, his long beard braided twice and neatly combed. He gave his arm to a woman who appeared somewhat younger, slim and red-haired, wearing a matching diadem and similar robes with gold embroidery.

Behind them came the woman who had kissed Malcolm; Lorelei noted that she wore a gold tiara. Additionally, there was a man in black tunic and red-and-gold kilt, bearing a supercilious smile.

“Good evening, my countrymen,” the King said, in a deep, resonant voice (at least by uruisg standards). “It is with great pain that I call this meeting of the High Council of the Urusks to order. Malcolm

MacChaluim, step forth.”

“Am I to understand,” said Malcolm, “that you see no need to address me by title, brother?”

The crowd gasped (as did Miia and Lorelei, though for a different reason), but Domhnall kept his gaze even. “You are no longer fit for the title of Prince of Neri, my brother. Your actions have seen to that.”

“Well then, I shall stand forth as Malcolm MacChaluim, son of His Royal Highness Domhnall the First, the greatest King of the Urusks. Not even you, Domhnall, can deny me that.”

“Would that I could, Malcolm. The Grand Inquisitor will now read the charges against Mr. MacChaluim; Mr. McGillFhaolain?”

The man who had strode in behind now strutted to the fore, preening and grinning mirthlessly. “*Prince* Malcolm MacChaluim,” he sneered, “It is my sad duty to read these charges.”

“Oh, come off it, Kester. None present here thinks you’ve anything but glee at this; get on with it.”

“The prisoner will remain silent,” said the King, severely.

“Prisoner?” whispered Miia. Lorelei shushed her.

“The former Prince Malcolm is charged with providing aid and comfort to humans above and beyond that which is acceptable, theft of one Gill of ambrosia, and bringing disrepute upon the House of MacChaluim. Prisoner, how do you plead?”

“To the first two? Guilty. But I submit that ’tis the actions and proclamations of your King that have brought dishonor to the Clan MacChaluim, not I.”

“Brother, brother, enough. You are accused of aiding humans; do not add treason to the list of charges. So, you admit that you saved three humans from death during the outbreak of plague?”

“Aye. And I’d do it again.”

“And you stole ambrosia to do it.”

“Aye! I used it to save lives, the purpose the Creator meant it for. The purpose our mother taught us both to use it for, Don. ’Tis not propping up the throne. If dad could see you now—so concerned about outmaneuvering the Brownies. What a waste of your talent. No wonder mum hates you so.”

“Enough!” roared the King. “You think it’s funny, don’t you? Even after I proclaimed that all urusks must cease assisting humans, you continued to do it. But of course, we know why, don’t we? We all know why,” he said, turning to the crowd.

“Brother, don’t,” said Malcolm.

“It is your twisted love of one of them! Your bizarre fascination with them! Why not a Kobold, brother?”

Why not an ass?"

Malcolm looked down, then looked up, hatred brewing in his eyes. "The Creator will look quite askance at your casual disregard for Aoife, Don. She was a better creature than you'll ever be."

"He admits it!" roared the King, as the crowd simultaneously gasped and tittered. "Fool. What will your Creator think of you when you go to meet him?"

"He will weigh my sin against my deeds, brother," said Malcolm, head high. "The same as you."

"And you expect to be rewarded for saving humans? Come now, Malcolm. They're not worthy of your Creator. Better the whole bloody lot perish, and let we elven races attain our rightful place as masters of this world."

Malcolm shook his head. "I see now, that there is to be no reasoning with you. You monster. You would have consigned those three little children to death—"

"Little? They stood a Fa high!"

"Those three little children," growled Malcolm, "would have died. And they'd done nothing but been born human. Would you sacrifice Aileas and Jamie so easily, Don? Would you let a human trod them underfoot, him saying, 'Well, 'tis only an uruig. Better the lot perish'?"

"I've had enough of you, brother," said the King, his voice dripping with sangfroid. "You must be cast out of our society—Coventry is the minimum sentence for the crimes you have admitted today. But—the Queen Mother, I am sure, would be loath to see her baby son killed. And so I offer you this choice: turn over the balance of the ambrosia to me, and your life will be spared."

Malcolm grinned wildly. "I can't. I haven't any."

"You didn't need that much to save the children."

"I didn't use it all on them, brother. I am proud to say I saved one more human on my journey back to here—a young lass who was at death's door."

The crowd dissolved into a hundred conversations as the King grew purple with rage. Finally, the word "Why?" fairly popped from his mouth. "When you knew why you were being summoned? When you knew what the stakes were, Malcolm? Why?"

"Because it is what one should do, what the Creator asks of us all. Trade yourself for others, give of yourself to make the world a better place. Better I die today, that Miia and Diana and Kate and Michael all have lived to see another day."

He turned to the crowd, and looked at them evenly. "You, my countrymen, will witness my death today. At the hands of my brother, the scoundrel. Remember tonight well. Remember why I chose to do what I did. Ask yourself whether the lives my brother has taken with ambrosia—brownie, uruig, and

human alike—were rightly taken. And ask yourself if that is what our Creator would want.”

He turned back to the King, and defiantly said, “I’m ready.”

“As am I,” said Domhnall. “Kester, direct the executioner to behead Mr. MacChaluim.”

The Queen Mother broke down as two men flanked Malcolm, and forced him to his knees. “Sorry, Mum,” he said, and he closed his eyes.

A black-hooded man, strong and able, carrying a deadly-looking axe, strode forth. He nodded to the soldiers, who forced Malcolm’s head onto a chopping block. The executioner lined himself up, and swung his weapon skyward.

Suddenly, there was a thunderous crash, as two buildings gave way under tremendous weight. “We are truly sorry to interrupt,” said one of the rapidly expanding dust clouds, “but I think Mr. MacChaluim had a point there about sacrifice.”

“Miia?” Malcolm said, as he heard the voice.

“She’s not alone, Malcolm,” said a second dust cloud, which was dissipating enough to reveal an enormous warrior. “One good turn deserves another, don’t you think?”

As the crowd scattered, the King rushed forward, voice quaking with rage. “You...humans...have no standing here!” shouted the King, raising his sword.

“Ah, but we do,” said Miia, stepping forward, casually kicking through the wreckage of the home she had obliterated in her drop. “I owe my life to Mr. MacChaluim. And that is a debt I must repay, lest my sins and deeds not even out when I meet the Creator. Oh—I guess maybe you weren’t paying attention. Well, you see, Malcolm said—”

“I am well aware of what he said!” shouted the King. “You will leave at once, or die!”

Lorelei looked at the ground, studying the guards who were rapidly, if timorously, gathering. Tactically, this wasn’t exactly cut and dried; it was probably a fair fight, but she thought that she’d rather not find out what a hundred inch-long swords could do to her knees. “Actually, your highness,” she said, kicking down a wall on the house for effect, “we have a proposition for you.”

The King looked at her, weighing his options. Lorelei smiled slightly; if he wasn’t insane, he’d be interested in dealing. He had to know that even if he beat them, they’d cause a lot of havoc before they died.

Domhnall was many things, but he was not insane.

“All right,” he said. “Let me guess: I allow my brother to live, sentence him to Coventry, and you agree

not to destroy the village and everyone here?”

“That’s the long and the short of it,” said Lorelei.

The King bowed his head, appearing to mutter a string of oaths. But when he raised it, his face was impassive. “Very well. Go, brother; do not darken our doorstep again.”

Malcolm stepped back, and started to say something, but he turned his head toward his mother. Lorelei saw her smile at him, and then turn and smile up at her.

Malcolm nodded, and turned. “All right, lassies. I’ll lead you out of here. Though I’m a bit concerned now, Miia. Seems you’ve saved my life.”

“We’ll call it even. I promise to be nice—unless, of course, you cross me,” said Miia sheathing her sword with just a little extra flourish. Then, to the crowd, “Thanks for your hospitality. Sorry about your houses.”

The three turned and exited before anyone dared complain.

‡ ‡ ‡

“I’m sorry,” said Malcolm as they settled in back at the camp, “that you two had to get mixed up in this.”

“I’m not,” said Miia, attacking a piece of venison jerky with gusto. “You’d be dead if we hadn’t.”

“Aye, and a martyr to the cause of peace. ’Twas my plan, anyhow, until you two came along.”

“Good plan,” said Lorelei, sipping a bit of water. “You can do so much more for your people when you’re dead.”

“Maybe I can,” said Malcolm. “My brother is spoiling for a fight with the Brownies. Now, I’ve no truck with that lot, but they’re not evil. They’re just—er—high-spirited.

“But my brother keeps thinking if he conquers them, he can seek out the faerie lands and destroy them, and then to the humans, and on and on until he’s ruling his own Kobold slave army. And if he has to kill every living thing there is, he will.

“I thought if I went back and faced up, and they saw that he’d even kill his own brother...”

His voice trailed off, and he looked down. “Ah, who am I kidding? I’m a deposed prince. They’d have forgotten me soon enough.”

“It would be their great loss,” said Miia.

“And at the very least, I’m glad we didn’t forget you,” said Lorelei.

After a moment, Miia said quietly, “Malcolm, who was Aoife?”

Malcolm smiled bittersweetly. “She was a friend, Miia. A good friend. ’Twas her children I saved with the ambrosia. It was her dying request.”

“Ah,” said Miia. “I’m sorry.”

“There are parts of it I’m sorry about, and parts I’m not,” said Malcolm. “But she was a kind spirit, and I’m grateful to have known her.”

Lorelei could tell Miia wanted to push it further, so she cut off the discussion.

“So where do you go now?” Lorelei asked.

“Now? Lass, I wasn’t expecting to live to see another sunrise. I’ve no plans for now.”

“Well,” said Miia, “You could hang out with us. We’ve got plans for tomorrow, anyhow.”

“I wouldn’t trouble you—”

“No trouble, Malcolm,” said Lorelei. “We’d miss you if you were gone. You’re welcome to stay with us until you get bored or we get boring.”

“That’s not likely to happen anytime soon, Lorelei,” said Malcolm, quietly. “Just tell me when I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

“In the unlikely event that happens, we will. Now, come on everyone. It’s been a night to remember. Tomorrow I have to go find a guy I’ve never met and convince him to teach me the secrets of why I’m slowly going mad. We’d best get some sleep.”

With that, Miia tossed her jerky to Radulf, who attacked it mercilessly, and the three comrades lay back under a bowl of stars.

The party slipped slowly into slumber as the fire dimmed to ash.

## Six

### *The True and the Made*

Neri would not be considered a significant village by a casual visitor. While it was not as small as the sleepy hamlet of Pipestone, it was still tiny by any rational measure. Aside from a nice market, a bookstore, and a mill, there was nothing that Neri possessed that any other town within a five days’ journey lacked.

Save for one thing, of course: the university.

The University of Neri was not so much a place as an idea; there was no central building, no bursar’s office, no real hierarchy save a small governing council of

clerics. Classes met where they could—which this year included the Church of Mithras (Reform), the home of Misses Julie and Elsie McKeown, and an abandoned blacksmith shop at the edge of town.

This was not something that a nonresident of Neri would know, which is why it took Lorelei until well into the afternoon before she tracked down Zvonimir.

She walked down the muddy path past the Church of Mithras (Orthodox) toward an old shack, barely a house at all. It looked as if a swift kick to the corner might bring it down.

She approached with far more fear than she'd ever felt in battle. She approached the door, and reached up to knock.

The door swung open, unbidden, and a tall, gaunt man strode forth directly into her, knocking her to the ground.

He backed up, nonplussed, mouth opening and closing at the center of mass of wild black beard and hair that seemed to exist independent of any actual human within. Flint-grey eyes finally fixed on her, and the mouth found its words.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Excuse me, sir," said Lorelei, returning awkwardly to her feet. "I'm looking for Professor Zvonimir Pasternak."

"You? I don't teach girls. Go back to your knitting." He swept his ragged black cloak around him, and proceeded past her.

Lorelei gaped, then followed him.

"You don't understand, Professor. I was told to seek you out by one of your students. Ian Crouch."

"Crouch?" said the Professor, pausing to turn back over his shoulder in an act of pure disdain. "Ah, yes, the madman. Had the second sight, couldn't control it. Now he's sent you to me. Lovely. My day keeps getting better and better."

"Sir—"

"Don't you have children to tend to?"

"No. Do you?"

Zvonimir wheeled. "Tell me, woman; you're quite willing to look a man of my rank in the eye and address me; most women would not. You carry a sword; that's rare for one of your sex. You had an apprenticeship, no?"

“Uh...yes, sir.”

“Apprenticing women. What is this world coming to?” he muttered. “So what was your apprenticeship in? Cooking? Smithing? Dear Lord, I hope not bookkeeping.”

“No, sir. I am a Valkyrie.”

At this, Zvonimir snorted in disgust. “Valkyrie! Aha! A paid assassin, you are—one of Herja’s wenches. I should have known. What is that crazy witch up to now?”

It was not perhaps the best way to make Zvonimir’s acquaintance, but Lorelei didn’t care. Her sword had been drawn before Zvonimir got the word “witch” out, and it was at his neck before his sentence concluded.

“Herja is dead, Professor. And I’d take care, if I were you; the next time you insult her memory I will not stop shy of your throat.”

Pasternak regarded her blandly, then, slowly, his face broke out into an odd, twisted smile.

“Well. Even the kitten has claws, I suppose. I apologize for slandering your teacher, madam; though I will not apologize for my disdain for your profession. Mercenaries don’t add to the ambiance in this land.”

Lorelei lowered her sword slowly, and putting it away, said simply, “I accept your apology. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

“I apologize myself; I did not get your name,” said the professor, rubbing his hand across his neck.

“Why do you care? You won’t teach me,” said Lorelei, petulantly, as she started to walk away.

Pasternak’s smile grew wider. “Intriguing. You have journeyed here to see me from—well, I believe Crouch was last in Pipestone—yet my insults are enough that you are willing to throw that quest away. Why do you give up so easily?”

Lorelei turned back to him. “I’m not giving up, Professor. But now is obviously not the time for this. I’ll come back later, when you have your manners together.”

Zvonimir barked out a wretched cackle. “Aha!” he shouted, pointing a bony finger in her general direction. “Good girl! Proud, but not stupid. But I still don’t know your name.”

“Lorelei Voss,” she said simply, and started away again.

“Wait!” cried Zvonimir. “Who said you should go?”



“Well, you said you wouldn’t teach me.”

“I said I don’t teach girls. And I do not—but you’re not a girl, you’re a woman, and I said nothing of teaching them.” He smiled, just a bit. “Now, I can’t issue you a degree, given your sex; I imagine, though, that you could not care less about that.”

“I want answers to some questions,” she said, flatly.

“Don’t we all, my dear. Tomorrow. Sunrise. My house. Do not be late.”

Lorelei gave a winning smile. “Until the morrow, Professor.”

‡ ‡ ‡

“Wow,” said Miia, stretching out in her bed, as Lorelei finished telling her story. “What a complete jerk.”

“She’s right, lass,” said Malcolm, reclining on the chest of drawers. “He’s off his crumpet.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Lorelei. “But he isn’t stupid. The closest the Valkyries have been to Neri in the last ten years was Western Plains; he knew Herja by reputation, just as she knew him. And...she did say he was unorthodox.”

Miia snorted. “I would have opened another hole in him.”

“Believe me, I was close.”

Lorelei shifted in her bed, and suddenly felt herself falling.

She landed with a thud, and got up. “Damn it,” she said. “That hurt.”

“You okay?” came a call from behind her.

“Yeah, yeah. Just missed the last step.”

She looked around, unsurprised at the unfamiliar surroundings. It had been a few days since her last vision, but she was always prepared for them.

She looked back at the concerned woman, who was sweeping a mass of golden hair out of her eyes.

Lorelei felt like fainting; it was Annalie.

“You need to watch where you’re going,” said her fallen comrade, who was wearing a light blue shirt that fit tight to her form and a pair of breeches made of that dark blue canvas; Lorelei couldn’t help but realize it was a bit immodest, but she’d long since stopped worrying about such oddities in her visions.

“Sorry I—uh—lost sight of where I was for a second. Thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it, Lori. See you at dinner tonight?”

“Yeah, but then back to Econ. It’s kicking my butt.”

The two parted, and Lorelei felt the odd but familiar sensation of going with the woman she was with. She pushed through a door, then another, and walked into a room of gleaming marble and metal and mirrors. She walked to a pipe, and turning a wheel started a flow of water. Lorelei looked at it, wishing it was that easy in her world.

Then she looked into a mirror, and saw herself.

Herself. Lorelei. Dressed in the yellow tunic she had on, her hair swept back into a single braid as she wore it, the slight scar on her cheek from a long-forgotten battle.

And she gasped, as did the woman she inhabited.

“So, you going to be there tomorrow?” asked Miia.

“Oh, yeah,” said Lorelei, snapping back to her world. “I don’t know how I can avoid it.”

‡ ‡ ‡

The sun had not yet broken the horizon when Zvonimir strode out of his door. Lorelei was waiting for him, sitting cross-legged with her sword in her lap. She stood and sheathed it, and bowed slightly. “Good morning, Professor.”

“You’re early,” Zvonimir said. Then gesturing in no particular direction, he said, “Let’s walk.”

They trudged through the mud in silence for some time, before Zvonimir enquired, “Why, my dear Valkyrie, are you not dressed as one?”

“I’m one of only two left,” said Lorelei, bluntly. “My friend Miia is back sleeping at the Paper Tiger; she and I are all that are left of the Choosers of the Slain.”

Zvonimir raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. They trudged on.

“I figured that it was better for us to blend a bit,” Lorelei offered, quietly.

“Discretion is the better part of valor, or so I’ve heard said,” agreed Zvonimir. After a time, he asked, “So Ian Crouch told you I could help, eh?”

“It was more like he believed I was destined to go to you, Professor.”

“Why?”

“He said I was chosen. He called me ‘the fox.’”

“Hm. Crouch has been desperate to end this world since he started seeing the other; he knows the quatrain about the Valkyrie-Fox better than even I. But he never understood the rest of that prophecy. Not that anyone really does, I suppose. Crazy fool.”

“Do you think he’s wrong?”

“No, no; your biography, such as I know, suggests he could be right about who you are. It’s possible. But he’s wrong about the role of the Fox. You are to balance the worlds, if you are indeed the person Crouch thinks you are.”

Lorelei frowned, and paused. “How do I do that?”

Zvonimir smiled, sadly. “I don’t know.”

Lorelei shook her head. “Look, I keep having these visions....”

“Yes, yes, the other world, more technologically advanced, but no magic. A world where rules seem fixed rather than fluid, where there are only humans. Yes?”

“You’ve seen it?”

Zvonimir cleared his throat. “Somewhat. It is our sister world. One you and I are directly tied to.”

Lorelei looked at the professor, realizing to her dismay that every question he answered was leading to six or seven more questions.

“I don’t understand,” she said, finally, hoping he’d explain something fully.

“Do you know,” said Zvonimir, changing the subject as he began walking again, “what the motto of the University of Neri is?”

“No, sir.”

“Of course you don’t. Why would you? It’s *Verum et factum convertuntur*.”

Lorelei paused, and said, “What—”

“Does that mean? It means that the true and the made are one and the same. One cannot tell the difference between what is original and what is copy. It always struck me as an odd motto. Oh, the Friars told me something about the constancy of Mithras; I ignored it, as I believe in no particular God and don’t much care for Mithras at any rate (though I’d ask you not to mention that to anyone. I only mention it to you because you’re one of Odin’s).

“Anyhow, in the Tome of the Gates, it constantly refers to this school, this place. That is odd, as the Tome was written in Angleland, and Neri was barely known to them. It was while reading that I realized the motto of this school is a clue to the meaning of the Tome.”

“What does it mean?”

“I believe it suggests that of the worlds we know of—this one and the world you see in your dreams—only one is real, and one is a facsimile. And I believe it is this one that is the false realm.”

Lorelei was aghast. “But how can that be?”

“As I said before; the other world is static. This one is fluid. That fluidity suggests to me nothing so much as an undercooked loaf of bread, one which did not rise properly and remains somewhat...uh...doughy. There is, you see, only enough yeast for one loaf to rise completely.”

Lorelei frowned, and considered. “Couldn’t be the other way around?”

Zvonimir paused, and looked at her, an eyebrow cocked. “How so?”

“Well, I can tell you that as you gained training as a Valkyrie, you were able to take more chances and bend the rules when need be. Not ignore them—and never ignore some—but...well, when I attack, I don’t hold my sword the way I’m ‘supposed’ to,” said Lorelei, drawing her sword and coming to an attack position. Unthinkingly, she began to rotate the sword in her right hand, sweeping it up and down counterclockwise, away and back toward the professor, who was studying her intently.

“I don’t even think about it, but this is definitely not standard procedure. But when Alexandra was training us, as we got more advanced, she saw I did better when I started this way. I think it helps me decide what my opponent is thinking, and helps me bait them a bit. Regardless, even though it isn’t standard, Alexandra approved me using it in battle when I got a bit older.”

Zvonimir’s jaw dropped, a bit, as Lorelei quickly spun the sword and sheathed it again. “So what you’re saying,” he murmured, “is that maybe there are more rules in that world because it’s the young, unexperienced one? That this world is fluid because it is real?”

“Maybe. Just a thought.”

Zvonimir chuckled. “For a woman, you’re sharp. Hell, for anyone, you’re sharp. I hadn’t considered that. Interesting.”

Lorelei smiled. “So what is my role in all of this?”

“That is what I have to determine—and what you do, as well. Tell me, Lorelei, can you read?”

“Some. Reginleif said we’d need to know if we ever became Adepts.”

“Good girl. I must go to class now; I have to teach fifteen-year-old boys theology, so that they can become priests, despite the fact that half of them were stealing from the poor at sundown last night. My cup runneth over.

“You said your friend was at the inn; does she know of your visions?”

“Uh—yes.”

“Then I shall call on you both at sundown tonight. There are a few more things I wish to discuss before I introduce you to the Tome.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei paced nervously as Miia, Malcolm, and Radulf shot glances back and forth.

“Lor—could you, you know, sit down or something?”

“No,” said Lorelei. “I’m still not sure what Zvonimir was talking about.”

“Well, lass, that could be due to the fact that ’twas all gibberish.”

“True,” said Miia. “That and the fact that he sounds incredibly creepy.”

“Indeed,” agreed Malcolm. “Though I am interested to see the man.”

There was a knock at the door, and Lorelei nearly flung it open. “Ah, Miss Voss. A pleasure,” said Zvonimir, lugging a large satchel. “And this must be your comrade.”

“I’m Miia, and this is Malcolm, Prince of Neri,” said Miia, gesturing.

“An uruisg? You didn’t mention him.”

“Lass! I’m hurt!”

“You didn’t come up, Malcolm.”

“Fair enough. Oh, and the wolf’s Radulf. I imagine she came up, but not me.”

“Not at all,” said Zvonimir. “So if nothing else, you haven’t fallen behind it. At any rate, it is a pleasure to meet you both. And the presence of you leads me to suspect that perhaps Crouch was right about you, Lorelei.”

“How so?” she asked, arms crossed.

“Because it is written in the Tome, as I will show you.” Zvonimir reached into the satchel, and pulled out an enormous, jewel-encrusted book. Setting it on the bed, he looked around the room.

“This is one of only three known copies of the Tome,” he said, solemnly. “One of the others is in the possession of my protégé in Two Rivers. One is with a religious order in Frankland. All others have been lost to time. This book tells of the gateways that exist between this and other worlds, and they tell of the one who will balance the power in each.”

“The Fox?” Lorelei asked.

“The Fox. These books were written by—”

But Zvonimir got no further in his explanation before an explosion rocked the building.

“What the deuce?”

“Swords,” said Lorelei. “On your guard.”

She gestured to Miia. “Can you scout out what’s up?”

“With all due respect,” said Malcolm, clambering down, “if it’s stealth you’re looking for, I’d say ’tis my job. Out of my way, lasses.” Miia cracked the door for him, and he snuck into the hall for a moment. When he came back, he was ashen.

“Five men, black clad, masks. Coming this way, swords drawn.”

“Back up, Malcolm. Miia, stand ready.”

They stood calmly, almost at ease. When the door flew open, they struck as one, hacking and slashing at the advancing group. All five men were dead within seconds.

“Nice work,” said Lorelei.

“Lasses—bad news,” said Malcolm, peeking out into the hall. “There’s about twenty more of ’em on their way. Fast.”

Lorelei looked down at the men, looked at their uniforms. And a mask of hatred covered her face.

“They’re mine,” she said, racing out into the hallway, not even hearing Miia’s shout.

She was bobbing, weaving, parrying and attacking. The first kill was decapitated, the second run through the heart, the third sliced open from stem to stern. The fourth got a sword in the eye as Lorelei twisted and kicked a fifth backward into the group.

“Lor! There are too many!” she finally heard Miia calling, distantly, but she ignored her, spinning and killing at her maximum output. She was going to kill one of these bastards for every one of her friends they’d killed. She would avenge Herja, and Alexandra, and Reginleif, and Satu, and Annalie....

Suddenly, she woke back up as a sword caught her left arm, carving a finger-sized hunk of flesh out of her forearm. She parried, and realized that Miia was right; they were flooding in from everywhere. How could that be?

She looked over her shoulder, and pulled off a backflip that, while not overly graceful, was at least effective in creating space enough for her to turn and race for the room. She spun and slammed the door, happy to see that Miia was already pushing the bed into position to block it shut.

“Exits?” Lorelei asked her comrade as Miia finished pushing the bed into place.

“One,” Miia replied.

“Window?”

“Yup.”

“Go.”

She heard the glass breaking as she crossed the threshold, heard Radulf, Miia and Malcolm depart. She turned to tell Zvonimir to go, when she saw a man standing at the window.

Impossible.

Zvonimir was looking desperately for a way out, clutching the Tome to his breast. Lorelei turned, and with malevolent intent, ran the interloper through. Turning, she shouted, “Now, Zvonimir!”

The Professor dove through the window, and Lorelei followed right afterward. They landed a story below, one right after another. Lorelei had tucked and rolled, but Zvonimir was not as adept at those things. He was getting to his feet weakly, but the tome had fallen some distance away.

He scrambled to his feet and swept it up, and sprinted to Lorelei. “Blasted Cadre! What do they want of me?”

“Of you?” Lorelei asked. “I thought they were after Miia and I.”

“They’re not after us?” said Miia, as the group joined back up.

“Doesn’t matter, lass,” Malcolm said, holding fast to the fur on Radulf’s neck. “They’re after one of us, that’s for sure.”

“Quickly,” said Zvonimir, “we must get to my house. Before they do.”

As he spoke, at least two dozen Cadre foot soldiers headed their way. “All right,” said Lorelei. “Where to?”

“This way,” said Zvonimir, ushering them down a narrow alleyway.

They rushed over uneven cobblestones and dirt, through gardens and over walls.

“So what does the Cadre want of you?” asked Lorelei, as they vaulted a fence.

“They want the Tome,” panted Zvonimir, leaping somewhat less gracefully. “They think it will give them power.”

“Will it?” asked Miia.

“Yes.”

They exited from behind a church and onto the mud-strewn street that led to Zvonimir’s shack. He raced up the sidewalk, and flung open the door.

“Well, well, Zvonimir. So nice of you to join me,” said a voice from inside.

“Bloody Hell,” cursed Zvonimir. “Ozymandias.”

‡ ‡ ‡

“So,” said Ozymandias, “that’s my deal. Turn over the Tome, and I don’t kill you all.”

Zvonimir was sputtering with rage at the interloper. He was a debonair man, wearing a snow-white coat and blue trousers tucked into riding boots, a simple red sash adorning his chest. He ran a hand through thick blonde hair, and gazed into the fire. “I am quite certain, Zvonimir, that you understand the disadvantage you and these...women are at.”

Lorelei and Miia stood fast, placid. They weren’t dead yet, but they’d been disarmed, and each was guarded by two men. They threw each other a look; they both knew they’d strike at the first opportunity. Odin willing, they could take out a baker’s dozen before they died.

Lorelei’s stomach fluttered for unrelated reasons. It had felt, as she’d been forced through the room, as if she’d walked over a grave. She still shivered a bit at the sensation.

Malcolm, for his part, was nowhere to be seen.

“What do you want with it?”

Oz laughed. “Surely you jest, Zvonimir? You of all people know the secrets contained within that book could—in the right hands—make a man the ruler of this world and the next. And you know that is my aim.

“But you, Zvonimir—you could improve your situation if you’d like.”

“How so?”

“Turn the Tome over and help me with its secrets. And in return, you will be Grand Vizier in the New Order. When Fowler and George bow down to me, they will bow down to you as well.”



Zvonimir stepped forward a bit, and bowing his head, said, “’Tis better to reign in Hell, I suppose. All right. Here you go.”

“No!” shouted Miia. “He killed—”

“He has killed many, many people. Best he doesn’t kill us, too.” Zvonimir said. He turned, and walked toward the man, holding the Tome out in front of him. “Here it is, Ozymandias,” he said, solemnly, “and here it goes.”

With a careful and quick toss, he directed the book past the outstretched hands of Ozymandias and into the fire behind him. It blazed immediately, consumed by the flame.

“You fool,” said Oz, turning back to the dark figure. “You’ve sealed your fate.”

“Better dead than your servant, Ozymandias.”

“As you wish.” Oz drew a jeweled dagger from his breast pocket, and moved forward as if to strike the professor, when suddenly, there was a whumpf, followed by a squish, and then a thud.

Ozymandias turned toward the sound, and realized that it had been made by Miia driving her first captor’s nose through his brain, causing him to collapse, dead. This surprised everyone, including Miia; she had not intended to act as she did, but her captors had been distracted by Zvonimir’s impending execution. Before her other guard had time to react, she floored him with a roundhouse boot to the head, knocking him cold.

The room went silent. Ozymandias stared down the freed Valkyrie. “What are you waiting for?” he shouted to his minions. “Kill her!”

Lorelei took the opportunity to clothesline one of her guards, but she quickly found herself at the business end of the other’s sword.

“Surprise!” came the roar of a one-foot-tall uruisc, dropping from the rafters on top of the guard’s head, poking him in the eyes. “Now, lass!”

Lorelei spun, elbowed the guard, and stealing his sword impaled him. Deftly, Miia plucked Malcolm from the head of the guard as he fell. “Where’s Radulf?” she asked.

“Good question, lass. She should be entering right about...”

There was a growl as the wolf leapt through a window that had been closed a few minutes before. “Aye, love it when a plan comes together, don’t you?”

The wolf stood before the remaining guards, separating them from their leader. Ozymandias sputtered for a second, then recomposed himself. “Well, well. It seems, Zvonimir, that you’ve found some effective bodyguards there. Two

women and a brownie.”

“I’m an uruisg, you fool.”

“A thousand pardons. But you are all forgetting that outside this house, there are one hundred more of my men. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Oh, Oz. You know damn well where we’re going,” said Zvonimir, smiling. “Cancello!” he roared, throwing his left arm out with surprising grace. A fine mist of blue powder dissipated into the air exactly where Lorelei had felt the chill.

There was a rumble, then a wail. And then a sphere of churning, bubbling air appeared, distorting the world around.

“No time to explain. Everyone in,” he said.

“Not you,” said Lorelei, reclaiming her sword in time to aim it at Oz.

For his part, Ozymandias simply smiled. “Nicely played, Zvonimir. We shall cross paths again.”

“Yes,” said the professor, “we shall.” And he stepped into the sphere and vanished from sight.

“Sblood,” said Malcolm. “Are we really—”

“Yes,” Lorelei muttered. “Unless you think we can beat a hundred soldiers by ourselves.”

Malcolm shrugged, and entered the sphere, and Miia grabbed Radulf by the nape and drug her through.

“Farewell, Ozymandias,” said Lorelei. “I look forward to revenging Herja the next time we meet.”

Ozymandias’ expression, which had been one of bemusement, suddenly morphed into shock. “Wait!” he cried, onrushing her. But it was too late. As she stepped into the sphere, it disappeared, leaving Ozymandias grasping at thin air.

## *Seven*

### *The Kobolds, The Knight and the Corpulent Colonel*

She felt her insides pulled like taffy, felt her world sinking into the background. All she could see was a uniform gray.

No, not uniform—it was pulsing just a bit. Light, then dark. Then light again. Repeating slowly, fractiously.

Then, the mist began to rise, and she saw herself in a forest. She stepped forward, and began to look around, when the crack of a stick behind her sent her whirling.

There was a Valkyrie standing there, taller than her, but unmistakably related. Her face was almost a mirror image, and her hair had the same pattern of red and brown and blonde as her own. She could be her sister. She could be her twin.

She took a step forward, and then stopped.

No, no, that wasn't right. She was the Valkyrie. That was her. The woman she possessed now was the other one, the one from her dreams.

Wasn't she?

Or was she? Wasn't she Lori Green? Lori Green of Clive, Iowa, a student at Iowa State?

Iowa State? What were those words? That was nowhere she'd been. No, she was Lorelei. Lorelei.

She looked up at herself, and started to talk, but found she could not. She looked back at herself, gesturing at her mouth in frustration.

She nodded sadly. And tried to step forward toward herself.

And then, she was being pulled backward, inexorably. No, wait—the Valkyrie was being pulled away.

And then the mist came again, hard and strong and complete, and the world faded completely to black.

‡ ‡ ‡

"She's coming around."

"Easy, now, Lor."

"Give her space. She'll be okay."

Lorelei opened her eyes, and stared up at her friends and Zvonimir. "Ooog," she murmured, shuddering. "Why do I feel like I've been pole-axed?"

"You've come through a collapsing gateway," said Zvonimir. "One I was forcing closed. Never good to be the last one through one of them."

Lorelei rose, and rubbed her temples. "What is a gateway?"

“Ah, lass, don’t get him going. He’ll bore your socks of with discussion of n space and y axes.”

“Well, you asked me to be more specific.”

“We were wrong,” said Miia. “Just tell her the basic version.”

“You’ve come through a gateway between where we were and where we are.”

“Where are we?” said Lorelei, noticing that her arm was already bandaged.

“Nemonia.”

Lorelei’s eyes opened wide. “That’s halfway to Blue Earth!”

“Over half way. Of course, we took a short cut.”

Lorelei stared, then shook her head. “I don’t even want to know. What now?”

“Now,” said Zvonimir, “we go see Hakim.”

“Who’s Hakim?”

“His protégé,” said Miia, wearily. “The one in Two Rivers.”

“He has the only copy of the Tome in the Western lands,” Zvonimir said, “and you will need it if you are to fulfill your destiny.”

“Great,” said Lorelei. “Why don’t we just take a gateway there?”

“It doesn’t work that way. The gateways go from point to point. The one from my house to Nemonia was already extant. It’s why I built my house there. But to create one from Nemonia to Two Rivers—it would be impossible without an assistant in Two Rivers, working in concert. We will have to go overland.”

“Well, then, I guess we’d best. Come on, folks.”

“Can we get some sleep first?”

“No,” said Lorelei, gazing up at Lune. “I’ve had enough dreams for the moment.”

Slowly but surely, the party trudged east.

‡ ‡ ‡

Nemonia had long been coveted by rebel leaders, Kings, and robber barons alike for its fertile lands and its Kobold-run mines. It was no surprise that Reginald Fowler was making his move toward the area; he was just repeating the moves that King George’s great-grandfather (King Prescott the Decadent)

had made when he first seized control of the land.

What Nemonia possessed in wealth, however, it lacked in atmosphere. The sky was a uniform gray, the winds whipped through in just such a way as to alternately chill and cook the unfortunates who inhabited the area, and—well, frankly, there were Kobolds. Their presence would be enough to despoil Shangri-La.

The small-but-growing party was trudging into the rising sun, toward the inaptly named Bella Vista, where they hoped to secure some lodging for long enough to regroup.

“So,” said Lorelei, shuffling along slowly, her head throbbing, “I assume the Cadre wanted the Tome for some reason. What was it?”

“It isn’t just a guide to the things Ian Crouch told you,” said Zvonimir. “It is what it says it is—a guide to gateways. How to make them. How to exploit them.”

“They’re using them, aren’t they?”

“Indeed. And they’ve started to figure out how to create new ones. The Tome suggests how to stabilize them if you have the right materials, how to create them if you have others. It’s not easy—as you will soon see. But they’re learning. And I fear the time that they will have full mastery is nigh. Perhaps even enough of a mastery to create new gates between the worlds.

“So,” said Zvonimir, moving on to another painful subject, “I am given to understand that they are the ones who destroyed your encampment, no?”

“Yes. They caught us by surprise. My sisters fought with everything they had. Miia and I were the only ones left alive.”

“I see. Do you know why they attacked you?”

Lorelei shrugged. “I don’t. I don’t even get them. What are they after?”

“You heard the man—they want power. Raw and unadulterated. Ozymandias sees himself as the future ruler of this land, but he doesn’t want to go about the long military campaign of Fowler. Holding territory, laying siege to cities, winning the hearts and minds of the people—that’s not his style. He’s content instead to let Fowler and George duke it out while he works behind the scenes. When the two armies are at their weakest—that’s when he’ll strike.”

“Then he probably wanted to get the Valkyries out of the way while we weren’t looking,” said Lorelei. “Although he could have just hired us.”

“He’s cavalier with his men. To him, the sacrifice of a hundred foot soldiers is nothing. Where he’s getting them, I don’t know. It’s like he’s got an unending supply. But he’s always got just enough, right when he needs them.”

The road curved into a singularly unattractive forest, and the party shivered,

then sweated.

It was but a few minutes later that they tripped across the Kobolds.

They were a group of four of them, pulling a large cart filled with ore. They stood about five feet high, with tarry black fur matted down where it wasn't covered by battered metal breastplates.

The one on point drew his sword at their approach. "Humans! Out of the road!"

"Really? That's how you ask?" said Lorelei, wearily. "Not even a 'please?' Didn't your mother teach you manners?"

"Out of the road!" the second said, drawing his sword as well. "Or we kill you!"

"All right," said Zvonimir, calmly. "We don't want trouble."

"Bloody Kobolds," muttered Malcolm, as he and Miia moved to the side.

"Meh, they're not worth it," Lorelei said.

They trod past, slowly, laughing in ugly, guttural barks. As they had almost passed, one of the trailers turned, smiled at Lorelei, and spit a gob of yellow pus into her face.

Before she had a chance to draw her sword, a chipper voice broke through the grove. "What have we here? That's no way to treat a lady."

A huge white horse galloped in at top speed, bearing a gleaming suit of armor and a sword, which was drawn and at the ready. "Bow, knave! Unless you'd enjoy the taste of my steel!"

"What is this?" said the Kobold, turning and sneering at the approaching cavalier.

The knight dismounted in a fluid motion and placed the sword at the creature's neck. "I said apologize, Kobold swine! Or would you do so more properly without a head?"

"Sorry," he sneered, and trudged away.

"And you should be!" the knight called out, removing his helmet and smiling broadly. He was handsome enough to serve almost as a parody of the concept, with flowing blonde locks and a trapezoidal jaw and dazzling blue eyes. He turned to Lorelei and said, "A thousand pardons for that display, milady. It is not right that a woman should have to witness such violence."

Lorelei fought the urge to smirk, and instead bowed slightly. "Thank you, good sir knight."

“’Twas my pleasure. Sir Iorwerth Maddox, at your service. And what is your name, fair maiden?”

“Lorelei,” she said, blushing in spite of herself. “Lorelei Voss. And these are my friends, Miia Aalto and Malcolm MacChaluim. And my teacher, Zvonimir Pasternak.”

“Lorelei,” he said. “A lovely name. And where is your party headed with no protector?”

“Well, Sir Iorwerth,” said Miia, “we are armed.”

“Indeed. But two women, an old man, and a manikin does not a fearsome party make. I should be glad to offer my services to you for the pleasure of your company.”

“Well, Sir Iorwerth,” Lorelei said, “We’re going to Two Rivers. I doubt you’d wish to travel that far.”

“For you, fair maiden? I would travel to Angleland and back.”

Lorelei laughed a little at that. He was full of it, and she knew it; nevertheless, she couldn’t help but smile. At the very least, he was being full of it for her benefit. That was a first.

“Well, Sir Iorwerth, we’ll take that one sea at a time. But for now, we’re headed to Bella Vista. We would be glad for your company.”

“And I for yours, my dear. And I for yours.”

‡ ‡ ‡

They booked two rooms at the Giant’s Pinky—one for the men, one for the women. Iorwerth had insisted on it. “Milady, Miia, I would not dream of intruding on your honor,” he had said. “We shall meet for dinner. I await the hour with baited breath.”

“He’s an idiot,” Miia said, when they reached their room.

“You think so?” said Lorelei, grinning. “I think he’s just trying a bit too hard.”

“You could kill him with one hand tied behind your back, Lor! We don’t need his protection.”

“I didn’t invite him along for his protection, Miia.”

“I know,” retorted the brunette, settling to a seat. “I know exactly what you invited him along for. And he is pretty.”

“You’re just jealous,” Lorelei said. “Or you would be, if you weren’t mooning over Malcolm.”

“Whatever are you talking about?”

“Please.”

Miia grinned. “Okay. He’s cute. And he’s...I don’t know...noble, I guess. I mean—he was willing to die for his cause. How can you not love that? If he were five feet taller—or I were five feet shorter....”

“Yeah, well, that can be arranged, you know,” Lorelei said.

“I know,” said Miia, dreamily. “I think he could probably take care of it himself if I found the right herbs for the right potion.”

Lorelei chuckled. “Just give me some warning. And—just a suggestion—I’d go with taller, if I were you.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Miia said. “Whisky is cheaper at his size.”

‡ ‡ ‡

“And that,” said Iorwerth, as the last of the chicken was devoured, “is how Prince Wallace came to knight me.”

“Interesting. And what became of the dragon?” said Miia.

“Oh, that brute had learned his lesson well. He never again troubled the citizens of Freeport, I can promise you that.”

“It’s strange I never heard anything of that; you’d think we would have heard of a dragon attacking Freeport.”

“The war’s fouled up communications,” said Lorelei, shooting her friend a sideways glance. “And I’m glad to hear that Tegwen was reunited with her fiancé. Though that must have been hard for you, given the time you spent with her.”

“Ah...well, milady, she was not mine to pursue. Nothing to be done there. Besides, I was already eager for adventure; it is why I chose to embark on the life of a knight-errant. And I must say, I have been glad for the adventure. Why, I remember one encounter near Byrnesville....”

“I’d love to hear the story, but it is getting late,” said Zvonimir. “I think it best if we retire, don’t you?”

Malcolm nodded. “Not that your stories aren’t well-told, Sir Iorwerth. If you ever quit the knight business, I’d recommend you consider taking up the lute. You’d make a fine bard.”

“Why...thank you, Prince Malcolm. That’s very kind.”

“Still, the Professor is right,” said Miia. “I think it’s time we turned in. Lorelei, don’t you think we should turn in?”

Lorelei smirked at her friend. “You know, Miia, you go ahead. I’ll catch up with



you shortly. I'm interested to hear Iorwerth's story."

Miia rolled her eyes, and said, "Well, summarize it for me when you come back. I'd hate to be in the dark about it. Malcolm, may I lend you a hand?"

The three filed slowly out, leaving Lorelei and Iorwerth, and two glasses of cider.

"'Twas fortunate indeed that Tegwen was engaged," he said, after a time. "For not even she could match your beauty, milady."

"Oh, Sir Iorwerth, thank you. But honestly, you don't have to try as hard as you're trying. I'm not even as pretty as Miia."

"Balderdash. I mean no disrespect to your friend; she's a fine girl, no doubt. But you—well, there is a saying in the language of the Franks: you have *je ne sais qua*."

"Well, thank you. I think. But—well, Sir Iorwerth, with respect to you, I think you should know that while I would welcome your company, we don't need protecting. I've taken the lives of dozens of men in battle, and Miia has taken almost as many; we are both of us Valkyries. Another sword would be welcome—but another sword, not the only one."

"A Valkyrie! My, my, I had heard of such legend, and I am glad to hear that the legends are true. Yet still, milady, I would fain that you defended yourself only as a last resort. I have long believed that a woman should be protected from battle, not forced to engage in it."

"Well—"

"After all, I'm sure you have imagined a life free from battle and want—one with children, and a nice house, and a man who comes home at the end of a long day to your side."

Lorelei frowned, a bit. She would be lying if she said she never had dreamt of such a life. The sisterhood had sacrifices, and many left for just such an existence.

A stable, calm life had an undeniable allure.

But—could she really hang up her sword happily, birth a few tots, and live for her man? It didn't really seem the life for her. Then again, was that any worse than leaping to stay one step ahead of killers and slaying any who crossed her path?

She looked at Iorwerth, and thought maybe, maybe, if everything went right, it might be nice to settle down. To not sleep on edge for once. To simply love and be loved.

At any rate, all she said was, "I have."

"Perhaps, then, someday you shall have it. I should hope someday you should have it. I, too, dream of the day I find the right woman, the one for whom I know I must lay down my sword and end my days of

questing.” He raised his glass. “To the end of the quest.”

Lorelei returned the toast with a mixture of unease and exhilaration.

‡ ‡ ‡

They set out the next day on the road to Blue Earth; Iorwerth had loaded his filly, Wind Dancer, with the packs of the party and with Malcolm. “While she may not be a pack horse by nature, I could not possibly ride while you others were forced to walk. It wouldn’t befit a man; eh, Zvonimir?”

“Eh? Oh, yes, chivalry and whatnot. Lorelei, a word, please.”

Lorelei walked over to the professor, saying nothing.

“I know,” said Zvonimir, “that you like this lad, and that’s fine; women and men are supposed to like one another, it’s part of life. And he seems harmless enough. But I would request that you not forget why you sought me out.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” said Lorelei. “In fact, I’m curious. Yesterday you said that you thought the Cadre could create a gateway between this world and the other. How would they do that?”

“It would not be easy. For one thing, they would need a confederate in the other world, working with them to open the gate. Then they would need more liptumuno than I believe exists, not to mention some ambrosia as a catalyst. And that assumes that these things would work in the other world. The Tome suggests the process there would be altogether different.”

Lorelei was about to ask another question, when they heard a distant rumble.

“What’s that?” asked Miia.

“Tis the sound of a distant army, methinks,” said Iorwerth, blandly.

“It’s the sound of a retreating army,” Lorelei said, listening. “One approaching this position. Miia, go to that rise and take a look.”

Miia obliged, heading quickly up a hill and looking off into the distance. “It’s a Royal Army unit; perhaps two thousand men under arms, five hundred of that cavalry. They look like they’ve seen better days.”

“Best to cut them a wide berth,” said Lorelei, frowning. “Let’s go into the woods for a bit.”

“Milady—should we not go to them?” asked Iorwerth.

Lorelei frowned. Iorwerth was a knight; he was probably duty-bound to go with the King’s army, such as it was. But she knew the King’s army all too well; they had scored some victories in the preceding years—with assistance from the Valkyries and some other mercenaries. But when they fought alone, Fowler’s rebels invariably beat them. Indeed, the fact that the King’s army was here

suggested Bella Vista would soon be falling. If Fowler could push south to Novi, this war would be over soon.

“I believe this would delay us in our quest,” said Lorelei. “And I do not wish to delay. Besides, you could be hurt.”

“Ah, it is lovely of you to think of my safety, milady. I should honor Prince Wallace. But if you think it best we avoid them—”

“It’s too late,” Miia noted. “Scouts approaching.”

Zvonimir simply sighed, and said, “It’s a good thing I’m too old to be conscripted.”

“It’s a good thing we’re too female,” added Miia, looking pointedly at Lorelei.

“And I’m too short, I imagine,” said Malcolm. “Come on, lasses, let’s prepare to go on without him.”

Lorelei was dubious. She knew that it might not be the best idea. But she couldn’t let Iorwerth go off alone.

‡ ‡ ‡

It was not much later that the party found themselves in the presence of Colonel Oliver Chase, commander of His Majesty’s Royal Fourth Army. He was perched atop a dapple horse much as a turkey might perch atop a mouse.

“Well, well, Sir Iorwerth, good show, volunteering and whatnot. I’m not sure we need you in the cavalry, but you’ll be surely helpful keeping the boojums and the snarks off our flank.”

“The boojums and snarks, Colonel?”

“Yes, yes, boojums and snarks. Not their proper names, of course. You see, Fowler has been dealing with some black wizards who have provided him with some rather nasty beasts. Not very sporting, of course, but Fowler never has been.”

“Well, Colonel, you can count on me. Sorry, milady,” he said to Lorelei, “but we shall have to part for now. Duty calls.”

“Wait a minute,” said Lorelei. “Colonel, can you describe these...’boojums?’”

“Describe them?”

“Yes. Describe them.”

“Well they’re...um, you see, they’re much like...uh, perhaps if I...er, no. Not as such.”

Lorelei sighed, heavily. “So you don’t know if they’re something one man can

tackle.”

“Well, I rather think they would be more than a man could handle. They ate five of my men yesterday. But a knight—that’s another story.”

“Come on, Lor,” said Miia. “You’re not saying what I know you’re going to say.”

“We’re staying,” said Lorelei.

“Staying?” chortled the Colonel. “Women? In combat? That’ll be the day!”

Lorelei smiled. She knew Miia didn’t particularly want to stay—but she knew also that she wouldn’t let that insult pass.

“It seems to me that you’re here, Colonel, because I slew one of Fowler’s men at the Battle of the Western Plains,” said Miia. “You may remember him—bald, van Dyke, one eye?”

The Colonel’s face went white as his memory was jogged. “You’re a bloody Valkyrie?”

“Yes, Colonel,” Lorelei said. “We’re staying.”

“Lorelei! I couldn’t possibly,” Iorwerth protested.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Miia.

“Trust me.”

Miia sighed heavily, but she knew better than to argue when Lorelei set her mind. “Well, what the heck. I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“I’m in too, lass. Someone’s got to keep an eye on you two.”

“I would not ordinarily,” said Zvonimir. “But it seems that this may be a good place to avoid the Cadre. For the moment.”

“It’s settled, Iorwerth,” said Lorelei sweetly. “We’re not leaving you.”

Iorwerth’s eyes appeared to water. “I—I shan’t forget this, Lorelei.”

“Right,” said the Colonel. “Move out!”

The party was absorbed into the rabble, and the army marched on.

*Eight*

*The Boojum*

Two days later, Lorelei felt better than she had since just before the attack.

She was surprised at how quickly she fell into the routine. Although the men in Chase's unit were not up to the standard she was used to, the military existence was familiar enough for her to feel almost at home.

It wasn't that she enjoyed the routine—she grumbled like anyone else. But the routine itself was liberating. There wasn't any questioning where to go to next, or what a vision meant, or whether she was “chosen”—whatever that meant. She just soldiered on.

More than that, she was getting to spend time with Iorwerth, and she felt almost giddy whenever she was around him. He wasn't up to the standard of your typical Valkyrie either, at least in fighting skill—but frankly, who was? She liked him, though, even though he had a tendency to talk about himself a bit too much. He was gallant, and kind, and flattered her to a ridiculous degree. It was transparent, of course.

But that didn't mean she didn't enjoy it.

At any rate, she was in a generally good mood, tempered only by the fact that nobody else in her party particularly was.

Miia was holding her counsel, but she was far from chipper. The most she'd say was that she was not going to leave. Zvonimir would talk to her about gating and suggest they should look for something he called unglaubium—but not much else. And Malcolm—well, actually, Malcolm was taking to it just fine. But he seemed to take to everything just fine.

Lorelei hoped that their sojourn wouldn't last long; she did want to get on to Two Rivers. But she didn't want to abandon Iorwerth.

“Hold up!” shouted the Colonel, echoed quickly by his lieutenants.

The army slowly ground to a halt at the edge of the forest outside of Bella Vista. Lorelei looked to the west, into the setting sun. It backlit a small grove, which at first blush appeared just like any other stand of trees.

But as Lorelei looked at the stand, she felt a wave of unease pass over her. At first she didn't know why, but then she saw at the edge of the grove a figure shuffling gracelessly against the black.

She looked into the distance and felt the terror again. “What is it?” she asked, neither expecting an answer nor particularly desiring one.

“It's the boojum,” said a quaking soldier, who appeared just shy of fourteen. “He's come back for us.”

Lorelei swallowed hard. She'd never felt this kind of terror before.

“Bloody,” whispered Iorwerth. “I've never seen its like.”

“That’s him,” said the Colonel, riding back to their position. “Sir Iorwerth, I assume you will take him out for us?”

“I—uh, that is—that’s really the boojum?”

“It is,” said the Colonel. “And good luck to you; I’m going to march us away from here. I can’t stand the thing.”

Iorwerth looked ashen, and seemed about to say something until he looked back at Lorelei. Swallowing hard, he nodded.

“Wait,” said Lorelei. “I’m going too.”

“Are you mad?” asked Miia.

“It’s one creature,” Lorelei replied, trying to sound calmer than she was. “It can’t be that tough. Probably.”

Miia gripped her sword. “I didn’t stick around to let you go in alone.”

“Well, good luck to you three,” said Zvonimir, “but I think Malcolm and I will remain here.”

“Speak for yourself, professor,” the uruig said, stepping boldly forward, if one can do so while trembling. “I’m in.”

“I—uh—right then. Let’s...” Iorwerth trailed off, and simply shrugged his command.

The creature was standing still, looking at them quizzically. It certainly seemed unconcerned that an armed party was approaching it. As they grew nearer, Lorelei could see that its face was almost human, just different enough to be truly and horribly grotesque. It fixed her with fiery eyes, and grinned with a gleaming white row of what appeared to be triple the usual complement of teeth. It raised its sword and shield into position, and rumbled, “Come.”

“We should go back,” said Miia.

“Oh, yes,” said Lorelei. “Wait. No. No. He’s...he’s clouding our minds with panic.”

“I don’t know if he’s doing it or not,” said Malcolm. “But I’m inclined to agree with Miia.”

Iorwerth, for his part, was simply repeating, over and over, “I am a knight, and I shall fight to the death against all my enemies...I am a knight, and I shall fight to the death against all my enemies....I am a knight....”

“All right,” said Lorelei. “Uh...Iorwerth, you on point, Miia and I will flank you. Malcolm, hold back and keep an eye on things. I want you to...uh...to warn us if need be.”

“Come.”

“Ready?”

“No.”

“I shall fight to the death...”

“Now!”

They fell into a quick trot—well, Lorelei and Miia did. Actually, to be fair, Miia was stumbling forward, and Lorelei could barely focus on the creature as she ran. His eyes seemed to shoot flame, his teeth appeared to drip with blood. As she watched, his face seemed to melt away into a garish, fetid slop, disgusting and revolting.

She raised her sword to strike and brought her sword down with all the force she could muster; the creature’s shield absorbed the blow. She spun slowly, as if in a dream, and parried, just avoiding the counterstrike.

She was in over her head. Stupid of her to do this. She couldn’t defeat him. He was too strong. It was just like when she saw the Cadre overwhelm the lines, like when she saw Miia holding Herja’s head in her hands, like when she saw her first battle, like when she was raped.

She tried to fight through the terror, tried to quell the overwhelming panic. She saw, distantly, Miia and Iorwerth both attacking, both being attacked. The creature threw Iorwerth to the ground, and then prepared to strike.

As if by its own accord, Lorelei’s sword swung into action, cutting the creature to the quick. With its anger, she felt the terror roll over her, of being alone in the forest. She was little. She was two. Her mommy lay dead, behind her, attacked by the bear. She had watched it tear her mommy’s head off. Her daddy had died the year before of some wasting disease. And she was alone. Alone! And her mommy wasn’t moving, and she was so scared, so scared, and she just wanted her mommy back....

“Lorelei,” a voice said, quietly.

“Please, mommy, get up.”

“Lorelei,” it said, more insistently.

“Please.”

“Lorelei!”

The world cleared, and Miia looked down at her, eyes wide.

“Miia...?”

“Phew! Thank Odin. You really need to stop crying.”

“What happened?” she murmured, noting that the sky was now pitch black, save for the stars.

“You’ve been out for about a day. You saved us both—Phobos was going for the killing blow on Iorwerth, and he would’ve got me next. I don’t know how you kept your head about you.”

“Phobos?”

“The creature. Actually, Malcolm and Zvonimir have been arguing over his name—Malcolm says Phobos, Zvonimir says Timor—I don’t know as it matters, really. He’s a fear monster.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” said Lorelei, shaking her head to try to clear out the echoes of the nightmare. “Why did I end up unconscious?”

“You actually got your sword on it. You killed him, but you took his last blow.”

“Ah. Remind me to not do that again.”

“Done. At any rate, I’m just glad to be alive.”

“Ditto. Speaking of which, where’s Iorwerth? We’ve slain the boojum, I want out.”

“He’s with the Colonel,” said Miia, rolling her eyes. “I’ll take you to him.”

‡ ‡ ‡

The fire burned brightly and was wreathed by laughter. It was a convivial atmosphere, one that was inviting as it was familiar—soldiers at the end of the day, swapping war stories.

Lorelei approached unsteadily; she was still feeling waves of panic, and although they faded quickly, she found herself almost embarrassed of them. She wasn’t supposed to feel the fear it had made her feel. She was supposed to be made of sterner stuff.

“...and so we saw the boojum. He was two Fa high if he was an inch, with eyes of fire and gleaming black teeth.”

The voice was Iorwerth’s. Lorelei sighed with relief; he sounded in good spirit.

“I told the girls to flank me. I wanted him myself. I charged in, shouting ‘Revenge!’ He tried to spook me, but I held myself strong. At one point, he threw Lorelei down hard—she’d advanced a bit faster than she should’ve. ‘You’ll pay for that,’ I cried, and struck.”

Lorelei stepped into the circle, her heart pounding. Iorwerth was clutching a



glass of something-or-other, smiling as the men cheered his triumph. His smile broadened as he looked around, until he saw her.

“Lorelei! You’re—uh—awake!”

“Yes, Sir Iorwerth. Your concern is deeply appreciated, I’m sure.”

“Well—um...I mean...that is, what I was saying, was, uh...”

“Oh, don’t let me stop you from telling your stories of glory, Sir Iorwerth. I wouldn’t dream of interrupting.”

“Well...I mean...that’s really all there is to it. I’m...well, I’m truly grateful that Lorelei made it through okay—I mean, you can all see she did. She fought gallantly. She was the greatest female warrior I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” said Lorelei, coldly. “It seems to me that a woman who simply got clobbered for advancing too quickly must have been a terrible hindrance to you.”

There was silence, before she concluded, “Don’t let me keep you. Enjoy the revelry. Farewell, Iorwerth.”

She didn’t wait for an answer. She simply turned on her heel and walked away, tears clouding her vision.

“Wait!” she heard from behind her. “Lorelei, wait!”

She kept walking for a long way—for a minute, maybe longer, as he called to her. She stopped only when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“What,” she said, staring him down. “Did you want me to faint so you could ‘revive’ me?”

“Lorelei, I’m sorry,” said Iorwerth, fumbling. “I—they started talking about how I was a hero. I tried to tell them that you’d slain the boojum, but the Colonel had everyone saluting me, said he’d make me his chief deputy, maybe even recommend me to King George as an advisor. Me! I—I went along with it. And that was stupid. You saved my life. You deserved better.”

Lorelei softened, a bit. “Why weren’t you with me? Why was it Miia there, and not you?”

“I was with you the entire day, Lorelei. I only left at sundown, at the Colonel’s request. Had I known you’d be awakening, I would have ignored him. I thank God you’re all right. Even if you hate me, Lorelei, I’m glad of that.”

She sighed, and shook her head. “Look, I don’t hate you. But this wasn’t a good thing you did, Iorwerth. You shouldn’t take credit for someone else’s accomplishments.”

“I know,” he said, and he surprised her.

He started to cry.

“Now, now, none of that,” she said. “If you’d cleared it with me ahead of time, I might have been less angry. I know King George isn’t going to have any female advisors anytime soon.”

“His loss,” said Iorwerth. “Whether they know it or not, you’re not just the best female warrior I’ve ever seen. You’re the best I’ve ever known. Far better than I’ll ever be.”

Lorelei looked at him, and smiled. “One never knows, Iorwerth,” she said, and then she surprised him, and herself.

She kissed him. Not a passionate kiss, but a quick buss that sealed his reprieve.

He responded in kind, and then, with a bit more. She didn’t raise an objection.

After forever, they finally broke, and she sighed happily. “Now, go tell your tales. Just try to put in a good word for me.”

“I—am unworthy of you, milady.”

She turned, and said coquettishly, “Don’t forget it.”

## *Nine*

### *A Brief Encounter in a Strange Place*

She walked through the campus, breath fogging in the unseasonably cold fall evening. Her pace was quick but steady. Nobody looking at her would have thought much of her, other than that she was a fairly typical coed on a fairly typical college campus. She was pretty, but not gorgeous; dressed modestly, but not primly. She fit well within the median. Indeed, even when she paused a moment and shook her head, most people wouldn’t have given her more than a passing glance.

“You’re seeing this now, aren’t you?” the woman muttered to herself, all too aware of the feeling of someone looking over her shoulder. There was no answer of course, not that she was expecting one. Still, she sensed some relief at the words she spoke; the warmth of being welcomed. Real or imagined, she didn’t know.

“Well,” she sighed, as she headed into a bland, industrial dormitory, “I hope that you’re able to make some sense of what’s going on, anyhow. More than I’ve been able to.”

She entered the foyer, flashed her ID to the front desk clerk out of rote habit, and heard a voice from behind her.

“Hey, Lori! Hold up a second!”

She sighed, and turned around. “Hi, Molly. ‘Sup?”

The girl—Lori’s friend—ran a hand absently through her dark hair. “Anna and I are going out to the bars tonight. You want to come?”

“Huh? No, I don’t think so. I just don’t feel up to it.”

The two boarded the elevator simultaneously. As it shut, Molly murmured, “Are you having other visions?”

“I never should’ve told anyone about those.”

Molly looked at her, a little hurt. “Come on, Lori. I’m your friend. Anna is too. We haven’t told anyone else. Swear. ”

“Oh, it’s not that,” said Lori, closing her eyes tightly as if it would block out reality. “I can run down all the simple Freudian analyses of my dreams, of why it is the woman in my visions seems to be falling in love, of the meaning of her teacher Zvonimir, even the meaning of the little man. And some of it seems like it must be related to this world. Miia looks just like you, you know.”

“Maya. Don’t like the name. But it’s better than Zvonimal.”

“Zvonimir. And I can’t help it,” said Lori. “But—I mean, I can tell you why the dreams are simply manifestations of my subconscious. Just dreams. Nothing more.”

“You don’t believe that,” said Molly, calmly.

“No, I don’t,” said Lori, as the elevator dinged and opened. “Not for a second.”

“Then what do you believe?” Molly asked, following along.

“I believe that whatever I’m seeing is real,” said Lori, the answer surprising herself. “At least, it doesn’t seem to be a dream.”

“It could be a past life,” said Anna, intercepting the two as they passed the study lounge.

Molly burst out laughing. “Have you been laying in wait?”

Anna smiled broadly. “My sixth sense is acting up again. What do you think? Your story has a lot in common with memories of a life lived before, including some crossover of ‘fellow travelers’ like Molly and me, and your shrink.”

“I know what you’re saying, but—well, she’s said things in my visions that make me think that this thing goes both directions.”

The two others were silent for a moment, before Molly said, “You mean she’s having visions of being you, like you’re having of her?”

“I think,” said Lori, weighing her words carefully, “that is going on as we speak.”

Molly’s eyes widened to saucer size. Anna merely looked absent for a moment, before saying, “Have you ever heard of dark matter?”

If anything, Molly’s eyes grew wider as she tried to suss the non sequitur. Lori, however, looked up with interest. “It rings a bell. Something about gravity and galaxies, right?”

“Something like that. When scientists look at galaxies, they seem to be moving too fast. It’s like they’re filled with ten times the stuff that they should be. If they were made up of just the stuff we can see, they should fly apart.

“They’re held together by the dark matter, and dark energy. It’s like ninety percent of the universe is hidden.”

“Well, what’s dark matter made out of?” queried Lori.

“Nobody knows.”

Molly shook her head. “That’s fascinating, Anna, but—what the heck are you talking about?”

“Molly, what if that ninety percent of the universe is other universes, other worlds? What if Lori is one of the few on this world capable of seeing that other world?”

“Peering through a darkened window,” said Lori, remembering a dreamed conversation, as she reached the dorm room she and Molly shared.

“It would explain what you’re seeing.”

“Yeah, well, so would insanity.”

Molly pulled her friend into a bear hug, one which Anna quickly joined. “Lori, trust me. You’re not crazy. I don’t get this thing, but you don’t seem to have any trouble telling this world from the other one. I don’t know what you’re seeing, but if you think it’s real, it’s real.”

There was a wolf whistle from down the hall, and the three broke quickly. “God, guys on this floor are idiots. So will you go out with us tonight, Lori?”

Lori smiled at Anna and Molly. “Yeah, I suppose. After all, if I don’t, I’m just going to end up googling stuff that doesn’t exist.”

“Cool. Grab your fake and let’s go! Who knows, maybe you’ll hook up.”

Lori laughed. “Yeah, maybe. I can’t let Lorelei be the only one of us getting some.”

“Now that dream,” said Molly, grinning archly, “sounds like a good one.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei’s eyes snapped open wide. She felt no more awake than she had moments before, but she was in control of this body in this world.

She sat up and hugged her knees. She didn’t understand every detail of the conversation—some idioms in that world failed to translate (though she supposed the reverse was true). But it was clear her doppelgänger was as confused as she.

“Dark matter,” she muttered to herself. That seemed like something to talk to Zvonimir about.

Radulf walked over to her and lay down at her feet. “Hey, girl. Yeah, I know this is odd.”

She closed her eyes, and saw a flash of blonde hair intercepting a dagger aimed at her heart.

She wished she’d gotten to know Annalie as a friend. They had been, for a time. Oh, they’d fallen out before the Battle of the Western Plains—they were the leaders in their group, their rivalry had started friendly and grown bitter. Lorelei had always assumed it was Annalie’s jealousy that had caused the rift, but she was beginning to wonder.

Anna seemed like a good friend. If Zvonimir was right, and the other world was both real and more rational, then doubtless Lori’s visions were considered even more troubling than her own. It was no surprise that Molly was standing by her, but the fact that Anna was too....

Lorelei sighed wearily. She should have tried harder with Annalie. She probably lost a chance at a friend.

After an interminable time, she looked at the wolf. “Radulf,” she said, “I didn’t lose a chance at a friend. Annalie was a better friend to me than I ever could have deserved.”

She hoped the alternate her was a good friend to Anna. She hoped she made up in that world for her sins in this.

‡ ‡ ‡

“Interesting,” said Zvonimir, as Lorelei completed the reporting of her latest vision. (With the exception

of the last little bit, of course. No need to mention that she was “getting some” from Iorwerth—whatever that phrase meant. Okay, she could pretty much guess what it meant.) “This Anna seems quite perceptive.”

“Yeah,” came the slightly despairing reply. Then, “Does this help at all?”

“Well, possibly. I wish I’d not had the Tome liberated from me, but I recall a passage that refers to unglaubium as ‘The tarry black which binds the heav’nly host,’ that could be this dark matter to which she referred. Of course, I’m not certain I quite grasp what a ‘galaxy’ is, but her reference to astrologers indicates it must be related to the motion of the stars.”

“You know, I think she knew I was there.”

“Yes, you said.”

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel that I was being watched right now.”

Zvonimir arched an eyebrow. “Really? You think your permutation may be witnessing our discussion?”

“Possibly. I don’t know—it’s just a sense.”

“Don’t discount your senses, Lorelei. She isn’t. No, I suspect it is possible that Lori is present with us as we speak.”

Lorelei flailed helplessly for words. Finally, she stuttered, “What do I say to her?”

“I think, Lorelei, you should greet her.”

Lorelei sat, staring ahead for a moment, before she said, simply, “You’ve been a good host, Lori. And no, I’ve had no more luck figuring this out than you—as I’m sure you can see.

“But—if you see through my eyes, I hope you can see that we’re both trying to figure this out from our own side. I hope that one of us does. I don’t think you’re enjoying this any more than I am.”

Only silence greeted her, of course. But that was as she expected. Somehow, though, she felt a bit satisfied—warmed by her words of welcome. Real or imagined, she didn’t know which.

## *Ten*

### *The Moment of Truth*

Miia was not overwhelmingly pleased with her friend, that much was certain.

Lorelei had tried to explain why it was that she’d forgiven Iorwerth for—well, she thought of it as “embellishing,” which was a good way for her to avoid

thinking of it as “lying.” But her explanation wasn’t especially convincing, as she could give no rational reason for it herself.

Well, maybe she could. But she didn’t want to tell Miia that part of the reason she’d been able to forgive Iorwerth his bravado was that it was depressingly familiar to her; as strange as it was, his taking credit above that he was due made him something of a kindred spirit.

Instead, she’d simply said, “He’s not bad, Miia. He’s just not perfect. He’s allowed to be imperfect.”

“That’s fine, Lor. I don’t care if he’s perfect. But I don’t think he sees you the way he should.”

“Which is as what?”

Miia rolled her eyes. “Well, it’s not a damsel in distress, that’s for damn sure.”

“Maybe I’d like to be,” Lorelei said, petulantly. “Maybe, just once, I wouldn’t mind being rescued.”

“And you think he’s going to rescue you?”

“Maybe.”

“You’re an idiot.”

The conversation went downhill from there until it sputtered to a halt. Finally, with a groan, Miia did what any good friend should do—she closed by saying that she respected Lorelei’s decision, she wouldn’t say any more about it, and so on and so forth. Lorelei knew that Miia meant absolutely none of what she was saying, of course, but like any good friend should, she accepted it, and said, simply, “I promise, I’ll be sure to keep my wits about me.”

“It’s not easy, I know, Lorelei. He is pretty. And I’ll give him this: he was fighting hard. Just not as well as you.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t just him I saved.”

Miia grinned, sheepishly. “I think I owe you two now.”

“Three. Don’t forget the Trail of Sorrows.”

“Never gonna let me forget that, are you?”

“You charged, unarmed, after a Kobold. You think I should let you forget that?”

Miia stuck her tongue out. “He called me a whore. I had to defend my honor.”

“At least you’ve learned to grab your sword first.”

“Okay, if we’re going to count Trail of Sorrows, then I’m going to have to count our training excursion in the Great Southern Desert.”

Lorelei gasped in mock indignation. “Is that ~~never~~ speaking of this again?”

‡ ‡ ‡

The morning was near-perfect—a rarity for Nemonia—and Lorelei was feeling a bit better. Miia could have been more obstinate; Zvonimir was providing her with good information. And she’d managed to steal a couple kisses that left her feeling gooey and disconnected from her troubles.

So it was inevitable that Fowler’s army would choose around noontime to attack.

They weren’t caught totally unawares. The sentinels saw the army approaching a few minutes before the attack, which gave the Royals just enough time to muster and arm themselves.

“So, I imagine this would be a bad time to leave?” asked Zvonimir, appraising the sword he’d been given as one might inspect an angry asp.

“It wouldn’t be right,” said Lorelei. “We said we’d help. We can’t go back on our word.”

“Let me just remind you,” said Miia, “that some of us didn’t want to help in the first place.”

“Lass,” said Malcolm, reproachfully, as he pummeled some gray power into finer gray powder, “nobody likes to hear ‘I told you so.’ Even if ‘tis true.”

“People like to say it.”

“Aye. I said nothing of that.”

“Steady, men!” called Iorwerth, riding tall in the saddle. “This is where legends are made! Where heroes are minted! Stand ready for their attack!”

“He’s in command?” murmured Miia.

“The Colonel’s in command. Yorrie is just leading part of the right flank.”

“?Yorrie?”

Lorelei blushed.

“You do realize you’re ?Yorrie and Lorie,’ don’t you?”



Lorelei shot a look at her friend that bore the approximate force of a concussive fireball. Miia simply lifted the corner of her mouth into a remorseless half-smile.

“Lorelei, Miia, move back off the front. I don’t want you hurt.”

“Sir Iorwerth,” replied Lorelei, “I appreciate that. But we know what we’re doing. Worry about Zvonimir,” she said, gesturing to the professor, who was holding his sword in a position that would cause him to impale himself if he was bumped by anything stronger than a stick.

“Lord,” replied Iorwerth. Then, to Lorelei: “Mithras protect you.”

“Battle-eager, and avenge us thus on thee, vile source of strife,” recited Lorelei. “Odin go with you.”

She felt the stirring of the fight anew as the armies approached each other. It wasn’t the unthinking devotion she’d felt with her sisters, or even the quiet confidence she’d felt confronting the ardbeg or the urusks. It was something else.

Something she’d felt in the woods, two days ago.

Fear.

“Calm yourself,” she said, bringing her sword up. “It’s just the hangover from Phobos.” She hoped if she said it, she’d believe it.

The roar was deafening. The armies were close, now, close enough for her to see that Fowler’s army had, at first blush, superior numbers. The banner of Fowler—gules with cannon or and argent, baston sinister sable—fluttered high above the gathered throng. They were organized, disciplined, battle-hardened. They were far superior to the force she had seen a few years earlier.

It was no wonder that Fowler had taken so much territory. He had a superior army to the ragtag group they’d fallen in with.

The time for musing was over quickly, though. Soon enough, the battle was joined.

The arrows rained heavy into the line; Lorelei got her shield up out of instinct well ahead of the volley; a few pinged off the steel, but nothing drew blood.

They rode out the deluge for but a moment, when Malcolm spoke.

“Enough of this. Miia, if you’d be so kind as to boost me?”

“Malcolm, what are you up to?”

“Just a parlor trick, lass. Quickly.”

Lorelei glanced over, saw Miia hoist Malcolm to eye level, keeping both safe behind her shield. “Now what?”

“Now,” said the uruisg, “throw me as high into the air as you possibly can.”

“Uh, Malcolm? Miia can probably throw you pretty high.”

“Aye, Lorelei, I’m counting on it.”

“Aren’t you a bit concerned about coming down?”

“That’s why Miia’s going to have to catch me, isn’t it?”

Miia looked at him with concern. “Uh...Malcolm, are you sure about this? What if I don’t catch you?”

“Well, ’tis best to dread the worst, for the best will be all the more welcome. Now heave, Miia, with all you’ve got.”

Miia swallowed and heaved, straight up and true, and Malcolm spun in a graceful pirouette that left Lorelei gasping. He faced Fowler’s army, and paying no attention to an arrow passing inches from him with a wheet, he stretched his hands forward and opened them.

He seemed to hang in midair far longer than gravity usually allowed. A spray of gray powder jetted forth from his hands, propelled by unseen forces at insane speeds. Suddenly, about halfway between the armies, it ignited into a purplish-blue flame, and exploded.

The concussion from the wall of fire knocked the fighters backward, and sent Malcolm flying. Miia stumbled, but quickly regained her balance and raced backward, lunging and diving and at the last possible second, plucking Malcolm from the air.

“See? Nothing to it!” shouted Malcolm.

Lorelei watched the flame advance on the opposing army before burning out. It had done its damage; most of the opposing flank was in chaos.

“What was that?” asked Lorelei.

“Nothing much. A patch of seed of bohun upas, mixed with some guano and some phosphorus, plus the last of the ambrosia. Makes a powerful explosive when combined.”

“He’s being too modest,” said Zvonimir, dusting himself. “’Twas Loki’s Breath, no?”

Loki’s Breath—she knew of it, of course. Of the Valkyries, only Herja herself

had conjured it, and then, only once. It was not exactly forbidden, though like anything connected to the Trickster it was looked on dubiously. But more than that, it was hellaciously difficult to create. Only a mage of great power...or a learned faerie....

But her musing was cut short. Time is life in battle, and Chase was already exhorting his men forward against the confused and bedraggled army they appeared to face. The Royals rushed into the teeth of the Fowlerites with reckless zeal, convinced that Malcolm's "parlor trick" had provided them the opportunity for triumph.

They were utterly surprised when the Fowlerites turned and hastily charged themselves.

Lorelei saw the trap as it developed. A cadre of troops were streaming off of the center of the Fowler line, quickly filling the ranks of their battered left flank. Far down the line, she sensed they were already in full attack mode; bloodied though they were, the Fowlerites were still the superior force.

The lines collided in chaos and bloodshed. Almost before she knew it, she was blocking and defending against the infantry of the opposing side. She ran through two men, and managed to slice the back of another's ankle, sending him down to the ground to certain death amidst the melee. "Malcolm! Any more Loki's Breath?"

"'Tis a one-shot attack, milady. I need time to prepare. I'm sorry."

"Why? If you hadn't hit 'em, we'd be dead already."

Another soldier broke through the line, and found himself suddenly taken down by a very angry wolf. "Nice, Radulf!" shouted Lorelei, slicing the leg of a cavalier.

"The battle's lost," said Miia, who was dispatching her own attacker.

Lorelei looked at the attacking army, looked at the rapidly dwindling Royals, and knew that Miia was right.

She knew what she had to do. "Miia!"

"Yes, Lor?"

"Take Malcolm, Radulf, and Zvonimir. Get 'em out of here."

"What?"

"You heard me," she said, slicing an attacker's throat and giving herself some breathing room. "I'll meet you later."

"I'm not leaving," Miia said, though she had her hands full just keeping people off of the professor, who was gamely trying not to vivisect himself.

"Zvonimir isn't going to last long here. Malcolm's done enough. You need to defend them. I can take care of myself."

They had worked themselves to the edge of the line. "Quickly, into the woods."

Miia looked at the conflagration, looked at the professor, looked at the prince. "All right," she said. "Are you coming?"

Lorelei looked back at her friend. "Someone has to hold them off while you go. Besides, I can't leave Iorwerth. Not like that."

Miia looked at her, sword ready, and said, simply, "I understand. Meet us in Blue Earth.. We'll wait for you, Lor. Forever, if we must."

Lorelei nodded, then tossed Miia a pouch. "Here," she said. "You'll need these."

With a nod, Miia pushed Zvonimir toward the woods. "Go, professor! Now!"

Lorelei didn't have the luxury of watching her friends depart; she had been spotted as a solitary figure, and already three soldiers were onrushing her. She bent low, sword out, shield high. They may kill her, but her friends would be safe.

It was enough.

She took the first with a swipe of her sword, knocked the second down with her shield. She turned to face the third, when she was leg-whipped; the blackguard had swept her as he fell. She dropped to the ground, as the third soldier—an oily wreck of a brute—raised his sword in a killing stroke.

Unfortunately for him, his head did not remain attached long enough to command the blow.

He fell down, revealing a white horse and a mounted knight, face inscrutable behind his mask. Lorelei smiled, and swung her sword back on instinct, piercing the stomach of the final living attacker. "Good timing," she said.

Iorwerth was quiet, but held out his hand. Lorelei grabbed it, and he clumsily pulled her onto the horse behind him. "Where are the others?" he asked in a hoarse croak.

"We were separated," Lorelei said, half-truthfully.

There was a roar as the Fowlerites broke through the center of the line, and Iorwerth urged Wind Dancer into a full gallop across the line, toward Blue Earth.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m getting us out of here,” he said. “This is no place for anyone.”

“Yorrie. Yorrie! Slow down! If you double back—Yorrie!” she called, as he urged Wind Dancer overland, the sound of cannon fire heralding the beginning of the end for the Royal Fourth Army. But Iorwerth was a man driven, zigzagging in and out. He did not let up on his steed until they reached a grove twenty minutes distant.

† † †

Lorelei comforted Wind Dancer. She was apprehensive and exhausted after her long gallop, no doubt the farthest she’d run in some time, perhaps ever. Iorwerth leaned against a tree, helm at his side, eyes closed. Lorelei gave him a wide berth; she knew the signs of this particular strain of madness, and she knew it was pointless to push him before he was ready.

She thought back to the sisters who had stormed into their first battle, only to crack under the strain; dear Gudrun had never recovered after the Battle of the Western Plains, and had been quietly apprenticed to a seamstress in Blue Earth. (Indeed, she was probably still there; Lorelei resolved to seek her out. Those cast out were not shunned, nor were they looked down upon; they were always Daughters of Odin, and if they did not have the temperament of a Valkyrie, then obviously He had other plans for them.)

Instead, she hitched Wind Dancer to a tree and set about gathering some apples and berries for dinner; she could’ve built a trap, but she’d seen enough blood for one day. She had no will to butcher an animal tonight.

After an interminable time, as the crepuscular wood began its slow transformation into the province of owls and bats, Iorwerth spoke.

“So, I imagine you’re pretty disappointed in my performance back there.”

“Not really,” said Lorelei. “Just a bit surprised. It’s not the first time you’ve faced battle.”

“Yeah, it was,” said Iorwerth, hangdog and quietly. “That kind of battle, anyhow.”

“But what about the battle you fought in Glen Margaret? You said you killed four men that day.”

“I...I may have embellished a bit. It was...nothing like today, that’s for sure.”

Lorelei looked at him, dumbfounded and angry. It took her a while before she could compose herself enough to lash out. “Yorrie, you told the Colonel that

you had battle experience. That's why he gave you command of the far right flank."

"I know."

"War isn't a game, Yorrie! That debacle back there may not have been preventable, but you shouldn't have assumed the position you were in. Your inexperience probably cost lives!"

At this, Iorwerth began to sob, uncontrollably. Lorelei stopped her assault dead in its tracks. She was pushing him too hard here, she thought, too soon. Not that she was wrong. Just that he couldn't take it now.

"Look," she said, evenly. "In the end, you ordered the men to advance based on orders from the Colonel. And that was a disaster in the making, no doubt. But you can't go around pretending to be something you're not, Yorrie. That just leads to ruin."

"I know," he said, leaning his head back, staring into the sky as if looking for absolution. "I wanted to tell him, but...I'd already told you and Miia..."

He suddenly went white.

"Oh, my God. Miia! Zvonimir! Did they—"

"No," said Lorelei. "I told you, we were separated. They went into wood to the south of the battlefield; I was trying to tell you to head into there, but you weren't hearing anything."

"Oh, sweet Mithras, I'm an idiot," said Iorwerth. "I don't even know where we are. How are we going to find them?"

"We're to meet up in Blue Earth. Which is where we're heading next. But not tonight; tonight, we need to rest, and eat a bit of food, and sleep off the battle. Tomorrow will be soon enough to figure out where we are. I already have some idea, I think; we're probably about halfway between Bella Vista and Blue Earth, somewhat north of the High Road."

"Do you think we're, what, a day away?"

"Probably two. We'll go into town. I must confess, I have no money; I gave my pouch to Miia."

"I have a few gold pieces," said Iorwerth. "It should be enough for a few days, anyhow."

He was silent for some time, and then said, "Do you remember Lyle?"

Lorelei thought for a second. "He was the Colonel's page, right?"

"Something of a junior page. No more than thirteen. He's a good kid, you know. So many children are cynical or surly, but not him. No, he was always at the ready, always ready to serve. His future's bright."

Iorwerth stared straight ahead. "He...he gave his life for mine. I was on Wind

Dancer, and one of the Fowlerites charged through. He had a spear. He had me in his sights, and out of nowhere comes Lyle, tackling him at the knees.”

He closed his eyes. “The bastard killed him. He pulled a dagger and slit his throat, right there. And I didn’t do a damn thing. I turned and rode away.

“It would’ve been better had I been slain, and Lyle had lived. He was a better man than I.”

Lorelei looked at him. She felt for him, though his actions were inexcusable. She quietly said, “You saved me, Yorrie. You saved me where Lyle could not have. If you had died instead of Lyle, I would be dead too.”

At that, Iorwerth began to sob again. This time, Lorelei held him as he did, letting him cry until his breath caught, fitfully and irregularly. She pitied him, really. But she knew that she had to know what she was dealing with here.

“Yorrie, it’s okay,” she said, smiling slightly. “But I need to know something.”

“What?” he asked, wiping his tears.

“Is there anything else you need to tell me? Any other...embellishments you need me to know? It’s important, Yorrie. Our survival might depend on it.”

Sir Iorwerth Maddox looked at the ground, and barely murmured, “No, Lorelei. I’d never faced battle before. But that’s the only embellishment of any importance.”

She didn’t bother to parse the last sentence; she heard what she wanted to hear. She gave her boyfriend a quick peck on the cheek, and then began to build a fire. They’d set up camp here; tomorrow they’d head for Blue Earth, and reunion with her friends.

The worst was behind them, she hoped.

‡ ‡ ‡

The morning broke, eternal, bright, and clear. Lorelei rose and stretched, looked over at Iorwerth, still slumbering by the dying embers of the fire.

She felt something for him, to be sure. She thought she loved him. Maybe.

She rose, and stretched, and tried to figure out what she wanted from the future. Zvonimir and Miia and Malcolm were no doubt already halfway to Blue Earth; they would be more difficult to track down than the thirty seconds they’d spent agreeing to meet there suggested. But no doubt they would find each other. She was certain Miia had spoken sooth—and Lorelei would certainly be looking for them.

But then what? On to Two Rivers, and Zvonimir's "protégé?" And what would come after that?

"Balancing the worlds." Right. Her "destiny." Would it involve more killing? More battles?

She didn't want more killing and more battles. She didn't fear them—she would stand and defend herself and her friends if need be. But she had seen enough death of late.

No, she wanted a house and someone to share it with, maybe a child or two. A calm, stable, normal life.

A calm, stable, normal, boring life.

Where she stayed at home.

And cooked.

She furrowed her brow. It wasn't supposed to be this hard. She was supposed to have passed the Trials, and moved into the adults' tent, and started making a name for herself in the Sisterhood. It was what she'd always wanted. Mostly.

She looked back at Iorwerth. He could maybe be husband material. He was a knight; even if he was a knight of the soon-to-be-former regime of King George, that meant he had to possess at least a base level of skill. Heck, he'd saved her life; that proved he was capable.

And he was kind, if foolish.

But then again...he was prone to exaggeration. And given to making foolish, prideful decisions.

Really, really foolish, really, really prideful decisions that caused an awful lot of damage.

And she wasn't sure, even if he were perfect, if she really did want to cook and clean and burp children.

But she certainly didn't relish the thought of spending the rest of her life balancing two worlds, or destroying the other world, or this one, or whatever it was she was supposed to do.

She shook her head. This was supposed to be easy.

‡ ‡ ‡

"So, milady, do you know where we are yet?"

Lorelei looked at the small path through the field, and sighed. "Yorrie, I've got



to tell you, that's the fourth time you've asked me that, and frankly, I'm getting tired of the question. How about I let you know when I do know where we are. Will that work?"

Iorwerth was silenced for the moment, though he quickly chirped, "Lorelei, it is good weather, isn't it?"

Lorelei, for her part, wanted to tell Iorwerth to stop talking. Forever, possibly. He had been filling the nine hours of trying to find their way back to the Low Road with copious amounts of idle chitchat, as if he would achieve some sort of redemption by forcing Lorelei to carry on a conversation.

"I'm not liking the sun this low on the horizon," said Lorelei, ignoring him entirely. "It's going to catch your armor."

"Bloody stuff. If it wasn't so expensive, I'd be rid of it."

"I almost think you should, frankly. It's not much good on the open road. Maybe when we get to Blue Earth, you should sell it."

"What does that mean?"

Lorelei rolled her eyes. "Exactly what I said it meant, Iorwerth. I thought you were 'looking forward to the end of the quest?'"

"Well...yes, I am. I suppose I should sell it. I just hate to not find some leverage from it."

"Yorrie, you're a Georgian Knight in Fowler territory. What leverage do you think you're going to get from it?"

"To be honest, milady, I am unsure."

"That," said Lorelei, "makes two of us."

Before the conversation could drift back to silence, however, Lorelei brought Wind Dancer up short.

"What is it?"

"Shh!" she said, waving Iorwerth down. She knew she'd heard it. From her left.

She dismounted in a fluid motion. "Draw your sword," she said, softly.

"What?"

"Do it!"

Iorwerth did as he was told; Lorelei spun slowly, counterclockwise, looking for

any sign she could see.

There—the wheat was moving slightly. “On your guard,” she said.

And then they were upon them, a platoon of Fowlerite infantry. Lorelei thought briefly about attacking—she could maybe, maybe win the fight.

Then the second platoon popped out of the field, and she dropped the tip of her sword out of its defensive position—though she did not sheath it. Discretion, after all, was the better part of valor.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she said. “I was beginning to despair we’d ever see someone. Can you point us toward the Low Road? We’re on our way to Blue Earth.”

The silence that greeted her was less than encouraging. “I’m sorry about the sword,” she said. “You see, we’ve deserted from the Georgian army, and, well, we’re a bit jumpy.”

“That one,” was the only response, as an infantryman pointed to Iorwerth. “He killed Llewellyn, then he and a woman lit out for Fowler territory like a bat out of Hell.”

“Me? No, sirrah, I think you must be mistaken.”

“Right,” said the serjeant—a rugged, middle-aged man with three days of stubble and a fresh scar on his cheek. “Drop your swords, you two.”

Lorelei looked at the situation, weighed the odds, and complied, spinning the sword and presenting it to the serjeant hilt-first. She knew why they were being arrested, and hoped that they could convince the Fowlerites that they meant no harm.

If not—well, they’d have a better chance of escaping when not surrounded by sixteen men, armed to the hilt and ready to kill anything that moved.

“Here you are, milord—”

“Serjeant, milady. Serjeant Tom Trombley. I work for my pay.”

Iorwerth, for his part, was still trying to talk his way out of it. “Look, good sir, I will admit I was involved in the battle. Quite unwillingly, I assure you. We abandoned the fight. Isn’t that right, Lorelei?”

“Your sword, milord.”

“Serjeant,” said Lorelei, “my name is Lorelei Voss. This is my friend, Iorwerth Maddox. I apologize profusely. I understand we’ll have to go to your base to be interrogated; I hope your Lord can appreciate our situation after we explain it.”

He took Iorwerth’s sword without further discussion, then turned back to

Lorelei. “I take it yer gonna say yer not exactly devout followers of the King?”

“I couldn’t care less about him,” said Lorelei, honestly. “We got mixed up with the Royal Fourth, and honor required us to fight. But we have no truck with George, nor anger toward General Fowler. We simply hope to make it to Blue Earth, to reunite with our friends and resume our journey.”

The serjeant shrugged. “Yer sound like you’re on the level—at least, yer do milady. But Commander Quigg and Lieutenant Romily will want to talk to yer themselves, I misdoubt.”

“If possible,” said Lorelei, “I would appreciate it if you kept my sword safe, Serjeant. It has sentimental value.”

“I’ll watch over the swords and the horsie, milady. You’ve my word.”

‡ ‡ ‡

They were marched back to the camp blindfolded. “Iorwerth,” said Lorelei, “they’ll no doubt separate us.”

“What?”

“It’s what I would do. They may try to turn us on each other. Our best bet is to tell the truth. Just don’t go volunteering anything. Understand?”

“Lorelei,” he said, “you can trust me.”

No, she thought, I can’t. But she held her tongue. Soon enough, her prediction was proven true, and she found herself in a heavily guarded tent facing Lieutenant Skylar Romily.

He was a physical specimen, standing taller than even she, with the muscles of a plowhand. He leaned carelessly on a battered black cane, and addressed her dispassionately.

“Milady,” the Lieutenant said.

“Lorelei, please, Lieutenant. I’m not of noble breeding.”

“You were with a knight. I assumed—”

“—I understand, milord, and am honored. But I can’t accept an honor I am not due.”

“Quite,” said the Lieutenant, smiling tightly. “At any rate, I’m sorry to say there’s probably not much I can do for you. You were both at the most recent battle at Bella Vista; more than a few men have identified you. If you’re lucky, I can perhaps arrange for imprisonment instead of execution.”

Lorelei smiled, knowing exactly what was coming next.

“Of course,” the Lieutenant said, as if scripted, “you are a woman. And women do silly things for love. Even find themselves on a battlefield with one of George’s knights.”

Lorelei crossed her arms and leaned back. “I’m listening.”

“Well, we know that your Sir Iorwerth was in quite a hurry to get here. And given that certain...unconventional methods were used by your side during the battle, well, we have reason to believe that your Iorwerth intends to cause damage to our fair land.”

Lorelei tried not to smirk. “What are you suggesting?”

“Well, let’s say you knew something of this plan. If you would aver to it, tell us what Iorwerth was up to, give us something to have the town criers in Bella Vista and Blue Earth say—well, as I said, women can be blinded by love. You wouldn’t be the first to be duped by a rogue. If you were to prove that you valued Fowler over your Iorwerth, I think we could find a way to...smooth things over.”

“Really.”

“Yes. I mean, of course, you would be guilty of battling us, but there are more than a few Fowlerites who started on the other side of the lines. If you prove your loyalty, I’d be happy to ensure that Serjeant Trombley gives you your sword back and escort you and your lovely horse to Blue Earth.”

“While Iorwerth is executed in the Blue Earth town square, no doubt.”

“Well, scoundrels like him must be punished, milady. Surely, you can see that.”

Lorelei sighed. “Lieutenant, what I told you before was the truth. Colonel Chase found us before we could get away; it was impossible for Iorwerth to decline his conscription. And I stayed with him out of love. We’ve no great love of the King. Indeed, having seen the state of his armies, I’d suggest that it’s inevitable that your leader will control all of this land within a few months.”

The Lieutenant sighed. “Well, Lorelei, I appreciate that. But you have to understand my position as well.”

“Oh, I do, sir. Which is why I suggest you find it in your heart merely to imprison us.” She smiled slightly; she knew this would call for an escape plan and some improvisation, but she still liked her chances better now.

“Well, Lorelei, I shall—”

The Lieutenant was interrupted by a clearing throat by the entrance to the tent; he turned, and walked over to a youngish soldier, who was clearly agitated about something. They spoke in hushed tones, and Lorelei struggled to make out the words. At one point, Lieutenant Romily looked back at her, eyebrows raised. After an interminable time, he returned.

“Well, Lorelei, it appears there is another problem for you. It seems Sir Iorwerth has let us know that you have business with the Cadre.”

Lorelei's eyes widened, but she remained silent.

"He also indicated that you were a Valkyrie, and that you were hired by Prince Wallace to create trouble here. Interesting."

"You won't get me to turn on him," she said, hoping against hope that Trombley was bluffing.

"Oh, there's no need for me to worry about that," he said. "It seems that you're the real troublemaker here. Fortunately for you," he said, "the fact that the Cadre wants you means you're worth more alive than dead."

"What?"

"Oh yes," said Trombley. "The Cadre has been quite helpful to the cause. But until we can verify your worth with our men in that outfit—well, we shall have to detain you. I do apologize."

With that, he approached her, and backhanded her across the left temple with his cane.

Before she lost consciousness, two things crossed her mind.

First, she was getting really tired of being knocked out.

Second, when next she saw him, she was going to kill Iorweth.

## *Eleven*

### *The Prisoner's Dilemma*

The pub was jumping, that much was to be sure. Strange music filled the air, thrumming, unnatural, yet oddly compelling. She sat at a table with the doppelgängers of Miia and Annalie, which meant that she was back looking through the eyes of Lori.

"Hey there," she heard, barely muttered. "Guess the cane didn't kill you. I'm glad."

She'd sensed, perhaps, that Lori was watching her interrogation, though she'd wisely decided not to dwell on it; odd that they could both sense when the other was there, but in a way it was reassuring. Sorry to be such a lousy host, she thought, bemused, knowing that she'd be a bit upset if she ended up getting a cane to the temple while in Lori's world.

Then she remembered some of the visions she'd shared, and sobered up. They'd both witnessed some unpleasantness in each others' lives.

Lori sipped the drink, and so Lorelei did too. It was sweet, with...some sort of berry, perhaps. Delicious. Just an undercurrent of alcohol that blended

nicely. If she figured out how to escape, she'd have to create this drink in her world; maybe she could find a future as a bar wench.

Fewer canings in that line of work.

"Excuse me," came a familiar voice from behind her, "but can I buy you a drink?"

Lori turned and saw a rugged young man, handsome enough almost to be a parody of the concept, trapezoidal jaw and all.

Lori laughed. "No. Thank you."

"Oh, why not? Name's Kevin, by the way. Kevin Tierney. And you are?"

"Not even vaguely interested, Kevin. But thanks anyway."

The handsome man shrugged, and defeated, walked away.

"Lori! Why did you turn him down?" asked Anna, genuinely shocked. "He was gorgeous!"

"He was Iorwerth," said Lori, grinning. "Happily, Lorelei's misfortune is my gain."

Glad one of us gained something from the blackguard, thought Lorelei.

"You think he's a liar like the boyfriend in the visions?" asked Molly.

"I think it's stupid for me to take the chance that he isn't. Lorelei got knocked out last night thanks to him. I don't know what the real-world equivalent of that is, but I don't want to find out. I've been raped once; that's more than enough."

"Have you given any more thought to going to see the psychic?"

"Yeah, Anna, and I might. But...well, I don't know if a 'psychic' can help me."

"Well, who else can?"

She shook her head. "This world works according to firm laws; that one doesn't. I think if I'm going to figure out what's going on from this end, I'm going to need a scientist."

Molly snorted. "Lori, I'm pre-vet; I'm taking two biology classes this semester. Let me tell you right now, you tell your story to a scientist, they'll laugh you out of the room."

"Maybe," said Lori. "I'll have to figure it out, I guess."

She took another sip of the cocktail; Lorelei savored it. She knew when she woke up, she was going to miss this brief respite.

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei woke up, head throbbing, missing her brief respite.

She reached up and touched a hand to her temple; there was a little blood, but mostly it was just swollen. That was good; the Lieutenant had just struck her hard enough to knock her out. He wasn't looking to do her permanent harm.

She became dimly aware of motion; she was in a Black Maria, the only passenger. She was surprised to find herself only shackled at the legs, but the bars on the small windows and the heavy door on the back suggested that her captors had no need to fear her escaping.

The wagon bumped and banged over the road; cobblestones. They must be in town. It made sense; if you wanted to detain someone you feared might escape, you'd take them to a jail.

After a time, the wagon stopped in a shaded area, and the back shifted. It might be her best time to escape, she thought—but then calmed down. They would move her again. She was best served by waiting. Getting a firm handle on things. Knowing what she was up against.

Getting rid of her headache.

The door swung open, and Serjeant Trombley ascended the step. "Good to see yer around, milady. I'm sorry about this. When I heard—well, I imagine 'tain't the truth they were after. If I was gonna trust one of yer, it would be yerself."

"So he told them that I was a spy?"

"Something like that. He signed a statement of the Commander. Last I saw, he and his horsey were on their way west. Good riddance, sez I. He's not got half the honor yer have."

"I appreciate that, Serjeant," she said.

"I'll keep yer sword for yer. 'Tis the least I can do."

"Thank you," she said. Then, she considered. "Serjeant, it's a good sword. The best I've ever wielded. It wasn't meant to sit about. If I am not to be freed, use it well."

"I'll keep it for yer," he repeated, helping her up. "A promise is a promise."

She smiled in spite of herself. Officers were arrogant and officious (save in the sisterhood, of course—for the most part, anyhow). She always had preferred the grunts.

She was led to a leaden door under a sign which read, simply, "GAOL." They

trudged into a dingy corridor, dimly lit with torches. An old man sitting at a desk awaited them.

“And who is this, Serjeant?”

“Prisoner,” he said. “Name’s Voss, Lorelei. Romily wants ’er detained until the Cadre can take ’er.”

“I see,” said the man in a hoarse, throaty whisper. “Well, Miss Voss, that means I won’t be allowed to torture you. The Cadre likes their prisoners sound in mind. That is truly a pity. Tell me, Trombley, what does Romily think of the possibility of other forms of assault in the case of this prisoner?”

Lorelei saw Trombley wince, but he said, simply, “The prisoner’s to be unharmed, Hayward.”

“Oh, come now. There are things we could do that wouldn’t harm her...much. She’s a female prisoner, Tom. We get so few of them.”

At this, Trombley reached across the desk, and grabbed Hayward by his shirt, lifting him from the ground. “She’s not to be harmed, Hayward. I’m stayin’ in town to oversee the transfer to the Cadre. I’ll see her before she leaves. And if she tells me yer done anything to hurt her, or yer done anything to take her virtue, I’ll—”

“You’d best unhand me, Serjeant. You’re forgetting your place. If not for me, you’d still be a foot soldier, or dead. ’Twas I who thought to turn traitor for Fowler, remember?”

“You’d best mind me, Hayward,” Trombley said, eyes ablaze, tossing Hayward back into his seat. “Quigg hasn’t been happy about the last few transfers. They’ve been comin’ out rattled. ’Tis why he sent me to keep an eye on this one. If yer step out of line with her, ’twill be a new Serjeant-at-Arms here, and yer will be back in the dock amongst them yer tortured. How long will yer last there?”

Hayward swallowed, and said, “I see. Well. I think we understand each other.”

“Good,” said Trombley. “And don’t be lyin’ about things we both know, Hayward. Yer know damn well I deserted from George’s army six months afore you even thought to kiss up to Fowler.”

“Be that as it may, Tom,” said Hayward, clearing his throat, “it’s good to see you. I’ll tell your mother hello for you, of course.”

“Tell her to get herself a new husband while yer at it, Hayward. In fact, if yer get home late, I’ll spare yer the trouble; I’ll see her myself before yer and I have to share any space.”

At that, Hayward stiffened, but said nothing, save a barked, “Guards! Forward!” Two extremely large men approached, and drug Lorelei back into the jail.

‡ ‡ ‡

Days passed. Maybe weeks. She wasn’t sure exactly what the date had been when she entered, but now it was clearly mid-fall. At one point, she overheard



the guards talking of an eclipse of Lune, but she couldn't see from her cell, of course.

She supposed it didn't really matter all that much.

She had sat in jail, looking for a way out and realizing, unfortunately, that there was none. She regretted not going out in a blaze of glory when she had the chance, then chided herself for regretting that; she'd be dead had she attacked the party that had captured her, and out of time to bide.

If anything buoyed her, it was the visions. Indeed, it was all that saved her from being utterly alone.

"I hope I'm right and you're here," Lori had said to herself. "Because I know you're in jail.

"I don't know how to help you, but I want you to know I'm not giving up on trying to figure out stuff on my end. We're in this together, you and I. I don't want you giving up or anything. Okay?"

The next time she'd sensed Lori's presence behind her own eyes, Lorelei replied, "I don't want to say much; not good to attract attention. But I appreciate it, Lori. Don't worry—I'm not going to do anything stupid."

"I'm glad to hear it," Lori had said at their next encounter in her place, as she stared at the flashing picture box. "You're tougher than I am, Lorelei. You'll get through this."

"I'm not tougher than you, Lori," Lorelei had said at the next chance. "I was there when...when you were raped. You haven't given up on yourself. I won't give up on me."

"Well," said Lori another day, this time almost whispered as she walked down a busy corridor, "me being there for you getting beaten sorta pales in comparison to that. I'm sorry you had to be there. I'm sorry I did, too."

"I'm not sorry I was there," Lorelei had said, the next opportunity. "I don't know what our connection is, Lori, but I know whatever it is, we're in this together. I was supposed to be there. With you. I'm glad I was. At least you weren't alone."

Lori had answered her, simply, "Thank you. Don't forget—you aren't alone either."

Lorelei sat in her cell, resting up against the wall. She had eaten what of the bread was not covered in mold, skimmed some of the brackish water after letting it sit for a while. They were her provisions for the night. Disgusting, of course, though actually, tonight's fare was better than average. She found that she was bitterly wishing for gruel and sausage at this point. Indeed, even the lutefisk would be nice.

She was about to go to sleep, when suddenly the door swung open. She had to blink at the unexpected incursion of torchlight. She was on her guard

immediately, noting that Hayward was there, along with a black-clad figure.

“Prisoner Voss,” said the warden, “it’s time to go.”

She was prepared to be roughed up on the way out, until she saw that Trombley was standing behind Hayward. She nodded to him. He nodded back, and said, simply, “Were yer treated well, Lorelei?”

“I wasn’t harmed, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good,” he said. “All right, Hayward, I’ll take it from here. Sorry about this, Lorelei,” he said, shackling her hands together.

“I understand,” she said.

They walked down the hall, the tall Cadre member walking silently ahead of her, Trombley behind her. They walked out into the night air, and Lorelei looked at the coach that awaited her. It was a bit ragged, but it would be more comfortable than a paddy wagon. The black-clad figure motioned to her to get inside, where another member of the Cadre awaited her.

She turned to look at Trombley, and realized that she had an opportunity; if she struck him just right, she could knock him out, and at least have a chance to get free. From where she stood, she could hit him right in the nose with a roundhouse kick. She considered it.

A kick to the nose could be deadly.

She almost did it. He was, after all, turning her over to the Cadre.

But he was doing his job. He wasn’t evil. He had shown her kindness. No. She couldn’t risk it. She wouldn’t chance killing him—not when she thought she might have a chance against two Cadre foot soldiers along the way.

She shook her head, turned back, and entered the coach, sitting down to the left of the black-clad guard. “Right,” said Trombley. “I’ll be driving, at least to Tree Fern. Yer two, guard the prisoner.”

The large figure got in and sat down across the coach from them. With a jerk, the coach rolled into the night.

“Well,” said Lorelei, “I imagine you’re taking me to see Ozymandias? He was pretty interested in getting me last time I saw him.”

The figures were silent. Indeed, there was no sound but the click-clack of the horses’ hooves and the rumble of wheels on stone. Lorelei stared her captors down until the wheels hit dirt.

“Well,” she finally said, looking out the window, “I can tell you this right now: I have no idea where Zvonimir is, if you think I can help you there. Last I saw he was disappearing into a forest. I assume he’s long gone by now.”

She couldn’t judge the soldier’s reaction. It was almost as if he was silently mocking her.

“Oh, don’t worry, young lady,” the figure said at last. “I’m quite aware of what became of Zvonimir Pasternak.”

Lorelei’s heart leapt. The voice was more than familiar. But she didn’t dare hope.

The figure was already removing his mask, though, exposing a bushy beard and wild hair. Simultaneously, the figure beside her removed her own mask, and displayed the face of Miia.

“Surprised, lass?” came a voice from the other side of Miia. Malcolm leapt across her lap to a position between the two Valkyries. “I would’ve joined in the fun too, but someone—” he gestured above him at Miia “—thought a foot-tall foot soldier would draw attention.”

As Zvonimir reached across to undo her shackles, she asked, “How—how did you do this?”

“It’s a good story,” came a voice from the drivers’ seat. “Yer have some good friends, Lorelei.”

“You were in on it too, Serjeant?”

“Do you think I’d be breathin’ if I wasn’t”

Miia grinned. “May I, Serjeant Trombley?”

“Be my guest, Miia.”

Miia reached down, and handed to Lorelei a sword, polished and gleaming in the moonlight.

“Thank you,” she said, quietly tearing up. “I have to hear this story.”

“Of course. But first,” said Zvonimir, “we need to get a bit clear of Blue Earth. After all, it’s always possible that the Cadre will be sending their own investigating party there shortly. Our camp is in the woods near Tree Fern. We’ll ride to there, and then all will be made clear.”

Lorelei had to ask, though she knew the answer. “I don’t suppose Iorwerth was somehow helping you guys, huh?”

Miia shook her head. “No, Lor. Looks like he really did sell you out.”

“You were right about him, you know.”

"I wish I hadn't been," Miia said. "I'd much rather you could be telling me 'I told you so.'"

"It's okay," said Lorelei, as the coach bumped along the Low Road. And she meant it. Whatever love had once whispered, she knew who her real friends were.

## *Twelve*

### *Tales of Stealth and Danger*

Lorelei had already consumed two pieces of hardtack in the coach, and was hungrily eating her third serving of stew; nobody had complained, of course. They'd made plenty. "We went foraging this morning," said Miia. "Got it going before we headed into town. If we got you sprung, we damn well were going to have fun."

"Is there alcohol in the stew?" asked Lorelei. She was feeling just a bit tipsy.

"Aye," said Malcolm. "'Tis an old MacChaluim recipe. Whisky potato stew. The whisky cooks off, of course."

"Well, it would," said Miia, "if you hadn't tripled the amount."

"A wee nip never hurt anyone. At any rate, do you like it?"

"It's the best stew I've ever had," said Lorelei. "And I'm not just saying that because the best thing I've eaten in the past three weeks was a cricket that got into my cell."

"Ugh! And you were the one who barfed during survival training when Reginleif made us eat worms."

"Oh, I would've killed for a worm. The cricket was—well, too crunchy," she said, making a face. "But I'm not going to think about that. You know, ever again for the rest of my life."

"So, at any rate, are you guys going to tell me how this little rescue party came to be? I still can't believe you're with us, Serjeant."

"Well, Lorelei, 'twas the least I could do for yer. Yer remind me of my daughter, Moira. She was about yer age when she was killed by bandits. My Sarah died not long after that; she didn't have the heart to go on with her baby killed."

"I don't know; it seemed wrong not to help yer out, to turn yer over to be murdered. I know what the Cadre can do to people. I've seen it. And yer was innocent, near as I could tell. No, I didn't want yer turned over to the ghouls. They don't want yer untortured so they can feed yer crumpets."

"No," said Lorelei. "I imagine not. I'm sorry about your daughter."

He shrugged. "I've got a boy—Harold, he's married to a nice girl, a farmer's

daughter. He lives out in the country, has a couple grandsons for me to play with. But I miss my daughter's laugh. She shoulda been happy and healthy all these years.

"But yer all don't want to hear my past sadness."

"But of course we don't mind, Tom," said Malcolm, quietly. "'Tis a terrible story, and 'tis to your credit that you didn't slit someone's throat out of anger. I might've."

"Well," said Trombley, awkwardly, "I suppose yer want to hear what happened."

"It is a good story," said Miia.

"Indeed, lass," said Malcolm. "When we left you during the battle, we weren't sure we'd see you again. And we almost didn't..."

‡ ‡ ‡

The group ran through the forest, Miia carrying Malcolm like a rag doll, Zvonimir huffing and puffing, Radulf bounding and leaping in a fenzy. They were moving quickly, putting space between themselves and the battle, ever-conscious that there could be members of the Fowlerite army breaking off in pursuit at any moment.

"We'll have to turn right at some point," Miia shouted. "We need to head back toward the Low Road."

"Up ahead...there's...a clearing," said Zvonimir. "Let's stop...and...get our bearings."

"I think he's right lass. I'm not even working and I'm getting tired."

"All right," said Miia, motioning them to a halt. "Let's stop for just a second, get our wind, and then continue at a more reasonable pace."

They paused in the gorgeous clearing, and looked about, listening carefully. "I don't think anyone's following us," said Zvonimir.

"No," said Miia. "Just normal forest. Pretty quiet. All right, I think it's safe to walk from here."

There was a thicket on both sides of the clearing, creating a pathway between where they had come from and where they were going. They headed forward, in the only possible direction.

After a few minutes, the thickets began to grow closer on either side as the clearing gave way to forest. The dense undergrowth reduced the path to a narrow walkway; they had been walking three abreast, but now were down to single file. At last, they found themselves run into a corner where the thickets grew together, preventing further progress.

“Well, we’ll have to turn around,” said Miia. “We’re not getting through that.”

They reversed course, and the thickets widened slightly allowing them to head back for the clearing. Miia was already considering whether they’d passed any other possible trails on the way. Maybe they could head south from just before the clearing....

The path narrowed back into a corner, where the thickets came together, preventing further progress.

“That can’t be right,” said Zvonimir.

“No,” said Miia. She turned around. “Let’s head back again. We must’ve missed something.”

But it was as before: the thicket widened just enough to give them hope, then narrowed again.

Somehow, some way, the thicket had come to surround them.

“This,” said Malcolm, “is not good.”

“This is a demon’s work,” said Zvonimir.

“No,” said Miia. “It reminds me of something Herja once said. About the land outside of Trollhättan.”

“Trollhättan? The haven of the Trolls? Isn’t that somewhat...apocryphal?”

Miia shook her head. “Not unless Herja was lying about it. They traveled there with Svava when they were just apprentices. There was a battle that they engaged in between the Hill Trolls and the Trollhättanites. She went very deep into the whole thing—I’ve got to admit, I was pretty bored by the end of the story.

“But I do remember rocks forming like this, cutting a few of the Apprentices off from the group. It was, she said, a fairly standard trick of the Trolls—the ones who knew magic, that is.”

“I think you may be right, lass,” said Malcolm. “It reminds me of something my mentor Loroki once told me. He had been in the woods, and had been surrounded by them. It turned out he was on Troll land.”

“How did he escape?”

“The thing challenged him to a battle of wits. He won.”

“Well,” said Miia, “let’s hope this one is in a challenging mood. Come forth, Troll!” she shouted. “We know you’ve imprisoned us! We mean you no harm!”

A grunt came from behind them. They wheeled in unison to face a massive, ugly wreck of a woman, who was dressed in the finest clothing any of them had

ever seen.

“Are you a Troll?” asked Miia.

The creature laughed, deep and guttural. And then she replied in the Old Tongue. *“They call me Troll—gnawer of the Moon, giant of the gale-blasts, curse of the rain-hall, companion of the Sybil. Nightroaming hag, swallower of the loaf of Heaven—what is a Troll but that?”*

“What did she say?” asked Zvonimir.

“Yes,” said Miia. Then, to the Troll, she said, sternly in the same archaic language, *“I am a Valkyrie, course-choosing sister of the slain. Let us pass, and there shall be no trouble between us.”*

“So, Valkyrie, where are your sisters? You are traveling with but an Uruisg and a human and a wolf—the wolf being the most fearsome. At least your sisters would pose a challenge.”

“What now?”

“She insulted me,” said Miia, angrily. *“My sisters have better things to do than chat with an ugly nightroaming hag. Come, Troll, you obviously want something; let’s hear it, or let’s fight.”*

“Ahh,” said the Troll, smiling with jagged green teeth. *“So, you wish to fight? I do not fight with steel, foolish warrior. I fight with wits. If you wish to battle, you must out-think me. And if you wish to escape me, you must solve my riddle; if not, you will be destroyed.”*

“Solve your riddle, eh? All right. *Tell me your riddle.*”

The Troll smiled wider. *“I am smaller than a stone, yet cities are built of me. Though I would not satisfy a mouse, I feed nations. I can destroy a house, and create great beauty. What am I?”*

Miia repeated the riddle, her voice giving evidence that she was already unsure of accepting the challenge.

“Clay can be used to build. And stone,” said Zvonimir.

“That can’t be it,” said Miia. “Clay can’t feed anyone. And it can’t destroy a house.”

“True,” said Malcolm. “Maybe wood? No, no...it could make a battering ram, but nobody eats it.”

“Damn,” said Miia. She frowned, then suddenly smiled. “No, no. I know this. *I have your answer, Troll.*”

“So what is it, if you have it?”

*“You are a seed.”*

The Troll’s smile vanished. “Also gut,” she said. “Yhew haff anserrd mie riddl. Yhew haff showd yhor merrett. Yhew may gho.”

“How did you know?” asked Malcolm, as a dull ripping announced the breaking of the trap.

“Easy,” she said. “A seed can grow into a tree, which provides for wood to build with. It can become grain enough to sustain a city. If a tree grows too close to a house, and isn’t cut down, it will break the home to bits. And flowers are lovely, especially hydrangeas,” she said, pointing idly to a patch of periwinkle blossoms as she led the party into the opening that had appeared in the thicket. Taking not a moment longer than they had to, they headed back into the forest proper.

‡ ‡ ‡

They took a circuitous route to Blue Earth, to be sure. This was by design. They had no desire to fight anyone. They simply wished to get to their meeting place. It was a couple of days later, as they walked through a quiet forest late in the evening, that they chatted.

“Do you think that Lorelei survived the battle?” asked Malcolm.

“Yes,” said Zvonimir. “If she is the Valkyrie-Fox, she had to.”

“If she’s the Valkyrie-Fox. She might not be,” said Malcolm. “Though I’d like to believe you’re right, Professor Pasternak, we have only hope to guide us.”

“We are assuming she did,” said Miia, angrily. “And we will not assume otherwise until someone brings me her corpse, at which time I will stand a sacred vigil for her as I have sworn, and as she once swore she would for me—after I’ve avenged her death, of course. Is that understood?”

Both men were quite a moment, before Malcolm replied, “Of course, lass. I wanted reassurance, believe me.”

“I can’t offer you that,” said Miia. “But I’m stubborn as hell, and Lorelei’s more stubborn than me; Death will have to pry her from her body, of that I’m sure.”

She had more to say, but suddenly she held up. “Damn. Clearing up ahead—it’s an encampment.”

They stopped dead. “What should we do?” asked Zvonimir.

“Hide,” said Miia. “And scout out the situation.”

“I imagine you’re recommending I do that, eh, lass?”

“Malcolm, I don’t want to put you in danger....”

“Aye, ’tis a bit late for that. Besides, I’m the stealthiest of our lot, and that’s for sure. I’ll take a



look-see.”

Malcolm climbed and clambered his way through the forest, ever-aware that at any moment he could be detected. He hoped he would not be, of course; being a foot tall was an advantage for spying, but not for fighting.

After some time, he came to a hedgerow near the side of the camp. He climbed into the brambles and lay still, watching in the night as the soldiers went about their business. There were a lot of them, that was sure, but they seemed to be concentrated in this post. It looked like the little party would be clear if they just got around this area.

A sudden “Thwack!” turned his head toward a tent. “What the deuce?” he muttered, as he heard the sound of a body hitting the ground with a whumpf.

“Poor devil,” said Malcolm. He peered at the tent, trying to get a sense of what was going on.

A soldier left the tent, and returned with another in tow; they entered the tent and drug out the poor sod. He looked on the man with pity—he was dressed in mail, but no sword.

They carried the unconscious unfortunate by a small fire. As they did, Malcolm saw a shock of auburn hair illuminated against the first soldier’s breastplate. The fire reflected off the mail of the person being carried, and Malcolm suddenly realized that it was not a man they bore.

“Bloody!” he said, then shut up. He watched them load Lorelei’s lifeless form into a paddy wagon. He sat there an interminable time as an officer—who was wiping the top of his cane with a largish cloth—brought a soldier to the wagon. The soldier saluted, and leaping onto the wagon, bade the horses to move out.

As they did, Malcolm saw Iorwerth, talking quietly to the officer. “You bastard,” he said, wishing their scales were reversed. “You’ll pay for this. But not now.” For now, he had to tell the others. The wagon was heading to Blue Earth with all deliberate speed; they’d best do so as well.

‡ ‡ ‡

It took them less than a day to make it to Blue Earth. They would have been even sooner had Miia not had to spend a good twenty minutes wishing every possible malady and disaster upon Iorwerth in a stream-of-consciousness rant that included profanity, physically impossible suggestions, questions of parentage, and for good measure, a great deal of blasphemy. Neither Zvonimir nor Malcolm interrupted. Indeed, Malcolm’s only comment was to say, at the end, “Now that was impressive, lass. Remind me never to cross you.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said, smiling a mirthless quarter-smile. “But we’d best be going. And if we see that piece of kobold dung, he’s mine.”

Like Neri, Blue Earth was a college town, but unlike Neri, it was quite a bit more than that. It was a hub of activity, the largest city in either Nemonia or Osterlender. And while there were more than a few of Fowler's banners hanging conspicuously on the houses of the elite, the town had survived well the attacks of a few months back; indeed, as Blue Earth always had, the traders and merchants had simply struck new deals with the Fowlerites. They were in no mood to slow down the flow of gold one bit.

"Where would they take her?" asked Miia.

"To the jail, I imagine," said Zvonimir. "They obviously want her detained, or she wouldn't have been taken into town here. She's to be questioned, or paraded about, or some such thing."

"Aye," said Malcolm. "We'll have to break her out."

Zvonimir scoffed. "Dear sir, do you really think we three and a wolf are enough to spring Lorelei from prison? We stand a better chance of discovering we are Mithras' illegitimate children. And I don't believe in Mithras."

"Well, we have to do something," said Miia. "Malcolm, are there any spells you could use?"

The uruisg shook his head. "The only spell I know strong enough to blow through a jail is Loki's Breath—and it's too unpredictable. I'd hate to burn the lass to a crisp by mistake."

"Yeah," said Miia, "She'd hate that too. All right, first we need to find the jail. Then we need to find an old friend of mine, Gudrun. She may not want to fight, but she'll still help me."

The party walked on silently. This wasn't going to be easy.

‡ ‡ ‡

"Wow," said Lorelei. "I'm impressed that you remembered your Old Norse, Miia. I would have gotten flustered and just spat out 'Troll, your mother was a swine.'"

"I may have at some point," said Miia. "Frankly, I should have. She was obnoxious. But she was just the start of our troubles."

"I know. I'm glad our paths crossed when they did, Malcolm. And I'm more than glad that you weren't found. Romily was not a fun inquisitor."

"At any rate—Serjeant Trombley, how is it that you all came to be together?"

"Now that, yer see, is interesting. Because after I left the jail, I was so angry at my 'stepfather' that I couldn't see straight. And I just kept thinkin' about how if it had been my Moira in jail, Hayward would be talking of rapin' her."

"And I knew what the Cadre was like, and more than that, I knew yer were tellin' the truth. Yer were

no spy. Yer boyfriend sold you out was what happened, to save his own neck.

“I felt bad for yer. But I’d been doing my duty. At least that’s what I said to myself. But...well, I kept feeling bad for yer. For days. Didn’t have much to do but sit and think, and all I could think was how I shoulda let yer go when I caught yer, shoulda freed yer before we hit the jail.

“And then, when I was talking to the page goin’ to Two Rivers, I got to thinkin’. If I shoulda let yer go, shouldn’t I help yer escape?”

‡ ‡ ‡

It was three days later that the page came to Trombley’s rented flat above the recently renamed Fowler’s Crown Inn. Trombley thought it foolish; it had been the King’s Crown for three generations. It wasn’t as if Fowler was going to kill the innkeeper for the name. Indeed, Fowler would be King Reginald before too long, and when that happened, no doubt the “Fowler” would be struck, and “King” would replace it. Tom thought mirthlessly that it was no doubt that by the time King Reginald III was born, there’d be a new “hero” in the land. It was as it ever was.

At any rate, the page told him that he was being dispatched to Two Rivers, to speak directly with Ozymandias. “It will be at least a fortnight before I reach there, and I suspect another fortnight before the Cadre returns to claim the prisoner.”

“An entire month? Yer have to be wrong. It’s only a week by horse to Two Rivers.”

“Yes, but I’m walking; we have no horses to spare right now. And once I get there, no doubt the Cadre will take their sweet time seeing me.”

“Yeah, yer right on that,” said Trombley, toying with the mead. He’d gone to call on the Cadre just once—at Romily’s request, under his personal seal. It had taken almost a fortnight just to gain an audience with them, another three days to meet with Ozymandias.

“Besides,” said the page, “It’s not like she’s going anywhere.”

“True enough.”

“Serjeant, you will wait for the Cadre, right?”

“Those are my orders. I’ll be gone only if the Lieutenant or the Commander tell me to be.”

“I’ll direct them to meet you here, then. Or should I direct them to meet you at the warden’s house?”

Tom laughed. “Not unless yer would like either the warden or me dead. We don’t see eye to eye.”

“Well, then, the inn it is.” The page rose to leave, then mused, “I’m sure they’ll be glad to get this girl. Might even be a nice reward for us. According to the knight, Ozymandias has already tried to kill her once.”

“What was that?” asked Tom, head suddenly snapping up.

“Yeah, he said she’d destroyed something they wanted. At least, that’s what the knight told them. Some book or something. Anyhow, her death will be slow and painful, I’d bet. I’ve never known anyone who dared cross Ozymandias—not even General Fowler himself.”

“Yeah,” said Trombley, frowning. He repeated—“Yeah,”—while trying not to show his doubt.

He didn’t know if she’d done anything to legitimately anger the Cadre. Quite frankly, he didn’t care if she had. He never had liked them. “Silent warriors.” Feh. Idiot warriors, charging headlong into death. Not human, that. And every officer he’d ever met had given him the willies. No, he was no fan of them.

Besides, he had been around almost fifty years. He had been through battles and hardship, through businesses and apprenticeships. He knew when he was being lied to. And the girl wasn’t lying.

He had done his duty, he told himself. He had to turn her over. Those were his orders.

But what kind of man chooses the orders of a man over doing what is right in God’s eyes? What kind of man does his job and lets an innocent die because of it?

He looked over in the corner, where her sword and shield sat patiently.

He’d have to find a way to spring her.

He just had to figure out how.

For the moment, though, he had to keep those plans quiet. “Right,” he said, raising and shaking the page’s hand. “You’d best be on yer way.”

‡ ‡ ‡

One week later, a few people huddled in the darkness.

“All right,” said Miia, looking warily across the street at the sign which read “GAOL” in battered script. “Gudrun, you’re sure that there’s a window there?”

“My husband and I designed the guards’ uniforms. We’ve been in the prison,” said the seamstress with a touch of pride. “I know there’s a small window by the back entrance. He’ll be able to squeeze through.”

“All right, then,” said Malcolm. “If I don’t come back, Miia, I’d like you not to try to save me.”

“Well,” said Miia, “If you don’t come out, we’ll have to come in anyway; Lorelei will still be there. So one way or another, we’ll come in for you. No matter what.”

He smiled. “I’ll not get off that easy is what you’re saying.”

“Indeed,” said Miia. “Now get going.”

Malcolm approached the back of the jail, and crept along. He reached the window just as another figure creeping in the dark did.

“Bloody!” said Malcolm, scurrying backward at the sight of a serjeant guarding the back, wearing a Fowlerite uniform. He relaxed as he saw the man meant him no harm. “You scared me!”

“A brownie?” said Trombley. “What are yer doing here?”

“I’m an uruig. And I’m trying to get into this jail. I have, er, uruig-type things to do in there,” he said, wincing as he said it.

“Funny, that. I’m tryin’ to get inside, too,” said the soldier. “Trying to bust someone out, eh?”

“I—what?”

“That’s what I’m tryin’ to do. Hayward has this place locked down like Fort Stewart. I was hopin’ this winder would be loose—thought I could squeeze through. I bet yer can do that even if it isn’t loose.”

“I can,” said Malcolm. “But here’s the question: who are you trying to free?”

“A girl,” said Trombley. “I brought her in here. She doesn’t deserve to be here. Her boyfriend—well, it doesn’t really matter why. She shouldn’t be in jail. And I’m gonna free her.”

“This girl. Is her name Lorelei?”

The soldier’s eyes widened. “Yeah, that’s her. What the deuce?”

“Tis a very long story indeed,” said the uruig. “Did you...uh...have a plan?”

The man laughed. “Not a good one. I hoped that the guards might be asleep, and I might get the jump on ’em. They’re not the best, y’know—they’ll be half-drunk if Hayward’s runnin’ his ship as tight as usual. Even so, they’re not that bad. I’m probably chargin’ to my death, but I gotta try. Dodgy conscience.

“Uh...did yer have a plan?” the soldier asked.

“I was to steal the keys, then unlock Lorelei and hopefully sneak out—and hope against hope nobody noticed. I’m small. She isn’t, of course. Not a great plan either.”

They were silent for a moment, when Serjeant Trombley said, “This is stupid. What are we doin’, you and me? We’re gonna get ourselves killed, and that won’t help Lorelei.”

“True,” said Malcolm. “But—well, your conscience is dodgy, and my friend is imprisoned, and—well, ’tis not going to get easier if we wait.”

“Yer right about that. But the Cadre won’t be comin’ for her for another two weeks easy. We don’t have to attack tonight.”

“The Cadre, you say?” Malcolm said. “That puts a different spin on things. No, you’re right—maybe ’tis best we abandon our efforts for the moment. But I wonder if there might not be a way for us to combine our forces. Work together, if you will.”

“Good idea,” Trombley said. “And maybe while we’re at it, one of us could grow a brain.”

‡ ‡ ‡

“I don’t know whether to thank you for your concern or kill you straightaway,” said Miia. “Good job handing Lorelei over to a monster.”

“Nobody knows what a monster Ken Hayward is more than me. Yer didn’t have him as a ’father.’ I’d be happy to slit his throat, but that wouldn’t help yer much. Lorelei would still be locked down.”

“Why did you turn her over then?”

“I told yer, I was doin’ my duty. Believe me, I wish my conscience had kicked in afore that. But I’m committin’ a hangin’ offense just by talking to yer. Yer think that might count for somethin’?”

“It does,” said Malcolm. “Doesn’t it, Miia?”

Miia, for her part, paced in the living room of Gudrun’s home like a caged tiger. She knew tonight was dangerous as hell—she had expected to die trying to free Lorelei. But she had to try. Now they were back to square one, dithering and debating while Lorelei languished.

“Can’t you just walk in and take her out?” asked Zvonimir.

“Hayward would never buy it. Oh, the bastard would think I wanted to rape yer friend or somethin’ worse. He’d never think I was freein’ her. But he’d just stop me from takin’ her and take it as license to do her harm himself. No, he won’t turn her over to me ’til I show up with the Cadre. And good luck freeing her once the Cadre takes her.”

“Depends,” said Miia, closing her eyes and knitting her brows. “How many men will the Cadre send to get her?”

“Two or three, mostly. The times I’ve seen ’em. They may want me to go with ’em for a while. Usually have the soldier overseein’ the transfer drive the rig to Two Ferns.”

“Two or three. Those are good odds, you know. We could lay in wait. Attack the coach. It would be even up or better if you’d join with us, Serjeant.”

“That’s not a bad idea. All right, I’m game.”

“Ah, Miia, always attack first, ask questions later. You know,” said Gudrun, quietly, “there may be an even better way.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, the Serjeant said that Warden Hayward wouldn’t let him take Lorelei out without the Cadre, right?”

“Yeah, right.”

“What if the Cadre was with him?”

“Well, isn’t that the plan?”

“Not the real Cadre, Miia. Look, Marc is a tailor, and a damn fine one. I’m a seamstress, officially, but I can do anything he can do—he’s taught me everything he knows.”

“Aye,” said Malcolm, looking up in surprise. “I see where you’re going with this, lass. We’ve all seen them. ’Tis a fairly basic uniform. Black pajamas. Black mask. Zvonimir, are there any markings on the uniforms you can think of?”

“Minimal markings—and none that would show up at night. Even the eyes are barely visible. It’s got an odd cut to it, but I think we all could describe it for you.”

“Right,” said Tom. “And it wouldn’t be hard for us to pull it off. The soldiers don’t speak when on duty. ’Silent warriors.’ Stupid twits. They think it makes people afraid. Makes me think they’re too stupid to talk, sez I. He’d never turn ’em over to me, but—If yer were masked, Zvonimir—he’d never suspect it. He’d just unlock the cell and give ’er to yer.”

“I’d probably need to be the other foot soldier,” said Miia. “I’m not going to ask Marc, and Malcolm is a bit short for the Cadre.” She frowned. “Are there female Cadre soldiers?”

“Hayward wouldn’t know if there were, but yer can wait in the coach for ’er. ’Twould be their usual way. Unless he walked right up to yer, he’d never know. And even if he did, yer tall enough that he’d probably expect yer a man—’specially if Mrs. Donnelly is as good a tailor as she sez.”

“I am,” said Gudrun, smiling. “So, Zvonimir, can you describe the uniform in more detail? Wait—let me get some paper and charcoal. I want to draw this.”

‡ ‡ ‡

It did take a few days to get everything in order.

Black fabric was not easy to come by—and the first swath they found hung all

wrong, far too stiff and common. The second swath was close enough, but frightfully expensive. Miia hoped Lorelei would be so happy to get out that she wouldn't mind the ten gold they'd spent on fabric for two uniforms.

Gudrun and her husband worked on the uniforms. It was a time-consuming task, and indeed, as they came together it was evident how intricate the "basic" uniforms really were. Had Gudrun been overestimating the talent of herself and her husband, they might not have pulled it off. As it was, the uniforms slowly but surely took shape.

(Now, it should be known that Miia had apologized often for inconveniencing Marc and his wife, but he had told her he was quite fine with it; he knew well what his wife's background was, had known it since she came to his father's shop as an apprentice. He had thanked Mithras that fate had brought the tall, quiet, beautiful and capable Gudrun into his life. He proposed at seventeen, they married three months later, and had their first child already. When his father died, he'd taken the shop over, and it was prospering, not least because Gudrun was, if anything, more capable than he.

No, he had been given a great gift from the Valkyries when they brought him his wife; if they now needed a favor from him, he was willing to oblige, no matter the risk. He owed them all that made his life worth living.)

As the uniforms were slowly crafted, Tom looked for a coach. He found a serviceable one for sixteen gold, secured the use of two draught horses from his son.

The day finally came when they were ready for their mission. Miia hugged Gudrun. "Odin put you here for a reason. He knew you would be here, to serve your sisters one more time at our most desperate hour. I'm glad that He also found a way to make your life happy."

"Miia, tell Lorelei I love her, and if fate should ever permit the two of you to return, you will always be welcome."

Miia tried to pay for their time, and was rebuffed; one doesn't charge for helping one's friends.

They slipped on the uniforms, and headed toward the inn, where Tom waited in the pub. Zvonimir had played his role perfectly, entering the bar and walking right past Tom, up to the innkeeper. "I seek Tom Trombley," he had said in a near-whisper; the only time the Cadre spoke was to ask for needed information. The innkeeper, quite nonplussed at the sight of a black-clad warrior in his pub, had dumbly pointed out Tom, who had stood up with the perfect mix of sangfroid and disgust. "Well, yer here for the girl I'll be expectin'. Come on, I'll take you to the jail; let's get this over with."

Hayward had been truly disappointed to see Tom arrive with the soldier. "I still



wish you'd allowed us some leeway with this one, Tom. But she'll be the first to tell you, we've treated her like Fowler himself. I doubt she's had as much as a scratch.

"As for you, Cadre—what's your name?"

Zvonimir had momentarily panicked as he tried to come up with one, but Tom had simply rolled his eyes. "Mithras' helm, Hayward, is this the first time yer have met one of these blokes? He ain't gonna tell yer his name. He ain't said a word to me, and I drove him and his mate here. It's their way."

"Yes, but I always ask anyhow. I keep thinking that maybe someday, one of them will say...well, something. A dozen of these transfers, and I've never heard a word out of them."

Zvonimir buttoned up, and simply adjusted his posture to suggest impatience.

"Well, let's go check on the prisoner. And for yer sake, Hayward, yer had best be telling me the truth about her care."

They walked back to the cell, and it opened to reveal Lorelei. A bit gaunt, obviously exhausted, the yellowing of a fading bruise on her forehead. But she was undoubtedly alive, and in good health.

"Prisoner Voss," said the warden, "it's time to go."

Lorelei flinched, but stood anyhow, and adopted a defiant posture. Then, she looked straight at Tom, and instantly relaxed. She nodded to him. He nodded back, and said, quietly, "Were yer treated well, Lorelei?"

"I wasn't harmed, if that's what you're asking," said Lorelei. He nodded, satisfied; he knew her stay was hellish even without beating. But he would accept it simply if she hadn't been raped. He hated that she looked as hurt as she did.

"Good," was all he said. "All right, Hayward, I'll take it from here. I'm really sorry about this, Lorelei," he said, knowing that he had to shackle her if it was to be convincing—and that there was no good way for him to communicate it to her.

They'd walked her out of the jail, and Zvonimir had motioned her inside the cab; she'd turned to look at Tom for just a second, as if sizing him up. But she shook her head, and walked into the waiting coach.

"Right," said Trombley. "I'll be driving, at least to Tree Fern. Yer two, guard the prisoner."

Zvonimir sat across from Lorelei, Miia to her right, Malcolm in the shadow of her, Radulf on the roof under some cloth. It was all they could do as the carriage started to roll simply to keep from laughing uproariously. But they were good; they didn't speak until they were just out of town, free and clear of the warden.

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei was quiet for a bit; four bowls of stew would do that to a person even if it didn't contain whisky.

But that was not why she remained silent; she wasn't quite sure what to say. Her friends had been willing to charge in blindly to save her, and then they found a way to simply go to incredible lengths and expense and risk to do so.

"I...I don't know how I can ever thank you all."

"Lorelei," said Miia, "I owe you my life. Malcolm owes you his life. Heck, if you don't order us out of that battle, maybe Zvonimir and Radulf get killed, so they owe you their lives too."

"Aye. At most, Lorelei, our debt is squared. And we didn't do anything for you that you wouldn't have done for us."

"But—Serjeant Trombley, you didn't have to do this. I mean, how will you return?"

"Aw, Lorelei, of course I had to do it for yer. I imagine Moira woulda haunted me if I didn't. Besides, we have the last part of the plan to put into effect. They'll never suspect me of anything but being duped, and given that Hayward unlocked the cell, I won't be the only one. Worst that'll happen is I'll get busted to foot soldier, and that don't matter to me. A soldier's a soldier, sez I."

"So what's the last part of the plan?"

"Well," said Zvonimir, "we believe the best thing for Serjeant Trombley to have happened is for him to have been duped by 'fake' Cadre. It has the benefit of being half-true, of course. And when the real Cadre shows up, he'll be able to show convincing evidence that he put up a fight once he realized something was amiss."

"What would that be?"

"A wound, Lorelei. I'm ready for it, by the way—best be gettin' back early in the morn' so the barber's good and rested."

"What! Wait, what are you going to do?"

"We're going to stab him in the left side. It'll look nasty, and bleed quite a bit, but he won't die from it."

"Probably," added Tom, jovially. "I'm trustin' an uruig on this one, Lorelei, so let's hope he's up on his anatomy."

"Wait—wait a second. No, there has to be a better way to do this. I'm not going to let you risk that."

"Lor, we're all ready. Malcolm's been force-feeding him lavender for a week. He should be in good shape, and he's going to drive the rig straight back to town."

“And take my whisky with him,” said Malcolm. “I’ll have to get more in Two Ferns. I’m going through whisky like it’s water on this journey, lasses.”

“No, wait! Tom, bring me back with you. I’ll go with the Cadre. I can’t let you do this.”

Tom smiled at her, and said, “Lorelei, I know yer want the best for me. I’ve lived a long life, seen a lot of pain and sufferin’. I trust yer friend here—he may be short, but he’s whip-smart. Play shakmat with him sometime.

“I don’t think I’ll die. But if I die and yer live—well, I’ve got another thirteen or fourteen summers, tops. If yer live, you’ll see dozens. ’Tain’t a risk for me to gamble fourteen years against sixty.”

Lorelei wiped tears from her eyes. “I know,” she said, “that Moira would have been very, very proud of you, Tom. I promise you I’ll live.”

“I’ll do my best to do so as well, Lorelei. All right,” he said, nodding to Miia. “Let’s get this over with.”

Miia nodded, and took Tom’s sword—it would be more convincing if doused in blood. She put it to his side, and Malcolm said, “Okay. A bit higher. More to your right. Your other right. A little lower. There. All right, ’twill be a sharp pain here. Bite down on your whip; it’ll help. Just three fingers deep, Miia. On three. One...two...three.”

Miia pushed the blade in, and Tom howled in agony. The blade came back out, and blood flowed quickly from his side. Miia held the blade low on his side, covering it in fresh blood; it would show there’d been a battle, that was for sure.

“All right, quick, get the whisky, Lorelei. Now pour it on the cut. This will hurt even worse, Tom, but it’ll get better fast.”

Lorelei did as she was told, wincing as Tom howled yet again. But soon, he calmed.

“That...did the trick. Think me right lung is hurt. But...we knew that might happen. ’Twill heal up. I’d best get the rig on the road, afore I pass out.”

“Tom,” said Lorelei. “Thank you.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I pray we meet again.”

“Me too, Lorelei. All right, can yer help me into the front seat, Zvonimir?”

“Don’t forget,” said Malcolm, “the whisky will dull the pain but also your senses; use it only as you need it. And use it on the wound itself more than in your gullet.”

“I will, my brother. Mithras be with yer.”

He gripped the reins gingerly with his left hand. “All right, horsies. Let’s go shovel some of yer exhaust to my commanders. Yah!”

They watched him ride until they could hear him no more. Lorelei wiped her tears away, and said, simply, "I'll never forgive myself if he dies."

"I know," said Malcolm. "I never will either. But lass, 'twas his idea. Don't blame yourself for it. You're too important to let die."

"I'm no more important than anyone else," said Lorelei. "Possibly less."

"Not true at all," said Zvonimir. "The Tome speaks of one giving himself for the Valkyrie-Fox. 'Cut into my side, he told the guardian/Drops of blood fell on his sword, but still he lived.' I hope my memory is correct, and that my new interpretation that this stanza represents that Tom is correct."

Lorelei was quiet, until finally she said, "When we get to Two Rivers, after we get to your protégé's home, I need to do something."

"What's that?"

"I need to stand vigil."

"A vigil? Yeah, we probably both should," said Miia. "We never have paid our proper respects to Herja. There's been no time. I'll stand it with you."

"No," said Lorelei. "Not the symbolic vigil. 'I hung on that windy tree for nine nights wounded by my own spear. I hung to that tree, and no one knows where it is rooted. None gave me food. None gave me drink. Into the abyss I stared until I spied the runes. I seized them up, and, howling, fell.' I shall stand that vigil. For nine days and nights. For my sisters who have sacrificed all. It is my duty as a Valkyrie."

Miia looked at her. Lorelei could tell she was dubious at best. Malcolm and Zvonimir already were trying to talk her out of it. But Miia looked at her friend, and held up a hand to her companions, and simply said, "I do not know if we will find Yggdrasil in Two Rivers, Lorelei. But if you believe that you must stand the vigil, then know that I shall sit at the root of the ash tree with you for nine days, waiting patiently for your vigil to end. I shall sit with you nine days, even should Odin claim you. And should he, then for nine days I too shall stand vigil in your honor. For we are Valkyries, and it is our way. And if Herja could survive her vigil for Svava, then you can survive this. For you have already proven yourself to be the toughest of all the sisters to have called Ravenwood home."

Lorelei nodded, and hugged her sister, her friend. They held each other for a long time, as siblings do at funerals and reunions. They held each other until, too tired to stand any longer, at long last they lay down to sleep under a canopy of stars.

### *Thirteen*

*The Necklace, the High Road and the Fay*

They stopped only for a while at Two Ferns. It was a growing town, blessed by its position where the Western Low Road split into the Northern High and Northern Low Roads. Like many towns situated at a crossroads, it was a polyglot mix of peoples – Mithraists and Pagans and Odinists-- even some Jesuists had taken up residence here.

Lorelei sought out a Thorshof and found a small one. It was reform rather than conservative, but frankly, Lorelei had always felt more reformist anyhow. She stood in the chapel, looking at the displayed runes, reading the tales she had learned as a child—Balder's death and Odin's vigil, the Riddles of Gestumblindi, and of course, Njál's Saga and the Darradarljód.

There she and Miia prayed to Thor and to Odin, Tyr and Vali, to the memory of Herja and Reginleif and Annalie, to the memories of all their fallen friends and sisters.

It was there that they rededicated themselves to the sisterhood.

Lorelei had spent quite a bit of her time in jail thinking about what was to become of them after this adventure ended. Oh, certainly she knew that there may be no "them" left, but if they survived this quest, life would have to settle down into something permanent.

She no longer saw housewifery as a viable future for herself; she knew that was in no small part due to Iorwerth's betrayal—she didn't want to find herself out of control again. But it was more due to the fact that for all she'd been through in the past several weeks, she just couldn't imagine giving up a life of adventure. Not yet, anyhow.

That being the case, she considered what she was to do. Join Fowler's army? They wouldn't take her. Become a sailor, or a pirate? No, she knew too little of the sea. Become an adventurer-for-hire? It just didn't suit her.

No, she knew none of those were for her. She realized, finally, that what she was best at was being a Valkyrie.

And so she told Miia as they finished praying, "I don't know that we can, or even should, resume the sisterhood as it was. Perhaps new ways and new rules will have to be adopted. But it seems to me that you and I owe a duty to those that died, that we carry on in their memory."

Miia nodded. "I know," she said quietly.

"I am the last full Valkyrie," said Lorelei, taking care to make her words formal, redolent in the tones of the official functions she'd been through so many times. "I take Herja's statement to me to be sufficient

for me to say that. But wisdom comes from knowing your beliefs may be wrong. Miia, you were an apprentice in Ravenwood, and remain an apprentice today. You know the ways of the Valkyries. Do you believe that it is acceptable for me to call myself one of them?"

"I cannot imagine it would not be," said Miia, taking Lorelei's tonal cue.

Lorelei smiled. "Then a Valkyrie I am, the last of our kind. With an apprentice," she said, nodding to Miia. "Which leads me to something.

"You are an apprentice, that is true. But I cannot believe that Herja herself would not look at your actions since the Battle of Ravenwood as anything less than heroic, and worthy of promotion. I see no value in making you wait another year before you are tested; I believe that it is time, Miia Aalto, for you to face your Trials. Are you ready?"

"I—I don't know, m'lady," said Miia, looking up, shocked.

"An honest answer," said Lorelei, her eyes twinkling. "Nobody is ever truly ready for the Trials. But you have fought with honor, Miia. You have proven yourself worthy.

"It is custom for an apprentice facing the Trials to assume the duties of a full warrior; indeed, Miia, you have already, and with great aplomb. But you did so out of necessity, not by choice—and the choice to accept that duty is important. So, Miia, we move to your first test: in front of your sisters living and dead, the Daughters of Odin, the Choosers of the Dead, do you accept?"

"I do," said Miia.

"Very well, Miia," Lorelei said. "Before her death, Herja let me know that the Trials are not about fighting ability, but about character—showing that you understand the role you are to play in the sisterhood, and that you are a person worthy of promotion.

"You already have proven to be of the highest character. You saved me in Blue Earth when you did not have to. You questioned me when you did not want to. You have proven yourself and your commitment to the sisterhood, and I can think of no trial more grueling than what you have already faced. Accordingly, I certify that you have passed your Trials. You are now, and forever shall be, a Valkyrie. Congratulations."

Miia shed a tear as the two embraced; so did Lorelei. After a long time, Miia spoke. "I have something for you," said Miia.

"What?"

Miia looked off into the distance, beyond her friend. "As she lay dying, Herja spoke to me. She knew, I think, that the camp was destroyed, that her time was at an end.

"Miia," she said. "You have served me well, apprentice. I ask one last service of you."

"I am yours, mistress," I said. I could barely think, but I knew that this was a duty I had to carry out.

“I expected her to tell me to stand vigil, or burn the camp down, or kill myself before I could be captured—you know, something easy. But instead, she simply said, ‘Remove my necklace. It is the sigil of the leader of the Valkyries. Svava gave it to me on her deathbed. I expected Reginleif or Alexandra would have it from me one day, but it was not to be.’

“I didn’t know what to say. ‘What should I do with it?’ I asked. I knew she wasn’t turning it over to me. I was not worthy.

“She just smiled. ‘You will know who it belongs to when the time is right, Miia. She will reveal herself as the one who will carry on our traditions. Until then, guard it well.’”

Miia looked down. “I did as she asked. She died as I removed it, as if it was all that had been holding her soul to her body. And I have carried it ever since. Until now.”

Miia reached into a pouch, and removed a simple braided silver necklace. “You, Lorelei Voss, are the true leader of the Valkyries, heir to Herja and Svava, heir to Odin, Thor, and Tyr. Wear well the sigil of authority.” With those words, the newly minted Valkyrie anointed her newly minted leader. She fastened the necklace, and then dropped to one knee in a formal bow.

Lorelei closed her eyes. It was too much. She was not ready.

And yet she knew that Miia was right; knew that she was the leader by the most basic rule: she was the last woman standing.

Well, one of two.

She opened her eyes, and clasped Miia on the shoulder. “Rise, my fellow warrior. And sing.”

And the two friends sang proudly the song of the sisterhood, singing of their war-winning woof, of shields red with gore, and of their position, God-given, as the course-choosing sisters who had charge of the slain.

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“So,” said Zvonimir, as they returned. “I believe that Tom was right—it is best if we take the High Road, via North Glen and Byrnesville. It’s a bit of a haul between here and North Glen, but frankly, it’s the road less traveled, and I think the fewer people we run into, the better.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said Malcolm. “Besides, I’ve been to Rockford, and I can tell you ’tis possibly the ugliest town I’ve ever seen.”

“Well,” said Lorelei, “if you both think we should take the High Road, I’m not going to argue. But Zvonimir, I do think we need to talk about what I’m supposed to do once we get there.”

“You’re supposed to balance the worlds.”

“Yes, but what does that mean? We keep going around and around—and all you ever tell me is that I’m supposed to balance the worlds by balancing them.”

Zvonimir smiled tightly. “You seek more knowledge than I have, Lorelei. When it is time for you to know, you will know. I hope.”

“Hope is not a plan,” said Lorelei. “I hope when we get to Two Rivers, the Tome is more clear.”

“Ah, Lorelei, you worry too much,” said Zvonimir. “What is a plan but structured hope? Have faith and patience.”

“I do,” she said. “At any rate, no sense wasting time here. And we’re running low on money, frankly. Miia, are you ready to go?”

“Yes, mistress. I await your orders.”

Lorelei rolled her eyes. “Belay that, my sister-warrior. I don’t want you calling me ‘mistress’ until there are more than two of us.”

“As you wish, m’lady.”

Lorelei couldn’t help but chuckle. “Not so neither, but if I were, I’d suggest that when your mistress tells you to belay titles, you should.”

“Excuse me,” said Malcolm, “but what’s going on with you two?”

“Can’t discuss it,” said Miia, faux-conspiratorially. “It’s Valkyrie business.”

“Oh, I think Malcolm has proven his loyalty to the sisterhood. If not for some anatomical inconsistencies, I’d be happy to admit him as an apprentice. Malcolm, Miia is a made Valkyrie.”

Malcolm smiled. “Well! Congratulations, lass! Does Lorelei have the authority to do that?”

“Lorelei,” said Miia, “is the heir to Herja. As certainly as I am alive.”

Zvonimir scoffed. “Semantic drivel. There are still only two of you.”

“Nay,” said Malcolm. “Do not underestimate the power of a title, professor. The want of a title can be the difference between glory and banishment.” He turned to the two Valkyries, and raised a bushy eyebrow. “I do not doubt that you are the heir to Herja, Mistress Lorelei. The Chain of Jord would not glow so if you were not.”

Miia looked over and gasped. “Odin’s hat, Lorelei, he’s right.”

Lorelei looked into the tiny cracked mirror in the corner of their rented room. The necklace was catching the sun, just a bit. Or so she’d think, if there had been any sun on that particular day. Her face was bathed in an ethereal light.



“How do you know about the Chain of Jord?” asked Miia. “I didn’t even know that’s what it was called.”

“You wouldn’t. Not many do. I had a particularly good mentor; he mentioned his admiration for the chain, primarily because of its simplicity. Its creator didn’t do anything stupid like embed their soul in it or make its wearer invulnerable—nothing that would cause anyone to seek it out. All it does is glow slightly when worn by the True Leader of the Valkyries.”

“Nonsense. It’s just a reaction to the skin. Some sort of chemical. Probably would’ve glowed had Miia put it on.”

“Well, that’s possible,” said Lorelei. “Miia would make a fine leader. Someday, perhaps she will.”

“Don’t test it, lass. I don’t want Miia to be down when it doesn’t glow for her—and though I doubt it would, I don’t want you to be down if it does.”

“I won’t wear it, because it’s not mine. Besides, I know it wouldn’t glow for me,” Miia said. “I carried it around for weeks.

“And so what if it didn’t? It’s probably just a reaction to some sort of glandular secretions from the neck area.”

“Let me see if I understand,” said Malcolm. “You believe in gateways to other worlds and a prophecy of a great warrior, but a glowing necklace signifying a leader is beyond possibility? You’ve lost me, professor.”

Zvonimir sighed. “The necklace can glow, flash on and off, or softly play a cheerful Mithraist hymn for all it matters. What I am saying is that all this has been of no consequence. But if you and Miia are happy, Lorelei, then I’m happy for you. I will say, Mistress Lorelei, I just hope that you find more moral guidance than your predecessors in the position. It would be nice if for once in this world’s sorry history, battles were fought for honor and freedom, and not just temporal gain.”

“I agree with that,” said Lorelei. “But now is not the time to chart the entire future of the sisterhood. Now is the time to get ourselves on the road.”

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The High Road was a worn, dusty path, barely a road at all in places. It had fallen into some disrepair under King George. Wars tended to occupy him more than public works programs, although historians would long argue about whether George’s focus on wars at the expense of his lands led to the battle he and Fowler fought.

Still, it was better than trying to cross overland through forest and briar and field. And Zvonimir had been right; it was lightly traveled. In the first three days on the road, they’d seen only a few farmers hauling grain in from the

harvest, and one set of Fowlerite sentries who had passed them by without so much as a glance.

They camped out that third night only a few hours west of North Glen, in the hills above the city. They slumbered, feeling relaxed after a few days of quiet.

So it surprised Lorelei when she awoke from a vision of Lori's life (she had been talking to friends) with a sudden jolt, heart racing, hand reaching by instinct for her sword.

"You heard it too," said Miia, who was already stumbling to her feet.

"Yeah, but what is it?"

"I don't know. Just a buzzing."

Radulf was standing, head cocked, listening. The hair on her back was standing up.

"Malcolm! Zvonimir!" stage-whispered Lorelei. "Wake up! We've got company."

The two men stretched and yawned. "Lass, can't I sleep a bit more?"

"I don't think so," said Miia. "Someone's here."

They strained to hear the faint sound. It was ephemeral, barely audible above the soft breezes of the night.

"Well, thank you, ladies, for waking me. Let me know if I can fight the wind for you," said Zvonimir, rolling over.

Malcolm, for his part, was sitting with his hand at his ear, listening carefully. "It can't be," he said. "They're too far from their revels. Why would they be out here?"

"Who?" asked Lorelei, as she heard a soft, buzzing sound, slowly rising.

"The fay. This isn't their place—not this time of year. Something's wrong."

Zvonimir struggled to a sitting position. "Faeries live all over, Malcolm."

"Aye, that they do, but this time of year they head for the Great Southern Desert for their autumnal revels. They should've left at the equinox and they shouldn't return until we're almost halfway to the solstice."

The buzzing slowed, and fifteen glowing dots filled the sky, approaching them quickly. Lorelei watched as the dots spread out into a semicircle, which raced toward them at speeds faster than she could imagine.

“Run!” she said.

“Too late, lass,” said Malcolm. “’Tis better to find out what they want. Keep your swords sheathed. They won’t have any animosity toward your kind unless you give them cause.”

“Then what are they doing?” said Miia, as the semicircle began to tighten around them.

“Looking for me, I misdoubt,” said Malcolm.

There was no time for further question, as fourteen glowing dots resolved themselves into fourteen nine-inch-tall figures, buoyed aloft by softly fluttering wings. The fifteenth figure approached the center of the circle, while the others closed it.

He was beautiful, glowing softly in the night with wings that seemed to have absorbed the entire spectrum of color, plus some additional hues that he had simply dreamed up on the spot. “Malcolm MacChaluim! We are here for you. You must come with us now. Please, do not resist. Stand forth, that we may take you.”

Miia didn’t have to hear any more. Her sword was drawn, and she was in an attack position. “Over my dead body,” she said.

“Mine as well,” said Lorelei, mirroring her friend. “Malcolm stays with us.”

“Lasses, I’m touched, but you are no match for this lot. I will go with them. Hopefully ’tis nothing too serious—I’ve dealt with them before.”

“We’re in this together, Malcolm,” said Lorelei. “If they want to take you, they’re going to have to take us as well.”

“As you wish,” said the lead faerie. And with that, they struck.

They quickly dispersed, and began dive-bombing the party a few attackers at a time. It took but a few passes before Lorelei began to grow frustrated. Size-wise, she had a tremendous advantage over the faeries. But speed-wise, it wasn’t even close. She would hack and slash and watch, disheartened, as the faeries danced and spun away at the last second.

After a particularly inept-looking parry, she turned to her comrade.

“You having any luck, Miia?”

“Not in the least, Lor. Malcolm, how do we fight these things?”

“You don’t, lass. Not if you want to live for long. I’m telling you, drop your swords and surrender. I’m not letting you both die on my account.”

“No chance, Malcolm. But thanks.” At least she and Miia had accomplished something thus far; the Faeries had been unable to penetrate their defense of Malcolm. All the fay had accomplished thus far was to keep Zvonimir out of the fight, which was not really much of a challenge to them. Radulf, Miia, and she surrounded the uruig, keeping the faeries from reaching Malcolm—for now.

“Look, what do you want of him? Perhaps if you explained—”

“That is no concern of yours, human,” the leader said, hovering just beyond striking distance. “This is between us and him.”

“But you see, then it is our concern,” said Miia.

“I grow weary of this,” the leader said. “Poppyseed, Heartsease, Echinacea—now.”

Three faeries abruptly broke off their pattern and, dodging swords and teeth, struck their targets simultaneously.

Lorelei dropped to her knees. It felt as if she’d been set ablaze, a thousand flames licking at every inch of her skin. She tried to lash out, in a last desperate defense of Malcolm, but the world around her was swimming, until it faded into black.

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“So anyhow,” said Lori, “that’s why I’ve come to see you. I know it sounds insane....”

“It doesn’t just sound insane,” said the man across from her, stroking his beard slightly and adjusting his glasses. “It is insane. The idea that I have some doppelgänger in another realm of fantasy and witchcraft—it’s almost worse than Scientology.”

“Molly said you’d say that. But Professor Zimmerman, I swear to you, I saw your twin in my visions before I ever saw you, and yet he looked just like you. I saw my friend Anna before I ever met her. How can that be?”

“Simple,” sighed the professor, adjusting his spectacles. “It’s just a dream. You dreamed of a woman with black hair, or whatever your friend has, and then you meet a girl with black hair, and your mind connects it with the previous image. The more you think about it, the more certain you become that the girl in your dream was a premonition of your friend. You ignore the dozen redheaded boys you dreamed of. You just pay attention to the piece of data that fits.

“It’s called selection bias, and while I know this all seems very real to you, I assure you, if you’re looking for reassurance that you’re not insane, you’re better served visiting a psychic.”

“I could have, if I wanted reassurance—but that’s not what I’m after. Professor, I have no doubt that I’m sane, and no doubt that my visions are real. I’m not a nutcase. I don’t believe in horoscopes, intelligent design, or Yeti.”

“Those are three points in your favor. I suppose you do believe in God, though.”

“Not with the fervor of my twin. I guess I believe in something.”

Zimmerman rolled his eyes. “It’s the same—just different by degree. You’re still wishing for something that doesn’t exist. The universe is random. It exists the way it does through chance and luck and development according to basic natural laws, not because some big guy in the sky created it. Not that it’s without beauty, mind you.” Zimmerman paused. “I’m sorry, I tend to ramble when I get on the topic of God. Sorry for getting off topic.”

“Not a problem. And heck, you may be right about the universe—I certainly don’t know. I just think it feels like there’s something...but now I’m getting off track. Look, I know what I’m saying is borderline impossible. But that’s why I sought you out—because Molly told me that you would be at least willing to hear me out before shooting me down. I have a hypothesis—that I am seeing, somehow, a world parallel to our own. Not through magic or dreams or anything—that I’m seeing a real world, in some way that works in this universe, which is—I agree—a rational universe.

“I need someone to help me test my hypothesis—and if it fails, then I’ll know I’m wrong.”

Zimmerman raised an eyebrow at that. “Now there’s an interesting thought. What you’re saying is that you accept that there is a possibility you are insane, eh?”

*She’s not insane!* thought Lorelei, angrily. But Lori was not angered.

“I don’t believe I am insane, professor. I believe I am witnessing events going on in a universe parallel to ours. One where the physical laws of the universe are less strict than this one. But it is a universe connected to this—a universe with at least some crossover between them. That’s not magic. And it’s not insanity. And—you have to admit—it is possible.”

“Possible? Yes. Unlikely. But at least you’re using the right language. Okay, so that’s your hypothesis. How do you test it?”

“I don’t know. I know you’re a biologist, not a physicist, but you certainly understand the scientific method. And besides, I’m a biological being—there has to be some sort of reason I’d be able to see these visions. I was hoping you’d help me—if only to convince a poor, deluded coed that her visions are just dreams.”

With that, Zimmerman smiled, just a bit. “Interesting. The faith-based folks usually don’t want their faith tested. They’re afraid that the slightest blow from reason will scatter their precious beliefs to the four winds. But here’s a question: how will you know the truth when you see it? If I show something you see to be wrong, will you just move the goalposts? If I show you that you can’t be seeing what you claim, will I suddenly be not taking into account phlogston, or some other made-up nothing?”

“No,” said Lori, firmly. “If you help me test this, I’ll admit to you that I’m crazy if it fails the test. Heck, probably better I figure that out, right?”

Zimmerman appeared lost in thought for a minute. “All right,” he said. “I’ll consider it. But when I do prove you wrong, I want you to let me blog about it.”

“As long as you blog about it if you prove me right. After all, science is about testing hypotheses and proving them right or wrong, isn’t it? Maybe, if I’m right, you’ll have to change your positions.”

Zimmerman chuckled. “Well, Ms. Green, we’ll see.”

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Lorelei awoke, her head spinning, the wind buffeting her face, a thrumming drone filling the world.

She opened her eyes, and immediately wished she hadn’t; the world was moving by at a speed faster than she’d believed possible. Faster than she wanted to believe was possible. She looked up, and realized that she was being held in the crook of a faerie’s right arm.

A very large faerie, at least as tall in relation to her as she was to Malcolm. Maybe more.

Lorelei wasn’t sure that it was the best idea, but she had to figure out what was going on. So she asked.

“Hey! You up there! What’s going on?”

“Ah,” the faerie said, looking down at her quarry with Tyrian eyes, her short periwinkle hair rippling like the sea in the hard wind. “You’re awake. Good! I didn’t want to do any permanent harm. My name is Heartsease. And you are?”

Lorelei shook her head. “A bit confused. Er—Lorelei. Lorelei Voss.”

“Hello, Lorelei Lorelei Voss. This is my first direct experience with humans. You must forgive me for my rudeness in kidnapping you, but Globethistle was insistent that if you would not allow us to take Prince Malcolm without your permission, that we had to take you as well.”

Lorelei looked out, trying to see her friends, but the wind stung her eyes. “It’s just Lorelei, please, Heartsease. Are Miia and Radulf and Zvonimir with us, too?”

“The female and male humans are with us, as is the wolf, if those are the ones you wonder about.”

“And Malcolm?”

“He is most certainly with us, Lorelei. We would not feign take you and leave the one we came for. Prince Malcolm surrendered to us as soon as you were incapacitated.”

“Smart of him,” said Lorelei. “So...why is it you’ve grown to three Fa high?”

Heartsease laughed melodiously. “I haven’t grown, Lorelei.”

“But you’re huge! If you didn’t grow, then how....”

Suddenly, she swallowed. If the faerie hadn’t grown, there was only one other possibility.

And she didn’t want to think about that right now.

They came presently to a clearing. It appeared immense, although Lorelei rather imagined that everything in the world would appear immense at the moment. If the faeries were shorter than Malcolm...and she was as much smaller than the faeries as he was of her...then she had to be very small indeed.

She resolved never to pick a fight with a faerie again.

At least her captress didn’t seem particularly upset by their battle. Indeed, other than a bit of amusement, Heartsease didn’t seem particularly emotional at all.

They landed at last, and Heartsease deposited Lorelei on a high plain that she realized was a table. Soon, a male and female faerie placed Zvonimir, Radulf, and Miia with her. At least her friends had been similarly reduced; she wouldn’t have held up well if she had been the only one.

“Where’s Malcolm?” she asked, but Miia just shrugged.

“I know as much as you. At least Poppyseed didn’t seem to take it personally that I tried to fillet her.”

“I don’t understand why they had to bring me, though,” said Zvonimir. “I wasn’t attacking them.”

“They were attacking us, folks,” said Lorelei. “And we were right to defend Malcolm. We were just not as strong as them.”

“Obviously,” said Zvonimir. He started to say something else, until a dull thudding drowned him out. A titanic man approached, even larger than the faeries. He dropped down to one knee, and Lorelei’s heart leapt into her throat.

“Well, lasses. Zvonimir. A bit of a reversal, this. Don’t worry. I’ll see what I can do to get you all restored.”

His voice reverberated with bass, and not just a hint of amusement.

“Malcolm, what do they want?” Miia asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, looking up. “But I know this clan. I don’t know what they want of me, but I think I can get them to let you go.”

Lorelei shook her head no, surprising even herself.

“What, lass?”

“If you’re not free to go, we stay.”

“Oh, Mistress Lorelei, that’s just foolish. You’re well less than two inches high. If they’ll restore you and let you go, then go.”

“Not a chance, Malcolm.”

Further debate was tabled, as the music of harps began to fill the air.

“Make way!” called Globethistle. “Make way for Her Majesty, Titania the Fay!”

Lorelei gazed out at the immense tableau. Globethistle retreated a few steps, and fell to his knees, as did all the other faeries, and, she noticed, Malcolm as well. Shrugging, she mocked the gesture, and motioned to her friends. They were in no position to show disrespect.

Striding abruptly into view was the most beautiful being she had ever seen. She wore red vestments which set off perfectly against her lambent blue skin. Her wings stretched just wide of her shoulders, reflecting a myriad of hues in the torchlight. She swept a hand through pure white hair, ornamented by a bejeweled tiara of silver. “Come, Auberon,” she said, reaching out a hand for an equally beautiful man in a silver suit and matching crown. “Arise, my sweet and joyful brood. We have guests at our revels tonight; let us entertain them. Puck!”

“Here, your Grace,” answered a jovial faerie.

“Announce our guests.”

The faerie cleared his throat, and said in a tone of mock-gravity, “Our visitant hath come from far a-way. From lands afar where gleeful urusks play. Once a crown didst top his bushy head. Now his only brother wants him dead. Pay homage, fellow faeries, on thy feet: ’Tis Malcolm, Prince of Neri, whom we greet.”

There was much applause as the faerie completed his announcement; Malcolm simply shook his head and grinned. “As always, Robin, one is never sure whether one has been honored or ridiculed by you.”

“As always, Malcolm, a bit of both. Oh, and he also brought some fairly incompetent bodyguards.”

Lorelei saw Miia flush with anger, but she shook her head. “Not now, Miia. Patience.”



“Lovely,” said Titania. “What entertainment have we tonight?”

“Jugglers, singers, dancers, and magicians your Excellency.”

“Well then! Pass the libations and refreshments. We have a friend in our midst. Slainte!”

Lorelei smiled. She wasn’t exactly the size she’d choose, but at least they appeared to be detained by a gregarious bunch.

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It was several hours later, as the sun was peeking over the horizon. Lorelei mused that this had certainly been interesting. The food was excellent, the entertainment sublime. Malcolm even danced with the Queen in a dazzling display of grace that left Miia quaking with jealousy, at least until Malcolm bowed to her and took her out onto the dance floor. All and all, the evening had been lovely, and was marred only by the fact that they were unsure whether any of them would ever be allowed to leave.

At long last, the riotous party subsided, and the Queen stood forth once more. “Malcolm, I would feign request that you accompany my husband and I to the palace. There is an old friend there who wishes to speak to you.”

“Rather expected he’d be involved in this kidnapping. I’d be honored, Highness. But I would feign request that my friends be allowed to accompany us.”

“By all means. Heartsease!”

“Your Excellency?”

“Bear our diminutive friends upon a pillow to my palace.”

“As you wish, your Excellency.”

The Castle of the Fay was like nothing else Lorelei had ever seen. The entrance led directly into a vestibule that appeared to be ten stories tall by faerie scale. It was an iridescent pink, the color of a seashell, overlaid by curtains of faint gossamer. At the top of the chamber, a light glowed brightly, though it came from no chandelier. It simply was.

The doors to the Throne Room opened, and all strode through. “About bloody time, sister,” rang a voice out of the hall.

“Ah, my brother. There is protocol to observe. We were entertaining a prince.”

“He’s not a ruddy prince anymore, and you know it. Ah, Malcolm, my boy. It’s good to see you.”

Malcolm almost ran to embrace the man who stood in the center of the room.

He was a faerie, of course, but Lorelei instantly noticed that he was missing his left wing—along with a not insignificant part of his left arm. A deep scar ran the length of his face, just missing his eye.

“Well!” said Malcolm. “Loroki the Fay! It has been too long, my teacher.”

“That it has, my boy. So, I understand you had bodyguards with? That’s a good idea, but you might think twice against using humans—they’re just not going to cut it against Globethistle’s crew.”

“They’re not my bodyguards, Loroki. They’re my friends. Miia Aalto, Zvonimir Pasternak, Mistress Lorelei Voss. I’d like to introduce you to my teacher, Loroki the Fay, Lord of the Flowers.”

Loroki walked over to the pillow, and peered down at the tiny party. He smiled slightly, until his eyes locked on Lorelei.

“My God, this is how you treat the leader of the Valkyries? Some hosts we’ve been! Vostanovlenya Srednye!”

Heartsease shrieked as she dropped the pillow, which was never supposed to bear three faerie-sized humans and a dog. “Mistress, I beg your pardon,” he said, apologetically. “They did not recognize the sigil—I welcome you to our home.”

Lorelei, for her part, was picking herself up off the ground. “It’s not their fault, Lord Loroki,” she said. “We did battle—though that was perhaps foolish on our part. They were simply doing their best to protect themselves, and in the end, no harm was done.”

“I am terribly sorry for your loss, Mistress Lorelei,” Loroki said, extending a hand. “Mistress Herja was a warrior of great skill; Ravenwood will be greatly missed. I am grateful to see that the line did not die out with it.”

Lorelei was nonplussed. “I—thank you, Loroki. Bad news travels fast.”

“Oh, I’ve had an eye on Ravenwood for years, ever since I fought on the side of Herja and Svava after the destruction of Ulris. In fifty years, to go from two Valkyries to hundreds—it was a great accomplishment. A testament to the skill of your mentors. And now, of course, the cycle begins anew. I look forward to seeing what the next fifty years bring for your order.

“But enough reminiscing,” said Loroki, leaving Lorelei extremely confused. “Malcolm, you’ve really stuck your foot in it this time.”

“How so, teacher? You’re the one who taught me that all species should be equal. That all orders were deserving the same respect. Was I to sit idly by as my brother shredded that belief?”

“I also taught you to duck when an axe was about to cleave your skull from your body. And yet, from what I hear, if not for the intervention of your two friends here, you’d have been martyred.”

“And that would have been a tragedy,” added Auberon.

“Indeed. Malcolm, you’re a lot more valuable alive than dead, which is why recent developments concern me so.”

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “So that’s why you brought me here? To tell me my brother wants me dead, eh? That’s not news to me, my teacher. I expect the sentries left about five minutes after I did.”

“So? Do you know how wide a net your brother is casting? Even the damn kobolds are being told to look out for an uruig. Three brownies are dead because they had beards. Hell, they’re questioning faeries, for Gaia’s sake! Domhnall won’t rest until he has your head on a plate.”

“So Domhnall waited ten minutes after agreeing not to kill Malcolm before starting to try to kill him? That’s not exactly keeping his word,” said Miia.

“No, m’lady, but remember, contracts made at swordpoint are rarely enforceable. Domhnall wants Malcolm dead because of what Malcolm represents. And truthfully, Malcolm—and I hesitate to say this lest you think you’ve done something smart here—Domhnall has been busy with pockets of unrest in his empire since your little performance. Having humans risk their lives to save you has impressed those urusks who aren’t concerned with your moral turpitude.”

“Something good came of it, then. Well, all right, then; I’m in danger. And that’s great. What do I do about it? Charge back into Woodsylvania with two Valkyries and a professor? Oh, and a wolf too. That should do it.”

Loroki groaned. “Malcolm, some day, perhaps, you will learn that often it’s the middle path you should take. No, the time’s not right for revolution. It may not be for some time. But it will never be right if you’re dead, will it?”

“Weren’t you the teacher who told me that some things are worth dying for?”

“I was also the teacher who told you that it may be better to be a dead lion than a live jackal, but it’s better to be a live lion any day of the week.”

Malcolm laughed. “’Tis been too long, Loroki. Next time, though, you could just send me an invite. My friends have had to get all shrunk and half-unshrunk. ’Tis not easy on them, you know.”

“I know,” said Loroki.

“Malcolm—patience,” said Titania, joining her older brother. “When the time comes for the attack on Domhnall, all of the faerie kingdoms and all of the Brownies will stand with you. Surely you know that.”

“The Valkyries will too, Malcolm,” said Lorelei, firmly. “Even if there are only two of us. We are pledged to defend you and your honor.”

“Damn right,” added Miia.

“There. You see?” said Loroki genially. “Things happen for a reason. Trust in the hand of fate. And in

the meantime, I have a gift for you.”

“What’s this?” said Malcolm, taking a silver ring with a Celtic knot inscribed upon it.

“The ring of Proteus. To be accurate, it’s a reasonable facsimile of it. It can alter your scale back and forth. Place it on the third finger of your left hand—not yet, my impatient protégé—and you will zoom to the size of a human. Back to your right, and you’re an *uruig* again.”

“Human-sized? Teacher, you must be joking. You know there’s a reason there are so few talented mages among that scale.”

“Yes. And you’ll find when you’re of that scale, you won’t be much of one. But look, it is difficult to find a needle in a haystack. It is more difficult to find a needle in a pile of needles. Make no mistake; you’re far safer if you’re not tiny.”

Malcolm shook his head. “’Tis only because I trust you, Loroki. And I trust my friends to defend me.”

“As you should. One piece of warning—the ring will allow you to transition nineteen times, precisely. After that, it’s just decorative.”

“I understand. Now, how do we get back from here?”

“Well, you’re only a few miles from the Low Road. I know you’re heading to Two Rivers, so it will get you there. And if you should need my assistance, you remember how to contact me; be not proud, Prince Malcolm. You have more support than you realize.”

They left the palace, and there were hugs all around; Titania was apologetic toward Lorelei. “That Puck! Not noticing your chain. Glowing jewelry is international shorthand for ‘leader.’ My formal crown glows. Auberon’s formal crown glows. It’s not like this is something Robin never heard of.”

“Come, proud Titania, you know the Puck would not miss that,” said her husband, kissing her hand.

Titania smacked her forehead with the other one. “Remind me to exile him to the pastures for a week, will you, my love?”

“Of course, my love.”

“At any rate, Lorelei, you are welcome back to the land of the Fay any time you desire. Though we may request that you return at this scale. Humans tend to be difficult to tend to at full-size.”

“I am honored, your Excellency. And again, don’t think anything of it. We were honored by the welcome you gave Malcolm; kindness shown our friend is kindness shown ourselves.”

Titania beamed at that. “Ah, Malcolm, you’ve finally fallen in with a good crowd. Come back again. Anytime.”

In minutes, they were restored to their original sizes, save Malcolm, who was

restored to considerably more than his original size.

“Blast Loroki! Knowing he’s right doesn’t make this size any easier.”

“I don’t know,” said Miia, walking behind him. “You being this size does have some advantages, you know.”

He looked back over his shoulder, and arched an eyebrow. “Aye,” he said. “I suppose it does.”

## *Fourteen*

### *His Melancholy Tale of Woe*

There were some small advantages to where they ended up. For one thing, they were already east of Rockford; having the opportunity to bypass that town made both Zvonimir and Malcolm almost delirious with mirth. For another, much as traffic had increased, the Low Road certainly was an improvement over the High Road. The walk was easy, the path was wide and even paved in some places. They passed Glen Ellen quickly, and were soon within a couple days of their goal.

Not to say there weren’t some changes, of course. For one thing, having Malcolm full-sized took some getting used to. He was no longer content with crumbs from hardtack, for one; he looked on sadly at the amount of whisky he had already consumed.

And of course, there were long stretches during the night when he and Miia would disappear for some time, usually involving flimsy excuses like searching for mustard seed or looking at the stars. Lorelei didn’t mind; unlike her ex-boyfriend, Malcolm was kind and gentle, loyal and brilliant, brave and devoted. Everything Miia deserved

As a more practical matter, the long and totally coincidental absences of Miia and Malcolm let Lorelei and Zvonimir talk. And they needed to talk.

“You know, my permutation has met your permutation.”

“Really,” said Zvonimir. “Dashing, handsome, brilliant man, I suppose.”

“Actually, he’s sort of an arrogant jerk. But he seems smart enough. He’s going to try to prove scientifically that she’s not actually in connection with me.”

“Trying to prove it false? Interesting. What if he finds out it’s true?”

“I don’t think he’s expecting it, but he was willing to take a look. If Lori’s right, then he’s exactly what she needs—someone versed in the way her world works. Like clockwork.”

“She’s a smart girl. Reminds me of you.”

“Professor, I have a question.”

“Yes, Lorelei?”

“When we first met, you were very dismissive about me because I was a woman.”

“Ah,” said Zvonimir. “Yes, I was.”

“And yet you’ve been pretty willing to follow along, taking orders from me all the way from Neri on. You’ve tried to teach me, but you haven’t ignored me.”

“And you’re wondering why it is that I, a man who thinks women should be seen and not heard, am willing to follow your lead?”

“Well—yes.”

Zvonimir smiled. “Because you’re a good leader.”

“That’s a taught—taught....”

“Tautology. If A, therefore A. But why A? That’s the real question. Look, I should come clean. I don’t hate women. I hate weak women, something this land has in abundance. I hate weak men, for what it’s worth—there are more of them than of the women—but unfortunately I can’t do anything about them. They’re always convinced that they’re strong.

“You weren’t weak. You took my insults and threw them back at me. And good for you—that’s what I was hoping you’d do.”

Lorelei pondered. “So tell me about your protégé. I need to know.”

“Hakim is a brilliant man. It wasn’t like I handed him the Tome he owns. He found it through years of painstaking research. Indeed, I would expect that he will be of more help to you than I have been.”

“I don’t know, professor. You’ve gotten me this far. I just wish I knew more about what to do next.”

“What we do next, mistress, is study. The Tome is knowledge, knowledge is power. And if you are the one I believe you to be, you must learn how to control your abilities. You will learn how to shift in space. Perhaps you will even learn how to shift between worlds. I will help you to riddle out the more difficult portions of the text. As will Hakim, I’m sure.

“So, our fellow travelers are both suddenly and simultaneously indisposed. Shall you and I commence with preparing dinner? I can’t decide between hardtack and hardtack.”

“The hardtack is pretty good, I hear,” said Lorelei. “But I’d go with the hardtack.”

“Ah! Living dangerously. Let’s do it.”

‡ ‡ ‡

“So, you comfy?” said Professor Zimmerman, sitting across from Lori.

Lorelei was momentarily disoriented. She was in a room in the other world, with all sorts of odd boxes and machines that were pinging and beeping oddly. She didn’t know what to make of it.

“Just for reference, Professor, Lorelei’s here.”

“Is she now? That’s lovely. If that’s true, then I should be seeing some evidence of it.”

“You think so?”

“Uh...yes, Lori, just a moment.” He looked at a box, frowning. “I’m having trouble with the equipment.”

“I’m just going to talk to Lorelei for a moment, okay?”

“What? Yes, fine, whatever.”

“Professor Zimmerman is measuring my electromagnetic output,” said Lori. “I know that doesn’t mean anything to you; it barely means anything to me. But Professor Zimmerman seems to think that if he watches my brain while you’re here, he should see evidence of some sort of broadcast. Or something like that.”

*While he watches your brain?* That sounded bad. Was she missing part of her skull?

“Lorelei?” came the voice, full of shock.

“Interesting,” Zimmerman murmured.

“Lorelei, was that you? We’re not missing our skull. He’s got a machine that lets him measure us without hurting us. But...Lorelei, I think I heard your thoughts!”

*You mean, as I thought them? Right now?*

“Right now! Maybe I need to get hooked up to electronic gizmos more often. So how are you? How’s life? Last I saw you were just chatting with Zvonimir, so I don’t know if anything’s happened since.”

*I don’t know as anything has. You’ve noticed the Miia/Malcolm thing, I suppose?*

“How could I avoid it? I—”

“Excuse me. Lori, we’re—there’s something. An electromagnetic spike. It seems to vary in frequency and intensity—when you talk, one frequency spikes, another drops...and then, when you’ve been quiet, vice versa. I’ve never—Dr. McCall, have you ever seen anything like this?”

“Wait,” said Lori. “You’re saying you’re seeing evidence that Lorelei and I are talking, aren’t you? Proof, right?”

“Well, it’s not proof. Not by a long shot. It’s...inconclusive. But it’s certainly not contradictory evidence.”

“So you haven’t disproved my hypothesis, at least.”

There was a long quiet. “No. I haven’t.”

Yes!

“Yes! Lorelei, we’re—wait, wait, I can feel you leaving. Don’t leave yet! Dr. McCall—you...”

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei’s eyes popped open with the sound of a breaking stick. She armed herself, and rose.

She saw a shadowy figure in the woods, and she moved toward it, slowly. She carefully worked her way around the hulking figure, waiting...waiting....

Quick as a pronghorn, she leapt and brought the sword up to the man’s neck. “Drop your weapon. Now.”

The sword clanked to the ground. “Hey, give me a chance to explain,” he said.

“Explain? Explain to me one good reason why I shouldn’t slit your throat right now.”

“Because I love you.”

“Iorwerth!” she shouted, causing immediate alarm in the camp near her. “You sold me out, you son of a bitch. I rotted in jail for weeks. If not for my actual friends, I’d be dead by now. And...why am I even talking to you, swine? You know what? I’m going to let Miia work on you. Move!”

“Lorelei...”

“MOVE!”

Iorwerth clumsily moved, trying not to inadvertently slit his own throat. Within seconds, Miia and Malcolm were on the trail, both armed. (Malcolm had relieved Zvonimir of his sword a few days ago, which was frankly a relief to everyone involved, Zvonimir not the least.)

“Aye, there’s the bastard, all right. What, Iorwerth? You come back to finish the job?”

“Lorelei, he’s your kill. But please, please let me hurt him first.”



“Patience, Miia. Come on, Yorrie.”

She pushed and prodded him back to camp, then with a burst of ferocity, threw him to the ground.

He looked gaunt; he was not wearing the armor he had when last they’d seen each other. Instead, he wore a simple white tunic and pants. His hair was matted and he sported a week’s growth of beard. Wind Dancer was nowhere to be seen.

“Please,” he said. “I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Lorelei couldn’t help but laugh bitterly. “Really. You call lying about my being a spy for King George ‘not wanting to hurt me?’”

“Please. I know it sounds stupid. But they had a sword at my neck...much as Miia’s wielding right now. They were going to kill me. I had to do something. Didn’t I?”

“You had to do what a knight should do,” said Miia bitterly. “You had to die honorably.”

“I’m not a blasted knight! I never was.”

The camp went quiet. “Please, Lorelei. Let me explain.”

All eyes were on her. She looked at him, and finally sighed. “Yeah, why not? This should be an entertaining work of fiction.”

“Lorelei? Can’t we just kill him?”

“No,” she said. “I want to hear his tale of woe first.”

‡ ‡ ‡

His name was Godfrey I. Maddox. The I did stand for Iorwerth—but nobody had referred to him as that his entire life, except for the numerous childhood incidents when his mother or father had bade him hither with a stern “Godfrey Iorwerth Maddox, get over here now!”

There was no Iorwerth Maddox.

Well, that’s not exactly true. Iorwerth Maddox did exist—in the mind of Godfrey, that is. In his dreams, he roamed the countryside, a Knight-Errant in the grand tradition. He would slay dragons, save fair maidens, and when his quest was at an end, perhaps he would find one of those maidens to settle down with and form a family, and live on the fortune and fame he had won.

His real life, however, was more prosaic. He was an apprentice bard. Not a great one, mind you, but passable. His master, Dominick of Byrnesville, was a

good man but a drunkard. Still, he was a skilled writer, and a decent musician; he had taught Godfrey everything he knew, and Dominick would often tell him that Godfrey's talent outstripped his own.

"You'll do well, Godfrey. Your grasp of iambic pentameter is exceptional for a bard with your limited experience. I imagine that Lord Faircloth will take to you once I've passed on."

"You won't pass on soon, I hope," said Godfrey. "I'm not ready for that."

"Soon enough, I suppose. You'll do fine, lad! You worry too much. Always with your thoughts on how things won't work. Try!"

Soon enough, Dominick grew gravely ill. He had always been ruddy, but his face became covered in red webs of blood, his hands grew red and swollen to the point where he could no longer play the lute. Godfrey accompanied him at his performances, and wrote most of them. But Dominick grew sicker, vomiting and complaining of pains. Godfrey cared for him until he died.

The great men of Byrnesville were at Dominick's funeral, of course; he had played for them all. Lord Faircloth had called him the most gifted bard their town had ever seen. And Godfrey himself had played a composition of his own in honor of his fallen mentor.

In the weeks that followed, he paid a visit to the hierarchy. Lord Faircloth had been pleasant enough, but had indicated he had no further use for a bard; the Lord High Mayor wouldn't even see him. The Honorable Sheriff of Byrnesville threatened him with arrest if he played on the street for money again. Soon enough, he realized to his horror that his teacher was wrong. He had no future.

And so he left the house of Dominick's son, who had agreed to keep him through Novembar, and he set off to the west, carrying only Dominick's lute and a well-worn book of poetry, and the one gold piece he had saved up.

He headed west, toward North Glen. It was counterintuitive, to say the least—after all, there was a far greater concentration of artists and musicians to the east, in Two Rivers. Not to mention a significant concentration of well-bred and wealthy men who could serve as patrons.

But Godfrey headed west. He told himself that he thought it would be easier in North Glen, that perhaps he'd try to get into the university in Blue Earth. If he was honest with himself, it was because he feared having to compete in Two Rivers, feared that he would never measure up to the bards who already lived there.

And so it was that he ended up hungry, deep in the middle of a forest, somewhere south of the High Road. That's where he found the body.

The knight had fallen some time before—years, perhaps. His flesh had almost rotted away. It was likely he'd fallen from a horse—there were no marks on his armor, and his sword remained sheathed.

At first, Godfrey told himself that he was removing the suit so he could give the Knight a proper burial—which, to his credit, he did. Then, he told himself that he had taken the armor down to the stream to wash and clean so that he could sell it in town—a nice suit of armor, which this was, could fetch thirty gold pieces, enough to sustain him for a year or so, let him get himself settled.

And after he had let it dry, wiping it carefully with his tunic, he told himself that he was putting on the suit of armor just to see what it was like. And because it would be easier to move this way.

He had to be creative to get the suit on alone, but he was a creative lad. He pulled on the helm, and looked out at the world.

The suit fit like a glove. Like it had been made to fit him alone. He reached for the sword and drew it, lifted the shield into a defensive position.

In his imaginings, Sir Iorwerth had achieved glory through a series of encounters with dragons and dark lords, but he had come from maculate origins. Perhaps, he told himself, perhaps he could use this suit to give him a chance at glory.

And so he walked west, bearing the fifty pounds of armor easily—almost, indeed, buoyed by it.

He entered North Glen to stares and surprise. He reached the inn, prepared to offer his gold coin for lodging, but the innkeeper wouldn't hear of it. After all, he wore a suit of armor bearing the ensign of Prince Wallace himself. "One of those the prince knighted? You shan't pay a bronze for your room, Sir, uh...."

"Iorwerth. Iorwerth Maddox."

"Sir Iorwerth. Tell me, your suit—it appears to be somewhat worn. And no horse—you must've seen battle! Tell us of the battles you've seen."

The room erupted in calls for him to regale them with tales of the travails of his day. And so he did, hesitantly at first, then more fully and with growing confidence. He told of slaying a dragon in Byrnesville, of fighting against Fowler in Saint Stewart. Told of how Prince Wallace had knighted him in a ceremony in Freeport with flying doves and maidens fair, how he had wooed but lost Princess Michelle (the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen) to the equally charming and worthy Sir Jacob (now Prince Jacob, of course—as kind as he was deadly, and a good friend). And as he told these stories, he found that people listened. They cared. They believed.

And he found himself starting to believe, just a little.

He told them of how he had fought a dragon, how he had defeated it—but at the cost of his faithful steed and all the money he had. “It’s no matter,” he told the room. “I am heading through for just a time. Soon, I will head west, to join with the army of the King. I just hope to work over the next few months that I can buy myself a horse, even if it be just a beaten-down nag. Then, we shall ride to defend the crown!”

Within a week, his armor had been polished by a smith, he had received new garments from the tailor, and he’d been gifted with a mare of purest white. Wind Dancer.

He’d also been graced by the presence of the innkeeper’s daughter, the Lord High Mayor’s daughter, and the young Widow Murphy, whose husband had died but a year after they had married—just a year before Iorwerth came to town.

The life of a knight was more fun than the life of a bard.

And so he rode west, telling similar tales in Tree Fern and Blue Earth and even New Bishop. He had headed back through Blue Earth, and then down the road to Bella Vista.

Something took him through Bella Vista. He didn’t know what it was, until he reached a singularly unattractive forest. It was there that he saw the most beautiful woman he’d ever beheld.

She was tall and lithe, titian hair framing a perfect face. Before he knew it, he was riding to interpose himself between her and the kobolds who were menacing her.

It was the first actual fighting he’d done—not that he had to swing a sword. His presence forced the kobold to apologize for his insolence.

It felt good.

He introduced himself, as always, as Sir Iorwerth. He complemented the woman—Lorelei! Such an exquisite name!—in as many ways as he could conceive. And he told the stories he’d told in towns up and down the High Road, hoping they’d win her.

But he found that her friends were not as interested in them. They had, he realized, seen more battle than he—well, they had at the very least seen battle.

He wanted to confess to Lorelei that night, tell her he was a bard, not a knight. He had no want to deceive her. Even then, he realized he loved her—she with easy grace and charm, with a good heart and a keen intellect.

But shortly, they came across the Royal Fourth. He'd gotten lucky with the boojum—Lorelei had saved him, to be sure, though he'd forced himself to attack with whatever skill he could muster. After Phobos' death, Lorelei lay injured. He sat with her for hours, until the Colonel called for him.

He didn't know why he minimized her role; maybe it was just habit at that point. At any rate, she forgave him for that, though he didn't deserve it.

And then came the battle, and their flight—and she was righteously angry at him, something that didn't really abate.

And then they were captured.

He had been interrogated, and he had foolishly lied. He had claimed to be a knight, but one looking to serve Fowler. Quigg didn't buy it. He called for the executioner. Finally, his head on a rock, he gave them what they wanted, what he could always give them—a good story.

He blurted out that Lorelei was a Valkyrie. They fed him details, and he agreed with them. Anything to avoid death. He inked his name on a piece of parchment. Quigg smiled.

It was only after the sword was removed from his neck that he realized what he had done.

"No! I made it up!" he cried. "Don't—she's not the one you want! I was lying!" he'd cried, but they didn't care. They had what they wanted.

He watched in horror as they took her out, unconscious, and threw her in the paddy wagon. He tried to talk to the commander—wouldn't they rather have a male prisoner? He'd trade places! But Quigg would not budge. They took her east, to Blue Earth. He took Wind Dancer and rode west, rode all the way to Choking Wren. And there he gambled, and he drank. He lost Wind Dancer, his armor, most of the money he had. Everything but his sword and the clothes on his back.

He didn't care.

A week or so later, he awoke sober. He'd had no money for mead. He stunk, he was tired, and he knew that he would have no peace while Lorelei was in jail.

And so he picked up, and he walked back, all the way to Blue Earth. He would go to the jailer. He would kill the jailer if need be. He may die, but he would die in her sight—he did not want to live a traitor to her.

But Lorelei was gone, and the town was abuzz at the impostors who had taken

the prisoner. He heard of a guard who'd been assaulted by them, and he'd gone to see him straightaway.

"Do you know where they took her?" he asked.

"I know you," said the man, grimacing in pain and holding his side. "You're the bloke who turned on her. What do you care?"

"I was wrong. I gave false testimony. I must find her and help her. Surely you saw which direction they went?"

"They were traveling to Tree Fern. I think they would head onto the Low Road. It's what I'd do."

‡ ‡ ‡

"And so," concluded Godfrey, "I walked east, down the Low Road. I hoped to find the impostors who had captured you, and avenge you. Or, if I could not, I hoped they would kill me quickly, that I may die trying to right my wrong."

Lorelei leaned back, just a bit. "You see?" she said to Miia. "Told you it would be a good story. He's accomplished at telling them, you know."

"It's not a story! It's the truth!"

"Oh, no doubt some of it is, Yorrie—Godfrey—whatever your name is. I believe you saw Tom, because you described his wound accurately. I believe he told you to take the Low Road, because he recommended that we take the High Road, and he would have wanted to throw you off our track."

"But then why are you—"

"Shut up!" commanded Lorelei. Godfrey did.

"As for how much of the rest of it I believe? I believe you gambled and drank away your armor. I believe you probably felt really bad about betraying me. And I believe you must have been a bard apprentice, because only a bard could spin as fantastic a tale as you do."

"I love you, Lorelei."

She had to laugh at that. "Godfrey, will you shut up? You don't even know who you are. How can you love someone else? Look, if you'd confessed to me that night in Bella Vista, told me the truth—I don't know what would've happened. But I can tell you that I would not look on you now with the hatred I do."

Godfrey began to cry. "I understand, Lorelei. Kill me quickly. I'd not fain go on living knowing the pain I've caused you."

"Well then," said Lorelei, raising her sword, and then sheathing it, "I'd fain that you do go on living."

“Oh, come on! You’re going to let him live?”

“Yes, Miia,” said Lorelei. “Because he’s not worth killing. Godfrey—Odin’s beard, go east! Go to Two Rivers, or down to Freeport. Become a bard. You’re good at lying for a living—that has to be where your talent lies. Become the best bard you can, honestly. And maybe, if you’re lucky, you will find the happiness as Godfrey that you couldn’t as Iorwerth.

“But I can’t give that to you, Godfrey. And I can’t release you from pain, either. No, you have to go forward yourself.”

“I’ll kill myself then,” he said. “Give me a sword.”

Lorelei chuckled. “No, you won’t. But you’d like me to beg you not to. Whatever, Godfrey. On your feet.”

He rose.

“Go gather your sword, and go east. Trade it for a second-hand lute and a book of poems. Godspeed.”

“May I—”

“—travel with us? Odin’s beard, no. If our paths should cross again, know that we are not friends, we are not enemies—we are nothing to each other. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

Lorelei gave him about half a minute, before she exploded. “GET GOING!” she roared.

He ran, grabbing his sword on the way.

“Well,” she said. “Lovely story. I need some sleep. Anyone else?”

“I would’ve killed him,” said Miia.

“Pay attention to that, Malcolm,” said Lorelei, smiling. “Miia is not someone you want to cross. Especially in matters of love.”

“’Tis one of her most attractive features, Lorelei.”

Lorelei chuckled. “Too right,” she said as she rolled over to go back to sleep.

She didn’t let her friends see the tears she cried then. She just hoped they’d go away by sun-up.

## *The Protégé's Office*

"Look, the human brain doesn't broadcast. Doesn't receive, either—it's a completely internal system. One of the reason we know psychics are full of it is that we've never seen even a scrap of evidence that humans can project a thought outside of the skull. Until now."

Zimmerman ran a hand through his hair absently, focused on somewhere else. Lori (and by extension, Lorelei) could tell he was a bit rattled. Colin McCall, an MD and fellow skeptic, had been if anything more disconcerted. "Lori, what we're seeing from you is not physically possible. There's no broadcast antenna in the brain. If I didn't see the data myself and verify them...well, I can tell you flatly, if I was reading this in a journal, I'd laugh at it."

"Yes, but it did happen."

"Yes, it certainly seemed to," said P.M. "And we'd be poor scientists if we pretended it didn't. But we need to replicate our results again, of course. It doesn't prove anything yet."

"Well, you can try now. Lorelei's back."

"Well...no, we'd want to create a controlled experiment in a different place. There are a lot of variables that we didn't control for...this thing isn't proven."

"But...well, Lori, I'll admit I blew you off earlier. I thought this would be quick and easy to disprove, and it should have been. But it wasn't—and damn it, I want to figure out why. The things you're suggesting about the other world have dramatic implications for physics, biology, chemistry—virtually every facet of science could be dramatically changed by it. It would lend credence to the Many Worlds hypothesis while simultaneously calling into question what that hypothesis is supposed to mean. How is it that evolution shaped two worlds with disparate physics into two worlds with similar species? This would take years—decades—to unravel. It could change everything."

"I don't think it would," Lori said. "This world is rigid. Clockwork. Lorelei's professor, Zvonimir—who bears a resemblance to you, professor—said as much."

"Yes, but how can one world be clockwork and the other not, and both coexist side by side?" asked Colin.

P.M. added, "Look, Lori, when I talked to you before, I was dismissive, and not as attentive as I should have been. I assumed that you were crazy or trying to fool me somehow. I wasn't wrong to be skeptical, but I was wrong to jump to conclusions. I won't make that mistake again."

"I want you to tell me everything you know about Lorelei's world. The more I know, the better we can do at trying to determine what's going on here. I'm still not saying this world is 'real.' But we at least have evidence that suggests something is happening here. And I want to find out what."

"I will, professor. But first, I want to see something. Lorelei, I know you're here. Can you think something?"



*Sure. But I don't know if this will work.*

Lori listened, then sighed. "I don't think the connection is quite the same as before. Maybe it was all the equipment I was hooked up to, but I was actually able to get a sense of her thoughts. I was hoping that we could communicate better permanently.

"It's okay, though," she said. "Not that I wouldn't like to chat, Lorelei—but we've put this together before. I'll tell you as much as I can, professor. I'm sure when next I visit her thoughts, she'll fix anything I screw up."

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei awoke, and rubbed her eyes. She was cheerful—her permutation appeared to have a surprisingly good grasp of what she was doing and why, although she didn't mention Yorrie's latest bit of stupidity. (Maybe she hadn't seen it yet; maybe she had, but felt like preserving Lorelei's privacy. Either way, she was glad; she was sorry enough that anyone other than she was aware of her late infatuation with the "knight.")

The sun was just breaking the horizon, and the shadows hung long. It was beautiful, she thought. It reminded her of Ravenwood. She arose and walked down to the creek that she'd heard in the night. Maybe she could catch a fish. At the least, she could look at it and remember a happier day.

"Up early?"

She wheeled, and saw Zvonimir following after her.

"No more so than usual."

"You had a vision."

Lorelei paused for a moment. "You could tell, huh?"

"Of course. I usually can. Whether you tell me of them or not, you clam up. It's like you're running it through your mind, trying to puzzle out the answers. No?"

"Yes," said Lorelei. "She—well, your permutation was taking her a bit more seriously, I guess. Something about electronmagne-something."

"Hmpf. The science of that world, no doubt. Smart of Lori to seek scientists out—smart of you to agree."

"Something else," said Lorelei. "At one point, they were testing her, and—she could hear me."

"What!"

“Yeah. She heard my thoughts. It was only for a bit—we tried again later, and it didn’t work. But it was like we could just carry on a conversation.”

Zvonimir looked at her, and rummaged through his beard as if expecting to find a gemstone. “That’s—remarkable. More than anyone I’d ever...amazing.”

“Professor?”

“It’s possible,” he said, “that she did. That, though, would suggest that your skills have advanced quite a bit, even with meager training. Interesting. When we reach Two Rivers, we shall have to work on focusing this energy.”

“Have you ever had that kind of experience?”

Zvonimir shook his head sadly. “I can’t even say I’ve gotten a clear read on my permutation’s world. Just images and the like. You’re very gifted, Lorelei; not that I should be surprised.”

“Does this mean anything?”

“Not necessarily. You told me when you were in jail you and Lori worked out a way to communicate. Perhaps this is just the next logical step.”

“Or maybe,” said Lorelei, “it’s a sign that it’s about time for me to do whatever it is I’m supposed to do.”

“Or maybe it was just a happy accident. Soon enough, we’ll meet up with Hakim, and then we’ll analyze the Tome.” Zvonimir frowned briefly, and then said, apropos of nothing, “One more thing—I’m sorry about Godfrey.”

“Thanks,” she said. “But I’m moving on.”

“I know. But—well, hard as it may be for you to believe, I’ve loved and lost, too. Even when they aren’t worthy, it’s still hard. I know.”

“Thanks, professor. But really, I’m over him—he wasn’t who he said he was anyhow. No,” she said, running a hand through her hair and looking eastward, “my destiny lies on a different path than his, I think.”

“True,” said Zvonimir. “Soon enough, you’ll know where that path leads.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Two Rivers was the jewel of the Five Kingdoms. It stood at the confluence of the Thyme and Prescott Rivers, and at the intersection of the High and Low Roads. More than a few men had made their fortune there, and many more than that had lost. It was a town of ill repute, a town of which the bard Cedric the Younger had said, “It was no place for an orthodox Mithraist, and I did not long remain one.” And yet it was also the seat of the most renowned school in the west, the University at Two Rivers, and of great art and theatre. In short, it was

the most important city in the Five Kingdoms outside of Freeport—and Freeport's preeminence was a point of some debate.

Their first view was the spire of the Crimson Palace, the northern retreat of the king—or at least, it had been before Two Rivers had been removed from his possession. It bore the hallmarks of the fire that had engulfed it but a few months before, yet it still stood proudly, and if anything, the scars of the blaze seemed to have enhanced its beauty. The ruddy walls appeared to be almost aflame, shining through a haze of smoke. It was breathtaking.

They walked down the Low Road to the southwest gate, and it was there that they saw just how much Two Rivers had suffered during Fowler's siege. The towers on either side of the gate were rubble, as was a significant portion of the south wall; Fowlerite guards patrolled while workers busily worked to repair the fortress. They could see Southgate—which lay outside the walls of the city—was actually in good shape, no doubt because it had fallen quickly.

"Bloody! I hope Hakim made it through the attacks all right."

"Well, yes," said Malcolm, rolling his eyes at Zvonimir. "If he didn't, this will be a very short visit."

"Oh, he did, I'm sure. He's had worse," said Zvonimir, as they slowly waited in the queue for entrance. "His family fled Sidi Harazem when he was just a child. It is said that the Turks had fifty thousand swordsmen surrounding the city for over two years before it finally fell."

"'Tis a legend," said Malcolm. "Sidi Harazem fell almost immediately. Don't blame them for talking their resistance up, I suppose. Still, better not to be a Turk when you could be an Algar, no?"

"Do either of you know anything about this?" said Miia. "I mean, this did happen across the Great Western Sea a few decades ago."

"Well, you see...uh, no, not really," said Malcolm. "I heard the story from Loroki, but he could be wrong."

"I heard from Hakim himself, but he was only four when it happened; really, I've no idea."

"Hmpf. Thought as much. Al-Hassan's strategy in that siege was impressive, really. You should read about it."

"So where do we find your friend?" asked Malcolm, changing the subject as a guard waved them through.

"He's in East End. Near the University's buildings."

"East End? Lovely. At least it isn't Newton."

Zvonimir smiled. "What, Malcolm, you were expecting Twobridge? He's a professor, like me, and a Moor to boot. He's lucky not to be stuck in Newton."

“Fair enough. Besides, Twobridge is overrated. I’m a West Ender, myself.”

“When have you been here?” asked Miia.

“Five years ago. King George had invited royals from the faeries, the brownies, the kobolds, the elves, and the urusks. I had the misfortune of being tabbed as our representative. Huge waste of time—George wanted us to help him crush the new rebellion, we didn’t care. You Humans—nice people, smart, friendly, but lousy leadership.”

“So you were at the Crimson Palace, no doubt,” Zvonimir said.

“Yep. Ate more lamb than I care to remember, listened to long-winded speeches, napped a lot. If I hadn’t had the chance to pal around with Auberon for the week, there would’ve been no redeeming value to it whatsoever.

“Of course,” said Malcolm, “I remember the city being bigger than this.”

‡ ‡ ‡

The sun was already making its slow descent as they reached the campus of the University. Zvonimir led on through the few brick buildings, stopping at one fairly nondescript one. “The offices,” he said. “Lucky blackguards actually have offices; we had to work out of our homes in Neri. Lovely when one of the rogues needs to meet with you—it’s either invite them over to your house, or meet them at theirs. Or if you’re desperate to avoid both, you go to an inn. An office would’ve been nice.”

He opened the door, and they entered into a small reception area flanked by two stairwells. “Hello,” he said to the man at the desk.

The man barely looked up. “They’re not allowed,” he said, gesturing to Miia and Lorelei. “Men only.”

“It will only be a moment, my good sir. I’m Professor Zvonimir Pasternak from the University of Neri. I’ve come to pay a visit to my friend and colleague, Professor Samara.”

“Well, it will take only a moment, then. He’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yes,” said the man, studying his paperwork. “Gone. Stopped showing up to teach his classes five weeks ago. You’re his colleague, you say? If you’ve experience teaching Theology, there might be an opening for you.”

“That’s not like Hakim. He’s reliable as the day is long.”

“He’s a Moor, professor. Surely you know of their kind. It’s not surprising in the least. I warned them about letting one of them teach here.”

Pasternak glowered, and said, voice low, "I'll have you know Hakim is my friend, and that his ancestry has nothing whatsoever to do with anything. Moor or not, he's a damn sight better person than you. And you'll do wise to hold your tongue if you know what's good for you."

The man shook his head. "Bloody provincials. Look, professor, I don't know how you do things in Neri, but here at the University, we have standards. That means no women, first of all, and it should mean no Moors. I was against Samara's hiring in the first place, and I'm glad to see I was proven correct. We shouldn't let them teach our children; we shouldn't let them do more than serve us. So if there's nothing more—"

Pasternak backhanded the officious snob. "I warned you."

The man looked back at him, shocked. "Wha—how dare—you call— what—"

"What's all this?" came a voice from the left stairwell.

"I apologize, sir," said Zvonimir to the approaching man.

"He struck me!"

"He was casting aspersions upon the character and parentage of a colleague. Professor Samara."

The man exiting the stairwell was completely bald. Indeed, the only hair on his head was a black, thick, and robust van Dyke, which was styled to within an inch of reasonableness. His head seemed almost perfectly spherical, as did his torso. Nevertheless, he projected an air of gravity.

"So, Leonard," the man said, "espousing your anti-Moor sentiment again? Yes, we're all familiar with how Samara 'wasn't fit.' And we're also all familiar with how much in debt you are to the Cadre, and why you feel so compelled to deny what everyone else here understands all too clearly. It is I who should apologize, sir," he said, turning to Zvonimir. "Hakim Samara was my friend. Won't you come this way?"

"The women must stay!" said Leonard, rubbing his chin. "It is forbidden—"

"Last I checked, Leonard, I was the Provost of this school, not you. If that has changed, I would expect our patrons to have informed me. Ladies, please, this way."

‡ ‡ ‡

Provost Carl Sokol gestured to his guests to sit; his office was modest, but had plenty of seating. "You will have to excuse Professor Doubleday," he said, sighing. "He's a brilliant chemist—some day he may even create the Philosopher's Stone, he's that good. But...he's not the best welcoming committee for the school."

“Why was he greeting people, then?”

“He thinks he’s somehow in charge of separating people who ‘should’ be in the University from those who ‘should not.’ Fine as far as it goes—but while we can’t teach women, there’s no reason I can’t invite your party up to my office, Professor Pasternak. As for Professor Samara, while Doubleday wasn’t the only one who questioned his hiring, I thought it was good for the students to have a professor of theology who had grown up in another theological tradition. How better to learn what the nonbelievers think? And he was well-versed; he’s one of the best professors I’ve had here. That’s a credit to you, Zvonimir—he often praised you, as I recall.”

“Hakim would have been a great professor no matter who had taught him; he’s far more brilliant than I. But—well, I take it from your comments that we should be concerned?”

“More than concerned, I’m afraid. The evidence that Professor Samara has been abducted—or worse—by the Cadre is overwhelming.”

“Is there nothing that can be done?” asked Lorelei.

“In this town?” grumbled Sokol, dabbing his head with a handkerchief. “Young lady, the Cadre controls this town—they did before the siege, they do now. Even we at the University pay them tribute. Fowler was smart—he’s been giving them aid for some time now. But this town is theirs more than his.

“No, if the Cadre has Hakim, there’s nothing to be done for it. If he’s lucky, he’s dead already.”

Zvonimir dropped his head. “Well, we’ll have to try, of course.”

“Of course you do. Just don’t be upset when you fail. Or at least, not more than is warranted. Here, I have something for you.”

Sokol dug through his desk, and pulled out an envelope sealed with wax. “Hakim told me to give this to one of two people if something happened to him. You were one of them, Professor. The other was the ‘Queen of the Valkyries,’ though I doubt she’s coming by anytime soon. He said you’d understand the instructions within. I’ve been holding on to it, but seeing as you’re here, well—here you go. Good luck.”

They exited into the twilight. “Well, Professor, what does it say?” asked Lorelei.

“Not here,” said Zvonimir. “Let’s get to an inn. I think it best if we study this in some detail—and some privacy.”

‡ ‡ ‡

*To you who reads this letter,*

*If my dear friend and colleague Provost Carl Sokol has followed my instructions, you are either my dear friend and mentor, Professor Zvonimir Pasternak, or the Honourable Leader of the Valkyries. If you are neither, then I implore you, in the*

*name of God who is the most merciful and benevolent, to please destroy this letter, for it was not meant for any but those to whom it is addressed.*

*If you read this letter, no doubt the Cadre has finally come for me. This is not a surprise—they have been quite interested in my work for some time. Professor, you are certainly familiar with some of the puzzles I've been working on, and you know more than anyone how these puzzles would interest Ozymandias. Do not fear; I have taken steps to ensure that he will not learn all he wishes to know.*

*In the Western lands, where you both hail from, there is a town called Pipestone, and a man there that I studied with, and the professor taught. He is gifted but undisciplined; so much the pity. He frequents the inn there—drinking alcohol, sadly. Only one with much on his mind would seek out a place like that, hoping perhaps he shall find his answers there, at the bottom of a glass of mead.*

*You are no doubt tempted to seek your own answers now—where I have gone, what has happened to me. Risk is requisite in life, of course, and the questions are understandable, but I would prefer you did not risk your life for mine. I trust in the hand of God, and God willing he will deliver me through to the next life.*

*Assalamualaikum, my friend.*

*Hakim al-Ajam Samara*

Lorelei read through the text again. There was a clue here; there had to be. Hakim wouldn't have left the letter if there wasn't. But what? What was he telling them?

Then, it hit her like a thunderbolt. "So, is there a Drunken Pig Inn in Two Rivers?" she asked.

"What?" asked Zvonimir, looking up from the parchment.

"Well, that third passage—pretty weird, that he'd reference Crouch and the inn he frequented unless there was a really good reason, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Zvonimir, turning back to the sheet. "Yes, indeed. A Valkyrie or I myself would know the name of the inn in Pipestone, but the Cadre might not. Yes. But—well, there is irony there, of course."

"How so?"

"Hakim was devout in his belief. He drank no alcohol, and ate no pork." Zvonimir looked back at the text. "No...Hakim wouldn't be that obvious."

"Maybe 'twas symbolic," said Malcolm, stroking his beard.

Zvonimir looked back at the letter. "It could mean...that would be odd, wouldn't it?"

“What?”

“‘Drunken pig’ is the opposite of what he’d want. Maybe he’s trying to say that the Tome is in a place he’d ordinarily be forbidden to go. But where would that be?”

“Well, you said he was devout. But devout what?”

“Officially, Mithraist. Really, Mahometan. Rare here in the west, but there’s a large part of the eastern lands where they worship the God of the Prophet. I used to teach a portion of my class about the differences and similarities between Islam, Jesuism, and Mithraism.”

“Why’s he ‘officially’ Mithraist?” asked the junior Valkyrie.

“Miia, the followers of the Old Religion have enough trouble, and we’ve got a Thorshof in most middle-sized cities; how would it be to be one of the only believers there was? And dark-skinned to boot?”

Lorelei turned back to Zvonimir. “Anyhow, professor, pork and alcohol are forbidden by his religion. What else?”

“Well...tattooing. Charging interest.”

“So we’re looking for a bank and tattoo parlor? Lots of those around,” said Malcolm, though he quickly quieted as Miia lightly smacked him on the shoulder.

“And then—oh, but that’s perfect. That’s exactly where he’d go,” Zvonimir said, grinning.

“Where?” asked Lorelei.

“‘Risk is requisite in life.’ He’s prohibited from gambling. More than that, he was always violently opposed to the practice—he said it was far worse than anything one could do. Worse than drinking, even.

“Not only that, though—I’m willing to bet that more than a few gambling houses here are controlled by the Cadre.”

“So we can rule those out,” Miia said.

“No—that’s where we need to look. That’s where he hid it—a casino run by the Cadre. A place he would never, ever go.”

“Why would he do that?” asked Lorelei.

“Because,” said Zvonimir, smiling broadly, “they’d never expect to find it in their possession.”

“So tomorrow we’re going to search out betting houses? Because we’re down to three gold pieces, you know,” said Lorelei, dubiously.

“I know,” said Zvonimir. “But this is it. I know Hakim. Trust me.”



“Oh, I do, professor. I just hope one of us is lucky.”

‡ ‡ ‡

The lucky member of the party turned out to be Miia. And how.

By the time they reached the fifth stop of the day, they were over ten gold pieces, and had been given free food and libations at two different stops.

“So how are you doing this, lass? You’re bewitching, but this is remarkable.”

Miia laughed at Malcolm. “It’s nothing, really. I’m good at the game. It’s just sevens with a bit of a twist, and I’ve always been lucky at sevens.”

“You can say that again,” said Lorelei. “Once she took eighteen extra desserts off of our fellow apprentices over the space of four days.”

“We ate like Queens. Which probably is why I failed my polearms test at the end of the week. I was sluggish.”

“So, lass, you planning on leaving us and becoming a professional?”

“Well, not all at once. I’ll need a kept man, of course. Hey, switch fingers with that ring and I could keep you pretty cheaply.”

“Aye, true enough. Lorelei? Zvonimir? Been nice knowing you.”

“Um, yes it is,” said Lorelei, lost in thought.

“Forget it, Malcolm—I know this look. Always happened when she got a tough question in class. Lor!”

“Huh? Oh, sorry Miia. Just...not to jump on your hot streak or anything, but what are we doing, other than just wandering around and gambling?”

“Well...looking for clues.”

“Searching down the lad’s book.”

“Actually, gambling, mostly, but we can keep that up indefinitely.”

Lorelei grumbled. “No, no, no! Look, there’s got to be something else in the letter. Something that would give us a hint of which casino to go to. I mean, he talked about the hand of God, right? Maybe that’s a hint.” She looked around, searching for something—she didn’t know quite what it was, but she knew it was important.

“Yeah,” said Miia. “Lor—”

“Maybe it’s in the name of it. Or in the name of something by it.”

“Could be, Lorelei, just—”

“I mean, is there a casino that fits that description?”

“Yes, Mistress!”

Lorelei fixed her with a formulated gaze. “Where? And how do you know that, Miia?”

“Turn around.”

Lorelei spun, and saw a gambling parlor, smallish and run-down. Right next door, there was a free kitchen run by the Mithraists. There was a gleaming metallic sun, with an image of Mithras in front of it, his hands outstretched.

“Ah. There we go. Remind me to listen to you next time, will you, Miia?”

The junior Valkyrie rolled her eyes. “You don’t listen when you’re in that state. I’m used to it.”

They entered the saloon, and they all instantly regretted it. It was musty and dank, and the clientele was of a lesser caliber than their previous stops. In the corner of the room, bored-looking women danced for bored-looking men; half of the room seemed populated by bums, the other half by street toughs. Other than Lorelei, Miia, and the dancers, there were no other women in sight—something that was made abundantly clear as all eyes locked on them.

“Stay close, lasses. I’ll fillet any who come near you.”

“That’s sweet, Malcolm, but it won’t be necessary. Lorelei and I can take this whole room on if we have to.”

“Aye, but I can pretend, can’t I?”

Miia grinned. “Thank you for protecting us. We’ll stay close, dear Malcolm.”

Lorelei, for her part, was walking slowly toward the stage, looking a bit lost again.

“Lorelei, where are you going?”

“Professor—what does Hakim’s religion say about women?”

“It’s very restrictive. He’s not supposed to be alone with a woman he’s not related to or married to. He

would bend the rule on occasion, but only on rare occasion, and only with very good reason.”

“Right,” said Lorelei, picking up the pace.

She waited for the dancer to finish to tepid applause; she was comely, or at least she had been once. Her eyes were vacant, however, and time had begun to show its effect. Still, she collected the coins that had been gathered on the stage with a flourish that showed she still knew from showmanship.

“Excuse me,” said Lorelei as she headed toward the back. “Can I talk a minute?”

“Course, hon. But I don’t parlay with women, you know. Can introduce you to some who would, if you want.”

“Huh? Oh, no, nothing like that. I’m looking for a friend. He’s...” Lorelei fumbled for the description—her having not actually met Hakim did put her at a disadvantage. Still, she knew that one thing would stand out, even to this one. “He’s dark.”

“Oh, sure, I remember him. Gina was his favorite. Here, I’ll take you back to her, she’s on after Elizabeth.”

Before she knew it, Lorelei was being led into a small area in the back, where dancers were getting into costume and chatting about nothing much in particular. “Gina!”

“Yeah, Suze. I’m on next, ya know.”

“Got a girl lookin’ for Ali.”

An olive-skinned woman strode up to Lorelei, pointing a finger into her chest. “Ah! You seen him? He’s been missing lately. Comes every day for two weeks, then...poof! Gone!”

“How long ago was this?” Lorelei asked.

“Musta been four, five weeks. Nice guy. Good tipper. Gave me lots of silver.”

“Did he give you anything else?”

Gina ran a hand through thick black hair, and her eyes flashed. “What’s it to ya?”

“He—he was a friend of my father’s. My dad’s actually out in the casino right now if you want to meet him.”

“That so?” said Gina, skeptically.

Lorelei decided to try a different tack. “Look, Ali is...missing. We’re trying to

track him down.”

At this, Gina gasped, and her mood softened. “Oh, Mithras! I didn’t know! Here, come with me. Gwen, if Liz gets done before I get back, can you go on before me? Thanks. Come over here.”

Gina led Lorelei to an old trunk in the corner of the room, and opened it, displaying panoply of smallish costumes. “He said he was in some danger, but I thought it was a bit of game playing. He wouldn’t be the first, of course. He gave me a letter, said to give it to someone if they came asking about him, but not to let anyone know about it. I went along—the money was good, like I said. Here, I put it in here,” she said, digging down to the bottom and pulling out a sealed envelope. “He said they’d ask about him being missing. Said it might be a guy with a beard, or a tall woman. I’m guessing that’s you.”

Lorelei broke the seal, and looked through the writing. “Gina, this is—exactly what we were hoping for. This is going to give us a good chance to find him. Here,” she said, pressing a couple silver pieces on her. “For your time.”

“Just tell Ali—if you find him—that he’s always welcome back here.”

“I will.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei reemerged to a quizzical look from Zvonimir. “Found what I wanted.”

“Good. Miia is up another eight, by the way.”

“Luckiest girl in the world. Here,” she said, showing him the letter.

“Not the Tome, eh?”

“No,” said Lorelei, “but we’re on the right track.”

She started to say more when a rumble erupted from Miia’s table. “Filthy wench! You’re cheatin’, and there’s to be no doubt about it!”

Miia was looking up, somewhat surprised, at a very angry man, who stood over six feet and almost as wide. He was looking down at her, eyes blazing, his left hand grasping a dagger already in the table betwixt Miia’s hand—which was retrieving several dozen silver—and her body.

“I didn’t cheat you. It was just bad decision-making on your part,” Miia said. “Didn’t anyone teach you not to draw on an inside straight? There was no way a six was going to come up, and it didn’t. This was a cheap lesson. Now get your knife out of the table so I can collect my winnings.”

“Your winnings? You thievin’ banshee, I’ll see you in Hell first!” The man removed the dagger from the

table, and brought it down at Miia's heart.

It never reached its destination. Halfway through the downstroke it was severed from the man's body (along with most of the rest of his arm) by Lorelei's sword.

He howled in pain, and turned as if to rush Lorelei. He took three steps before his eyes grew wide, and he dropped to the ground. Malcolm removed the sword from the man's back, and shrugged. "Looks like the lesson didn't take."

"Taken or not, I think we'd best get going," said Miia, shoveling coins into her purse as a few large men began walking across the bar angrily.

"I think it's a bit late for that," Lorelei said.

"Must be my lucky day," replied Miia, rising and drawing her sword as her table-mates scattered.

"You weren't cheating, were you?"

"Of course not!"

"Because I seem to recall Satu saying—"

"Satu was just angry because it was a week we were having raspberry shortcakes, and she lost three of 'em plus one day's chores because she was hoping for the page of cups to flip over, and she got the three of wands instead. And besides, Annalie was dealing that hand. Can't blame it on me."

Their conversation was briefly interrupted as five burly men surrounded them. Lorelei, Miia, and Malcolm stood back-to-back, and prepared to parry.

"You remember it very clearly," Lorelei said, dispatching the first one to charge with effortless ease—he had made the mistake of onrushing her berserker-style, which never, ever works. She'd simply put the sword in his gut before he even had time to consider when his strike should come.

"I won three desserts and a day of chores off on one hand!" Miia exclaimed, as she sliced another's throat. "Next to the pot I just took, that's my proudest moment in gambling."

"Ladies," said Malcolm, who was engaged in a tough fight with a rogue who appeared to actually know his way around a sword, "there'll be time for recrimination soon enough."

"Hey, I'm not complaining," Lorelei noted as she threw the lifeless body of her most recent kill into Malcolm's attacker, knocking him to the ground and pinning him under three hundred pounds of dead weight. "I just want you to teach me."

"You have too many tells," said Miia, disposing of their last attacker with an upstroke through his chin. "But you're a good kid. And you know what they say, unlucky at cards, lucky in love."

"Miia, it's you who's lucky in love," said Lorelei, sheathing her sword. "I'm pretty much unlucky across the board."

“You can kill a man thirteen different ways.”

“That’s skill,” Lorelei said, as she surveilled the room. “I think that’s it for his mates, but I’d suggest we get out of here now—before any others emerge from upstairs.”

“Lovely time, thanks a lot,” said Miia, flipping a coin in the direction of a grumbling staffer, who was already complaining about having to clean up yet another raft of dead. He caught it, bit it, and smiled—at least he was being well-compensated.

“Shall we?” said Malcolm.

“You certainly know how to make an exit,” Zvonimir noted, as they joined him.

“No time for chit-chat. We need to get back to the inn,” said Lorelei, as she verified the parchment was still in her possession. “Hakim has left us another clue.”

## *Sixteen*

### *The Lessons Remembered, the Lessons Forgot*

“So are you going to make a habit of getting into scraps, Miia?” Malcolm asked.

“I don’t go looking for trouble, Malcolm.”

“Yes, you do,” Lorelei interjected. “Remember the time you sucker-punched Annalie?”

“She was badmouthing you.”

“She had her reasons. Or the time you tackled Satu?”

“Well, it was that or let her tackle me.”

“Or the time you came into the yurt and demanded that anyone who wanted to fight had better get in line?”

Miia rolled her eyes. “Okay, you’ve got me on that one. I’m sorry, Malcolm. Does it bother you?”

“Have you taken leave of your senses, Miia? Of course it doesn’t bother me! ’Twas just wondering if I need to practice my swordsmanship. Evidently, the answer to that is yes.”

“A decided yes,” said Lorelei. “Miia will keep you on your toes. Trust me, I know. But honestly, you’re not bad, Malcolm. A bit of work and there’s a chance you’d be pretty formidable.”

“If the mutual admiration society has completed its meeting,” Zvonimir huffed as they entered the inn, “I believe that we have a letter whose vital meaning is rather unclear.”

“All right, all right,” Lorelei muttered as she maneuvered her way up the back staircase. “Though there’s nothing to be done about it until tomorrow, unless you want to go looking for the Three Swans Pub at night. I guess we could.”

“What?” said Zvonimir, nonplussed.

“Three Swans Pub. It was pretty easy, actually.”

They walked up the stairs in silence, Lorelei grinning confidentially. As they reached their room, Zvonimir said, simply, “How in blazes did you figure it out?”

“First off...we need to let Radulf out. Then I’ll explain.”

“I’ll do it. And when I get back, I want you to tell me how you know.”

Zvonimir stormed out, dragging the wolf behind him. “What’s up with him?”

“He got shown up by a girl, Miia,” Malcolm said. “I’d wager he was thoroughly stumped.”

“It’s not my fault,” Lorelei said, stifling a laugh. “I’m just smart. Oh, and I kind of cheated.”

Miia muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “Glad I’m not the only one,” but Lorelei couldn’t be sure. Maybe it was “Can’t blame you for that one.” Possibly “Cheating can be fun.” Lorelei thought briefly about questioning it, but decided that she didn’t really care. Instead she puttered for a moment, until Zvonimir returned, bringing a relieved wolf with him.

“Well?” he peevishly demanded.

“Okay, first, for the benefit of our traveling companions, professor, let’s read the letter:

*This far you’ve come, farther you must go  
To find what you seek, more knowledge you must show  
Freyr’s disciple holds the key;  
Mind him if you’re to find me.*

*“Two brides did bear—snow white their locks,  
And housemaids were they—ale-casks homeward  
They were not made by hand, nor by hammers wrought;  
Yet upright on the isles sat he who made them.  
Alright, guess now this riddle, gentle reader!”*

At this, Miia gasped, but Lorelei continued.

*“Which I had yesterday, that would I have.  
Heed what I had:  
Men’s hamperer, words’ hinderer,  
And speeder of speech.  
Alright, guess now this riddle, gentle reader!”*

“The three swans. And a pub. Yeah, of course,” Miia said.

“I can see the second,” Malcolm averred. “Drink makes a man stumble and slur, but also makes one loquacious—among other salubrious benefits. But how did you know the first?”

“The Riddles of Gestumblindi,” Miia said. “Hakim lifted ’em. Did a nice job with the translation, too.”

Zvonimir looked dumbstruck, then began to laugh. “Of course! Freyr’s disciple—King Heithrek. I should’ve remembered. Not that it would’ve helped me—I know of the existence of the riddles, not the riddles themselves. But I suppose you both would have heard them.”

“Heard, nothing,” Miia chuckled. “Reginleif all but beat ’em into us. Said they’d make us better able to think for ourselves.”

“And you said they’d never come in handy.”

“Well, until now they never had.”

“So you knew them already,” Zvonimir said. “Well, I feel better for having not solved them.”

“Oh, we solved ’em. We just did it three years ago,” Lorelei beamed. “The first one is actually tricky, and had us stumped for a couple of hours. It was Annalie who hit on ’snow white hair’ maybe being just a description of the color of the things, rather than hair itself. That got the ball rolling.”

“Right. The ’ale-casks’ were eggs—not made by hand, but by the male swan who sat on the isles—remember the look on Satu’s face when you figured that out, Lor?”

“Yeah,” said Lorelei.

And quite unexpectedly, she found herself sobbing.

She turned away, barely conscious of Miia’s arm on her shoulder. Struggling for composure, she murmured, “I’m...sorry. I shouldn’t.”

“Yes, you should,” Miia replied, wiping away her own tears. “You’ve been holding this in since we left. You’ve allowed yourself just a few minutes of mourning. You’re allowed this.”

“No,” said Lorelei, closing her eyes and seeking in her words a firmness that she felt nowhere in her person. “No, I’m not. Not yet. Soon.

“Professor, Malcolm,” she said, “I think we should get a big dinner tonight. Celebrate Miia’s luck. And then early to bed, and early to rise. I can’t imagine it will be a short jaunt tomorrow. And we still don’t know what to look for once we reach the pub.”

“Lorelei,” Malcolm began, but Lorelei firmly ended it.

“Thanks, Malcolm. But I’m fine. Really. Let’s celebrate tonight. Tomorrow is another challenge.”



‡ ‡ ‡

“Sounds intense.”

“Yeah. Oh, Lorelei’s here.”

Yeah, I am. Lorelei was amazed at how quickly Lori was able to recognize her presence. It was almost instantaneous. She doubted she had as clear a fix on Lori when she entered her own mind.

There was a pause, before Lori piped up, “You know, Anna, you can continue talking.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“We were sort of talking behind her back there? Yeah, I suppose we were. Lorelei, just to bring you up to speed, I was telling Anna about your solving those riddles, and how you sort of swung from happy to sad all at once. I was along for the ride there, and...I could really feel what you were feeling, sort of. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Lorelei. Really. God, what you’ve been through—I’d be a wreck.”

No, you wouldn’t, Lorelei thought, remembering back to her first visions of Lori. You’re made of stronger stuff than I am.

“Do you ever feel weird talking to yourself?”

“Of course I do. But I know next time I pop into Lorelei’s head and she’s not in the middle of something, she’ll talk back to me. Even if just to say hi. It’s...odd. But you get used to it.

“Well, I guess you do, anyhow. It doesn’t mean I don’t still sometimes wonder if I’m just insane...but I suppose if I am, I’m not going to notice, am I?”

“So anyhow...if you’re okay talking about it....”

“Yeah. It was your analogue—Annalie. That was when I really felt it for the first time. Usually I can’t sense her emotions, but they were so intense, I think they just sort of bled through. She mentioned how Annalie had solved part of a riddle once, and then there was this huge pang of guilt. I know she blames herself for Annalie’s death.”

“That’s stupid. Annalie gave herself up. It was her decision.”

“Yeah, well, Annalie gave herself up to save Lorelei. I think I’d feel guilty if you pushed me out of the way of a bus and got hit by it yourself. And Lorelei and Annalie were rivals—I mean, it’s not just that Lorelei was saved by Annalie. It’s that she feels like she wasn’t fair to Annalie when she was alive.”

Anna gazed off into the distance for some time. “I wish I could sense what you do, Lori. I wish I knew what Annalie thought. But...I think if she and I are as similar as you and Lorelei seem to be, then I’m willing to bet she’d forgive her.

I would.”

We’re not that similar. And really? You would? Lorelei thought, sardonically.

“We’re not that similar. And really, you would?” Lori said, sardonically.

“Yeah. Knowing what I know now I would. Look, I know Lorelei’s a vicious warrior and you’re a college student, but you’ve described her pretty vividly, and she’s a lot like you. I bet Annalie was a lot like me, too. At least, a lot like me if I’d been raised as a warrior, instead of as a vegetarian.

“All I know is that when she stepped in front of that dagger, I think she knew she was giving herself up for Lorelei, and I think she was glad.”

“Yeah,” said Lori. Then she gasped. “Wait a second. I never told you it was a dagger. I didn’t even know it was a dagger. I came in somewhat after the battle.”

Anna looked up. “No, you must’ve told me. I wouldn’t just make that up.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well then, how did I know that?” Anna frowned. “Maybe I didn’t. Maybe we’re totally off-base. Heck, maybe it was a sword.”

Dagger! thought Lorelei, as firmly as she could. This was important. It had to be.

She desperately wanted it to be, anyhow.

“I think dagger’s right,” Lori slowly said. “I think it was a dagger. But I know I didn’t know that before. And I’m sure I didn’t tell you.”

“Coincidence, maybe?”

“You think?”

“No,” Anna said. “But how do I know that?”

“I don’t know. But—Lorelei and I, we’re tied together, like we’re part of each other. I think...maybe...you know because she’s a part of you, and you of her.”

Anna looked at Lori, and broke into a wide grin. “Maybe. Maybe so. If so, then I know Annalie had forgiven Lorelei, and I know that she hated her own jealousy. I can—I don’t know, I just know. She loved Lorelei. She just didn’t know how to say it, how to undo the hurt between them.”

Lori stepped forward and hugged Anna. “I hope that we are connected somehow. I hope Annalie lives on through you. It would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

Lorelei rose before everyone save Radulf. She let the wolf out again, and cursed herself for dragging poor Radulf with her. A city was no place for a wolf, even one as well-behaved as she was. She should've turned Radulf loose in the woods. Of course, Radulf wouldn't have taken kindly to that.

Lorelei walked down the street by their inn, stopping at a bakery that was just opened to buy a hard loaf of bread. She asked the baker if he knew of the Three Swans Pub, but of course, he said he hadn't. She was unsurprised at that, and trudged back toward the inn to awaken her friends and bring them a breakfast.

Radulf whined.

She jumped, and unsheathed her sword, and spun around. She knew why Radulf was whining, at least somewhat. The hairs on the back of her neck were standing up, and she scanned the area for some perturbation that might account for her feeling of fear.

There was nobody there.

She frowned. She'd felt this way before. Once.

She trusted her instincts. Carefully, she walked in the direction her body took her. "Hi, Lori. Can't talk right now. But it was a dagger. I hope you're right, too," she mumbled, slowly turning toward an alleyway.

She looked into the darkened corridor, barely lit in the twilight morning's glow. She looked in, turned back, and then whirled abruptly and placed her sword across the man's neck.

"All right," she said. "Talk."

The young man wore a dark grey cloak, his blonde hair somewhat askew. She could see in his eyes that he was debating whether he should reach for his sword. She made the decision easy; shaking her head, she removed it for him, and brought it across his neck as well, perpendicular to her own.

"What are you doing following me, Meallan?"

His eyes grew very wide at that. "You remember me?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

She thought back to her vision several weeks before, in Meallan's father's shop. "Oh, yes, Meallan. I remember you. And not fondly, may I add. Why are you here?"

"The Cadre—they paid me. Paid me to tell 'em when one of you came into town. A few days after you

bought the swords, they—they gave me two hundred fifty gold. Enough to pay off the kobolds once and for all.”

“That’s charming. One gold piece for every one of my sisters slain, you bastard.”

“I didn’t know. Really! I thought they wanted to hire you or something.”

Lorelei ignored him. “So where’s your sicko father?”

“Dead,” Meallan said, beads of sweat dotting his forehead. “His heart gave out four weeks ago.”

“So sorry.”

Meallan missed the sarcasm. “Thanks. I came here to work for the Cadre. Thought they might want a swordsmith—the one guy, Steve, he told me to come here if I wanted work—and with you all dead no reason to stay in Pipestone. So...I came here, but they’ve got all the weapons they need. They thought I’d make a better scout.”

“They were wrong,” Lorelei said, tersely.

“Please,” Meallan said. “They told me to look for Valkyries. Said a couple had survived. I knew you guys, they knew it. But really—I always liked your kind. I won’t tell them I saw you. I’ll tell them that you left. That you were headed to Freeport.”

“Where’s Hakim Samara?”

“Who?”

“The professor they captured. Surely, Meallan, you noticed him in their dungeon?”

“They—uh—they don’t let you see everything. I don’t know of that guy. But maybe I can help you find him, huh?”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t tell me where he is,” she said.

He went white, as if realizing suddenly the peril he was in.

“Come on, Meallan. Where is he?”

“The Cadre’s complex is in Newton, by the Southeast Gate. It’s a red brick building, with a star and a moon above each door. I’ll take you there. I’ll get you inside!”

“Right,” said Lorelei. “You’ll betray me the second you have the chance.”

“Look, it was about the money. I liked you guys!”

“Oh yes. Your father made that crystal clear.”

“No! He was a jerk, I know. Please, I didn’t ever do that. I wouldn’t.”

Lorelei narrowed her eyes. “What’s tragic, Meallan, is that I know far more about you than you know.”

“What do you mean? I only met you once!”

“Not true. But you wouldn’t believe me if I told you the story.”

“Please, in the name of Mithras, please don’t kill me.”

“I’ll show you the same courtesy you showed me,” Lorelei said, and with a swift motion—almost lazily—she brought the swords across each other, and Meallan’s head left his body.

She sheathed his sword, and carrying her own sword in her right hand, walked out of the alley. She retrieved the bread, and whistling for Radulf, headed back to the inn.

‡ ‡ ‡

She awoke, screaming.

It couldn’t be real. What she’d seen—it had to be a dream. She told herself this, over and over, hoping that maybe she’d even believe it.

“Wuz wrong, Lor?” a muddled Molly murmured.

She stared ahead. How could she? He was asking for mercy—no, begging for it. And she’d killed him. She saw the blood still in her mind’s eye, spewing forth like a geyser from his carotid artery as his head spun away, eyes wide, lips frozen in a silent scream of “no.”

“I—uh...nightmare, I guess. Nothing, Molly.”

“Didn’t sound like nothing.”

“No, it was just a bad dream. Thanks.”

She lay awake a long while.

It didn’t make sense. Not in the least.

‡ ‡ ‡

She’d killed him in cold blood.

A thousand pieces of thoughts drifted through Lorelei’s mind. For one thing, though she walked calmly back toward the inn, she knew that she needed to

get her friends up and out. The Cadre knew they were here, and undoubtedly when Meallan failed to show up for his muster (or whatever it was that the Cadre did) they'd flood the area with foot soldiers.

Most of the thoughts, though, focused on why she'd just decapitated a defenseless man.

It was forbidden to execute a prisoner unless they had committed a murder; otherwise, they were to be held until they could be returned to their families. This was a part of the code of honor she'd been taught as a child. There were exceptions, of course, and she tried to tell herself that this fell under the category of a platoon on patrol, with no means of securing and transporting a prisoner whose escape could jeopardize the group's safety.

She told herself that, but she didn't believe it. Maybe there was exculpatory evidence in this case. But she knew that this was post hoc reasoning—she hadn't killed Meallan because he posed a threat. She felt sure that they could've secured a boy for long enough to get away.

Nor had she killed him because he betrayed the sisterhood; he had taken money in exchange for information, something that was hardly unheard of. Indeed, more than a few of the sisterhood's contracts had come about from people searching them out, paying for information until they found Ravenwood. He'd taken blood money, yes, but he hadn't known that was what it was until after the fact. No, if she was honest, his blame for the destruction of Ravenwood was less than her own.

The fact was, she'd killed him because his doppelgänger had raped Lori.

She knew it in the marrow of her bones, knew that she had killed for revenge. And not even revenge upon one who had committed the act—just one tied to the guilty party.

It was wrong. It was forbidden. Experience had taught her kind that revenge killing became a neverending cycle of bloodshed and recrimination. For the safety of the sisterhood, it had been forbidden.

That didn't mean you didn't fight an enemy, or even fight an enemy harder for the pain they'd given you. It just meant that when you had your enemy beaten, you let them surrender.

Meallan had surrendered. And she'd executed him.

She felt the weight of the chain around her neck; saw its soft glow as she ascended the stairs.

It felt like it weighed a ton. She didn't know what Herja would say to her if she could, but she knew it would be laced with disappointment and anger.

“We need to go. Now,” she said, as she opened the door.

Miia rose to her elbows and looked over at her. “What happened to you?” she said. “Whose blood is that?”

“Cadre,” Lorelei said, softly. “They’ve found us.”

“Odin’s Beard,” Miia swore. She swung herself up, and poked Malcolm, who was sleeping in an adjacent cot. “Come on, honey, get up, we’ve gotta go—Cadre’s here.”

Lorelei noticed the blush on Miia’s cheeks as she realized what she’d just said, but she ignored it. There were more pressing matters to be attended to. “Professor, get up. Time to go,” she said, hoisting Zvonimir’s pack.

She didn’t get a chance to say another sentence before a loud bang caused her to whirl toward the door, just in time to see three Cadre soldiers. Instinctively she drew Meallan’s sword and deftly swapped hands; she wanted her own sword in her dominant hand.

Now, there are those who will tell you that a warrior wielding two swords is doubly dangerous. These are generally people whose battle experience includes both standing in a long queue for eggs and once seeing a play where a mock swordfight broke out.

Those who have actually known battle know that a warrior wielding two swords—even one trained in the technique, like Lorelei—is only marginally more effective than a warrior wielding a sword and shield. (A warrior who is not trained is likely to quickly die, as he discovers that one can’t simply pick up two swords and go charging for glory.)

Lorelei raised Meallan’s sword into a defensive position while she prepared hers for attack; as the first two ran in she dropped them down and skewered both simultaneously.

And then the battle was truly joined.

They flowed into the room like water from a spigot, overwhelming them. They were battling in close quarters, the room filled with waiting Cadre footsoldiers. She saw that Miia and Malcolm were busy fending off four attackers while Zvonimir struggled to try to figure out how to do anything constructive. Lorelei whirled and bobbed, trying to fight her way over to the group. If they were going to be killed, she wanted them to be together.

She ran through her parries and attacks mechanically, all the while trying to figure out how they’d arrived so quickly. She’d barely had time to return herself. It was as if Meallan had someone watching him....

“Hel!” she cried, as she dispatched one of the rabble. Of course they’d been watching Meallan. He was a new recruit. They wanted to see how he’d do.

It still didn’t explain how they were able to get so many troops there so quickly, but that was an old mystery.

She cleared a space to squeeze through, and rushed through it, aiming for her friends. As she did, she brushed a wall, and tingled oddly, as if she had walked over someone’s grave.

It was a familiar feeling, she thought, turning her back to it as an attacker brought his sword down. She quickly crossed swords and caught it, then gave him a quick kick to a sensitive spot. He backed off in obvious pain, which she salved by removing his head.

Her back brushed the wall, and she felt the chill again. Just like the professor’s house....

She looked to her side. She still held the professor’s pack, slung over her shoulder. She quickly sheathed her own sword and, reaching blindly inside, pulled out a small jar of blue powder. Urum, he had called it. No time to test it like now.

“Here goes nothing,” she said, as she held off another attacker with the sword in her off hand. “Cancello!” she cried, uncorking the bottle and tossing some of the powder over her shoulder.

The rush of air pushed her slightly forward as she felt the sphere expanding behind her. “Quickly! Now!” she called, advancing a few paces to clear out space for her friends.

“Where does it go?” shouted Malcolm.

“Who cares? It’s not here. That’s good enough for me,” Miia said, pulling him through. Zvonimir and Radulf rushed toward it next.

“Start to close it when you get to the other side,” Lorelei called, tossing his pack to him as he leapt inside. She then started to back up toward it herself.

She was accelerated through by the foot soldier who tackled her.

They fell into the void, grasping and clutching and biting and swinging mercilessly, arms and legs and bodies disconnected from time and space. And then, all too quickly, the world came back, and she was throwing him off of her, and spinning to her feet.

“Guard him!” called out Zvonimir. “The gate’s closing!”

It was indeed. Lorelei bounced up weakly, still wobbly from the odd vector that



had carried her into the vortex. Miia already had a sword on the attacker, who appeared to be unarmed.

With a soft pop, the gate terminated, and Lorelei walked over to get some answers.

“All right,” she said, pulling his mask off. “Let’s get a look at you.”

He would have seemed an average-looking man from a distance. He had black hair and swarthy skin, and a scar that ran down one cheek. But none of that was unusual—and none of that was what drew Lorelei’s gaze.

It was his eyes that grabbed her. They looked as if they’d been carved from pure obsidian. She gazed into them as they stared back at her, unblinking.

“What are you?” she asked.

“We are the Myrmidons,” he croaked in an inhuman whisper.

“No—what is your name?”

“I am but one who is in service to Master Ozymandias.”

“Look, scum,” Miia said, emphasizing her point with a sharp kick of her boot, “she asked you your name.”

If he felt pain at the kick, he did not show it. “We have no names. We are the Myrmidons. We are but servants....”

“...to Master Ozymandias, yes, we got that. All right, then, maybe you can answer this: how did you get to us so quickly?”

“Master Ozymandias told us to go, and we went.”

Lorelei felt very much like terminating this conversation the way she had the one with Meallan, but fortunately for the Myrmidon, Zvonimir interrupted.

“I think it best we get a move on. He’s not going to give us anything.”

“What do we do with him?” said Miia.

“Leave him,” Lorelei said. “He’s not a threat. Not unarmed and alone.”

“We will come for you. You cannot escape us.”

“We just did,” Lorelei said. “Come on, let’s figure out where we are.”

“So, what did you think when Lorelei cut off his head?”

Lori leaned against the wall, cradling the phone against her ear. It was nice of Dr. Thorson to talk to her about this, but Lori knew that she still viewed the visions as hallucinations or dreams. Nevertheless...she needed someone to talk to. Someone who wouldn't judge.

“I was horrified,” Lori sighed. “I couldn't believe that she could be so...so cold about it. I mean, he was begging for mercy. How could she do that?”

“So you were angry about her actions. You didn't want to see him die.”

“I didn't think she had to kill him. Not like that. Not with him pleading.”

“So you were revolted.”

“Yes.”

“Outraged.”

“Yes.”

“If it had been you holding those swords to Allen's neck, you never would've killed him.”

That question brought Lori up short. She tried to say yes—she would never have done that. The words that spilled out next surprised even her.

“No. I would've wanted him to suffer more.”

There was a pause before Dr. Thorson said, “I see.”

“I...that's what scares me, really,” Lori stammered. “I was shocked. And horrified. And...jealous. Jealous of her ability to destroy him. I want to destroy him.”

“Of course you do. He raped you.”

“Yes, damn it! He raped me, and he's going about his damn business like it's nothing! And I wake up every day with that hanging over me, and I can't ever get over it. If he'd gone to jail, paid for his crime...but he's redshirting at Illinois, for God's sake, probably raping other girls. He's fine. And I hope to God that Anna's right, that these people are part of us, because I hope he felt the knife on his neck, I hope he felt the fear, I hope he knows that somewhere, somehow, I've got my revenge.”

Lori slid slowly down the wall, and collapsed in a heap on the floor. “I just...I wanted him to pay. He never paid.”

“I know,” Dr. Thorson said. “That's why these visions are so real to you. Because they represent your darkest desires. You want to kill Allen—of course you want to kill Allen. I would too. But you don't want to admit that to yourself, because you're afraid it will make you a bad person. You're not a bad

person.”

“I’m not? Really? I don’t know, Dr. Thorson. I think maybe I am. And if I’m not—well, I wish I was. Because I could let loose on him and not care.”

“No, you couldn’t,” the doctor said.

“You’re right,” Lori responded. “I’d enjoy it too much not to care.”

There was a long silence, and Lori said, “Doctor, there’s something else.”

“Yes?”

“Allen—him being there. It seems...well, kind of weird, doesn’t it?”

“How so?”

“Well, I mean, what are the odds that a swordsmith’s son would end up a scout for the Cadre hundreds of miles east, and just happen to be caught by Lorelei?”

“I don’t know.”

“They’re not good,” said Lori, chewing her words as if she couldn’t quite make them come out.

“What do you think that means?” asked the Doctor.

“Dr. Thorson...am I dreaming all of this? Is this all in my head?”

There was only a brief pause before the reply came.

“Lori, this is what we refer to as a ‘breakthrough.’”

## *Seventeen*

### *The Statue and the Fortune Teller*

“You will see! He spreads himself throughout the Five Kingdoms. Soon he will be Emperor of the Western Lands! And we shall be rewarded, his faithful servants.”

“Can someone shut this guy up?” Miia asked, fingering her sword.

“Myrmidon, why are you following us? Go. Do...anything else,” Lorelei grumbled.

“I will follow you to the city, and there I will reunite with my brothers, and they will see that I have captured you, and they will honor me!”

“Well...bully for you,” said Miia.

“Of all the first attackers, I will be recognized as the most skilled. I will be given my own room at our fortress! I will be placed in charge of others!”

“If we don’t kill you first,” grumbled Miia.

“We don’t kill unarmed prisoners,” admonished Lorelei, halfheartedly. “Odin frowns on it.”

“Does he really?” Zvonimir said with a smirk. “Not that I think it’s bad policy, mind you, and I respect that you believe, but I have seen no evidence that Father Odin is at work here in this world, any more than I’ve seen evidence of Mithras or Jehovah or Allah or Zeus.”

“I’ve failed him before,” Lorelei said. “I’ll not do it again.”

“So where did you pick up the extra sword? It’s nice.”

“It’s yours, Miia, if you want it. I took it off a Cadre sentinel.”

“Yes, you executed him quite effectively. One of my brothers saw you do it. Perhaps Master Ozymandias wants you captured alive so that you can serve him as a warrior. We would be privileged to serve with you. Or kill you. Depending on our master’s wishes.”

“So you got in a scrape, eh lass? Explains the blood. One of these footsoldiers?”

“No, a human,” the Myrmidon scoffed. “He was called by the name Meallan O’Shea. He was slain with his own sword.”

“It’s not important,” Lorelei grumbled. “Look, I think we’re just a mile or so south of Two Rivers. Isn’t that Southgate?”

“O’Shea? Wasn’t that the name of the swordsmith in Pipestone?” asked Miia.

“I don’t remember. Yeah, that’s got to be Southgate. You can see the Prescott River there.”

“He begged you. We saw. Your refusal to grant him mercy was stirring. You would make an excellent Myrmidon.”

“Yes,” said Lorelei, harshly. “Definitely Southgate.”

“Wait,” Miia said. “What do you mean, ‘Beg?’”

“She held her swords at his neck. He cried, but she did what she had to do. She was as cold-blooded as any of my brothers. We were quite impressed.”

“You executed an unarmed prisoner?”

“Now’s not the time, Miia.”

“You said yourself—that’s forbidden.”

“And where were we supposed to secure him?” Lorelei asked defiantly, calling up her defense.

“I don’t know. Is that why you did it?”

“Well...”

“And if that’s the case, then why is Captain Cadre still alive?”

Lorelei wheeled on her friend. “Because five minutes after I killed Meallan, the Cadre found us. And I can’t help believe that Father Odin let them find us. As a warning to me to follow His strictures.”

Miia frowned. “I will assume you had a good reason for executing him, Mistress Lorelei,” she said, formally. “And I trust your judgment. But we will need to discuss this later.”

“Yes,” Lorelei said, “we will. But not now.”

They carried on in silence for some time, with only occasional hectoring from the Myrmidon to break the monotony. Miia only drew her sword on him twice. As they approached Southgate on the River Road, Zvonimir walked up to Lorelei, who was trudging sullenly forward.

“You know,” he said, “that was an impressive job with the gate. You sensed it was there, didn’t you?”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Not easy. I took many years before I could sense a gate. And that was the first time I’ve ever seen someone open their first gate without a misfire. You didn’t even make the signs – that’s master-level work. You are truly gifted, Lorelei.”

“Yeah, well...”

“False modesty is unbecoming, my dear.”

Lorelei shook her head. “I made a bad decision this morning, professor. I’m just glad I didn’t get us killed.”

“Nobody’s perfect. None in this world, that’s for certain.”

“You will soon turn to our side, or you will all be dead!”

“Shut up, Don,” said Lorelei in a growl.

The Myrmidon was nonplussed. “Don?”

“I’m tired of saying ‘Myrmidon.’ You’re Don from now on. And I still can’t figure out why you keep

following us. If you haven't left us by the time we reach Southgate, I will have Miia turn loose on you, if I have to hand you a sword myself to make it legit."

"You wouldn't risk it. I would kill you all if armed."

Lorelei paused, drew her sword, and pointing the tip at the Myrmidon's neck slowly said, "Look. I could kill you now. I'm not doing that. Where I come from, mercy is repaid with mercy, and respect with respect. You could show your respect by going away. Now."

He gazed at her with his unblinking onyx eyes, and softly pleaded, "Why will you not kill me?"

The only sound for a moment was the chirping of the birds and the rustling of the wind.

"You want me to kill you?"

The Myrmidon groaned as if confronting a subpar pupil. "I have been trying to convince you to. I thought if I was threatening enough, you would grant me that boon."

Lorelei sheathed her sword. "Death is no boon. And I've seen enough of it to last many lifetimes. Get."

"Master Ozymandias will be...displeased with me if I should return to his service after an absence. I would rather be dead."

"Then don't return," Miia snapped.

"And leave my brothers? Impossible. Besides, I was made to serve my master."

"Then tell him the truth," Malcolm said. "Tell him you followed us through the gate. Tell him you were unarmed, and that only through luck did you escape."

The Myrmidon stroked his grayish chin. "I am confused. We were told...it does not matter. I will do as you say."

And with not a spare word, he turned and began to run, faster than any person any of them had ever seen. He didn't stop until he passed over a rise far to their west.

"Well," said Miia, "I hope you all know what you're doing. He'll tell them where we are."

"They already know where we are," Lorelei corrected. "Or they will if they just follow the gate to its destination. Which is all the more reason for us to get going. If we can get to Southgate, we can lose ourselves in the city. They'll know we're there—but they already did."



About fifty years after King Dominic III founded Two Rivers, the merchants knew that they had a problem.

Two Rivers was a prosperous town, indeed, but that prosperity was tied to the Prescott and the Thyme—and they met in the center of the city, just south of the Crimson Palace itself. The barge workers and fishmongers and traders were tolerated—barely—in the Commons, but they were subject to onerous taxes, and could be cleared out at a moment’s notice if the Lord High Governor desired a nice view on a pretty summer’s day.

Clearly, something had to be done. And so a small cabal began building a few ramshackle huts just outside the walls of the city, outside the South Gate. Within a few years, the area was a city of almost as much import as Two Rivers itself, and the traders who founded it found themselves richer than the dreams of avarice.

The Lord High Governor wasn’t too happy with the turn of events; neither, for that matter, was Dominic V. But each time the army swept through the town, the traders came back, firmer and more resolute. Eventually, they began to hire mercenaries, and the conflicts grew too much for the crown to bear. After some negotiation, harsh words, a smattering of bribes, and a fortuitously timed marriage, Southgate was legitimized. Soon after, it would be embraced. And though it had long since become just one of the neighborhoods in Two Rivers, it still was well-known throughout the Western Lands as a place where criminals and soldiers would drink side-by-side in the pubs, wagering on cards and soliciting the women, before stumbling back to their respective professions (which, it must be noted, had a surprisingly high degree of crossover).

Lorelei led the small group into the winding streets of the town. Hawkers called out from every side, pitching everything from herbal medicines to sheep’s heads to chain mail. Twice, Lorelei steered Miia away from games of cards; she knew damn well that the games here were rigged—and in the unlikely event they weren’t, Lorelei saw no reason to make them so.

“So, best to find an inn here tonight? It’s getting late.”

“I’d rather be in the city proper, Malcolm,” Lorelei replied. “I don’t like the feel of this place. It’s....”

“Scummy,” Miia finished. “Though it has a sort of a unique charm.”

“One could say that,” the Professor muttered, wiping some ghastly dreck from his boot. “I certainly wouldn’t, but one could.”

“We can’t be too far from the South Gate. We’ll find a small inn, and then—”

“Lor!” Miia interrupted.

“What is it?” Lorelei sighed.

“Look!”

Lorelei followed her finger to the river’s edge, at the end of Fishmonger Street. There was a row of flophouses, pubs, and fence operations, often conveniently located in the same building. But one jumped out immediately at her.

It was a smallish pub, with a carving of three dead swans above the door.

“Charming,” she said, heading for it. “I wonder, will Professor Samara’s next clue lead us to a slaughterhouse or a leper colony? Can’t wait to find out.”

‡ ‡ ‡

At least the ale was cheap. Other than that, there was little to recommend the Three Swans. Lorelei knew, she supposed, that Hakim had done this for a reason, but she still thought he could have hidden a clue in a rose garden or a bakery.

She picked her way around the third fight to break out in the past couple hours, and said wearily, “Look, it’s getting late. We’ll come back tomorrow. I need to rest.”

“Agreed,” said Zvonimir. “Look, we’ve looked up and down the pub. I shouldn’t wonder if there isn’t another Three Swans inside the city. At any rate, best we bunk down for the night.”

Miia and Malcolm, for their part, had consumed just enough ale so as to become entranced enough with each other to cease to be part of the debate. Radulf, meanwhile, sat on the floor, head in her paws, waiting patiently.

“All right, you two,” Lorelei barked. “Let’s get going. Come, girl.”

She walked out the door, and shivering in the night air, gazed back at the inn. She noted a small statue on the side of the entrance, one she’d missed before. It was Tyr, the God of War, his good hand holding a sword aloft, his breastplate emblazoned with the teiwaz rune that had been the symbol of her tribe. She nodded to the God, aware of the incongruity; she wondered if the owner was a believer in the Old Religion, or if he just liked the way Tyr looked. Likely the latter.

She started out, took three steps, and stopped.

Freyr’s disciple holds the key....

She remembered a bit of Lokasenna, just a short passage, after Freyr was accused by the Trickster of consorting with his sister, Freyja. All the girls had



laughed about that, of course—they'd been thirteen when Margarethe taught them that particular bit, and...well, Freyr was the God of Fertility and Pleasure. Frankly, all of Lokasenna was a bit risqué -- more than a few inappropriate stories were shared conspiratorially among themselves.

But it was Tyr's defense that stuck out to her: "Freyr is best of all the exalted gods in the Æsir's courts: no maid he makes to weep, no wife of man, and from bonds looses all." Tyr, Margarethe took pains to note, was a great supporter of Freyr. It was as if he was his disciple....

She walked to the statue reverently, bowing slightly as she approached. His good right hand held the sword, while the stump of his left arm swung out as if to parry. She felt along the edge of it, and felt the seam.

She popped it loose with ease, and reached inside, grasping the scroll that she knew had to be there.

It was direct and to the point. "The Commons, the booth of Madame Vipond. Tell her you were sent by Mahmoud."

Lorelei smiled at her friends as they exited, smiled for the first time since killing Meallan fourteen hours and forever ago. "I think," she said, "that our quest is almost at an end."

‡ ‡ ‡

The Commons were to Southgate as a sword is to a wooden club; both are effective in their own way, and in some situations the club might be more useful. But the sword is elegant in a way the club can never be.

Lorelei wound her way through the small boutiques, looking for the psychic. She had gone alone—no reason, really, for them all to go—and besides, she thought one woman walking through would attract less attention than a troop.

When at last she found her, she was not quite what Lorelei had expected. Madame Josephine Vipond was young, for one thing—barely older than herself. For another, she was shockingly beautiful, with black hair laying wildly about a pale face just so, a bored countenance that suggested she knew she was wasting her talent.

"So," she said without looking up as Lorelei approached, "what would you like? I can read the cards for two silver, or play auspex for one gold. You provide the bird though."

"Uh...cards, please," Lorelei said, dropping three silver coins on the table. Then, looking both ways, she said, "Mahmoud sent me."

"Of course he did, Highness," said the psychic, not looking up from the arcana. "Thanks for picking cards, by the way. Never can quite get over the smell of freshly eviscerated swallow. Anyway," she said, dealing cards out quickly, "I think the Queen of Swords is your proper significator."

“Uh...Mahmoud?” Lorelei said, as Josephine dealt the cards into a Celtic Cross.

“Patience, your Highness. All in good time. Besides, you paid for your reading. It would be bad for business if I didn’t give you one. Word would get around that I was shorting customers, and that would never do. Hmm...you fear being alone, no?”

“What? Yes, uh...what?”

“Thought so. Understandable of course. Hmm. Still—you in a relationship? I don’t trust the guy.”

“You...you shouldn’t. Excuse me, but...”

“Oho! The Fool! Looking for the pure, carefree power of unfettered creation, no? Well, maybe. Let’s see...well, given that there’s a new crisis looming after this one, I wouldn’t count on it yet.”

“What?” Lorelei grumbled.

“Ace of Wands, reversed,” said Josephine, gesturing vaguely. “Hmm...you do really need to let go of your losses, Highness.”

“What?”

“You’re dwelling on them too much.”

“All right, that’s it,” said Lorelei, as she started to rise. “I didn’t come here to be mocked.”

“Not at all!” Josephine said sharply. “Look, the Five of Cups, reversed represents disappointment, loss. In this position it tells me that you must let go of your losses if you are to move forward.”

“You have no concept of what I’ve lost.”

At this, the psychic finally lifted her eyes to Lorelei, glaring daggers. The Valkyrie realized to her shock that they were a deep violet, almost indigo. It was a color Lorelei had never before seen in nature.

“Your Highness,” she said, coolly, “does even one more of your kind remain on this earth?”

“Yes,” Lorelei said evenly. “Exactly one.”

“Then that’s one more than me. I know loss, Highness. Loss more terrible than you could ever comprehend.”

Lorelei sat back down. “All right,” she said, warily. “My apologies.”

“Understandable. The cards can rattle you some times, if they read true. Anyhow, Eight of Wands, reversed. Right here, see?” said Josephine, dropping her eyes back to the cards as if nothing had transpired. “Be very careful of reaching for too much too soon, your Highness. You must stay within yourself—you are still learning. And for your condition—well, The Tower is a part of the major arcana.

It means you have gone through an abrupt change, one which has and continues to have repercussions in your life.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“I know,” said the psychic, looking back at her. Lorelei gasped—the eyes were now periwinkle and placid. “Your judgment is sound—the King of Swords, see? I think its influence is strong in you—I mean, your signifier is its partner, the Queen. And this—the Four of Pentacles, reversed. You still are uncomfortable with your power, aren’t you, your Highness?”

“Why,” said Lorelei, “do you keep referring to me as ‘Highness?’”

“You are Queen of the Valkyries, are you not?”

“Something like that,” Lorelei muttered, fingering her necklace self-consciously.

“Do not deny what you are, Highness. False modesty is unbecoming.”

“You know, that’s the second time I’ve heard that—”

“—in two days. Yes, I know. Back to your cards. We’re almost done, after all. Just one more to go.” She turned it over with a flourish, then frowned. “Hmm. Now this—this card leads me to caution you. You may win victory, Highness. But be careful not to rest on your laurels. The Four of Wands, when reversed, suggests you may achieve your goal but lose your way afterward. Don’t.”

Lorelei looked up at the psychic, and said, simply, “I won’t.”

“I wonder,” said the psychic, looking up at Lorelei with heliotrope eyes that seemed to spiral into nothingness. “Mark well my words. Now, I know you did not come here for my advice, but it is my gift. We must share and embrace our gifts, no?”

“Yes, we must,” Lorelei said. “Which is why I’m here. Uh—”

“Of course. Mahmoud sent you for this,” she said, retrieving a box from beneath her stand. “I’ve guarded it just as he asked me to. He has paid his fee ahead—I require no further compensation.”

Lorelei opened the box, and smiled broadly. “No, you do, Madame Vipond. Here,” she said, passing one gold coin to her. “For luck.”

“It’s you that needs it,” said Josephine. “But I misdoubt you’ve enough to get you to their lair. It’s getting out that will be the tricky part.”

“Thank you,” said Lorelei. “By the way—”

“His name wasn’t Mahmoud? Of course it wasn’t. I knew it and he knew I knew. But I agree with him, and with you—sometimes, it’s best not to say such things aloud.”

Lorelei had gripped the Tome as one might grasp a wriggling child, and held one hand on the scabbard of her sword. She was simultaneously buoyant and leaden, half-drunk with the exhilaration of coming to the end of Hakim's riddles, half-terrified with the prospect of what this meant. She felt like she was watching six ways at once, convinced that at any second the Cadre would swarm her, the Myrmidons swinging into action.

But for all her fear, she made the walk back to the Orange Cat Inn safely and without incident. She presented the Tome to Zvonimir with a grin, and sat back contentedly as he flipped through it. "Ah, the Tome of the Gates. Yes, indeed. This is one of three copies—well, two now...."

"Professor, we've been over this; written by Barnabas the Mad hundreds of years ago, only other copies are in Moiroir and a fireplace in Neri," came the rote recitation. "Can we get on with it?"

Zvonimir arched an eyebrow as he leafed through the book. "Part of it's missing."

"What?"

The professor looked vacant for a moment, then smiled. "He must have destroyed the the Tale of the Great Balancing. Or hidden it. It's the part of Worlds to Come that would be of the most use to the Cadre—it is the prophecy."

"But—don't we need that? Isn't that the part about the Valkyrie-Fox?"

"Yes, and we'll have to spring Hakim if we're to get it," Zvonimir said, rising. "But he's left us what we needed to train you for the upcoming battle. And a bit of light reading," he said, dumping the Tome on Lorelei's lap. "Start with the Book of What Has Been. We'll discuss it in the morning."

So Lorelei did as she was told. She began to read. And read. And read.

She read long after Miia and Malcolm had retired, long after Zvonimir went to sleep. She had read by daylight, by lamplight, and now by the light of a dwindling stub of a candle, which she was trying to make last long enough to get her through the first section of the second book.

It was a fascinating read, all the more fascinating because she could tell quite clearly that Barnabas the Mad had earned his nickname.

Long sections of the text rambled along incomprehensibly; even longer sections detailed various scandalous affairs between some Mithraist clergy and their female parishioners. She was still blushing over the Dark Tale, a sixty-three paragraph stream-of-consciousness fantasy that she was still not sure she understood—other than that it was the work of a highly deranged man.

But in between the scatology and the gossip and the inscrutable, there was beauty and clarity. Barnabas described the first opening of a gate with wonder:

The Reverend drew closer to the wall. “Thou must get thyself away, milady,” he cried, & then he threw the powder into the wind. It scatter’d into a thousand pieces, then faded into nothing. Suddenly, there was a great groaning cry, & the wind shook and shuddered, & then opened itself up like a blooming orchid, tender & scared, alone in the world. The Reverend stepped towards the gate, & cried out, “O Mithras! Thou hast answered my plea!”

She had read through voraciously, completing the Book of What Has Been and roaring into the Book of the Now. Here Barnabas’ ravings disappeared, and he held forth with the rules governing the gates—“in this world,” she noted with a smile.

The candle burned itself out as she finished the last words on the page, and so she arose, closed the Tome, and walked carefully to her bed, lying down as quietly as possible so as to allow her friends their slumber. As she dozed off, she couldn’t help but think of those last lines: “And so, you now know the means of creating these gates in this world. No doubt, you expect you will soon be an all-powerful magician, traveling through time and space with abandon. No doubt you think that. No doubt you are a fool.”

She wondered why Barnabas was so dismissive, when his instructions had been so clear. Truly, a child could follow them.

She wondered, all the way to sleep.

‡ ‡ ‡

“Oh, great,” Lori said.

“What?” came Molly’s voice from behind her.

The head Lorelei inhabited spun around, and she sensed that she was giving Molly a look. “Oh. Her.”

“Yes, her.”

Nice to see you, too, Lorelei thought, wondering what Lori was mad about. Then, thinking back to the last time she had felt Lori’s presence....

Ah. Lorelei mentally shrugged; she had yet to see Lori kill anyone, and she got the sense that death was a somewhat less common event in Lori’s world than her own. And it wasn’t like she didn’t harbor her own doubts about Meallan’s death.

Sorry, she thought.

“So...what, you’re just going to stand there, mute? You’ve been treating her like a sister, you owe more

than that.”

“I’m not sure she exists. If she does, she killed an unarmed man.”

“He raped you.”

“No, ‘he’ didn’t. His twin did. But that’s not his fault.”

“Fine,” said Molly, rolling her eyes. “As you wish. But she’s inside your skin, and you were in hers, right?”

“Maybe,” Lori said. “Maybe Dr. Thorson is right. Maybe this is just a fantasy. Maybe it’s time to put away childish things.”

“I know you don’t really believe that.”

“I don’t know what to believe,” Lori shot back. “It’s too convenient. Too pat. It’s just like she said—it’s my defense mechanism. It’s a way of getting revenge in fantasy that I can’t get in real life. That’s why she killed the bastard. Don’t you see?” she cried, her voice rising and trembling, “It’s not her. It’s me. It’s all me. I’m insane, don’t you see that?”

There was long quiet before Molly said, “Look, if you’re still dwelling on—”

“Paranoid schizophrenia, Molly! Damn it, that’s what she said, and damned if it doesn’t fit. Vivid hallucinations, delusions of a different world.”

“But what about the experiments—”

“Damn the experiments! They haven’t proven anything!” Lori blasted. “I just want to be normal, Molly! I just want to go to sleep and dream normal dreams! I don’t want to feel like someone’s looking over my shoulder! I just—want—a—normal—LIFE!” she shouted in tone that crescendoed into a scream.

Molly held her friend, and Lori sobbed uncontrollably for a good long while, before wiping her eyes. “Dr. Thorson...prescribed clozapine. She said it could help.”

“That’s an antipsychotic.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to take it?”

“I don’t know,” said Lori. “I just want it to go away.”

“And I’m afraid of what’s gonna happen if it does.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei awoke, and shook her head. The angle of the sun told her it had to be

midmorning, though she certainly didn't feel rested.

"Ah, you're up. Good. It looks like you got quite a bit done last night."

"Yeah," she said, trying to shake off the memory of Lori. "Yeah, I did. Is there breakfast—?"

"Some bread and water. Miia and Malcolm are going to the market to fetch some lunch. Shall we?"

"Let me freshen up," Lori said, stretching. "And then we shall."

She greeted the professor back in the room nine minutes later; he was sorting some bottles from his pack on the table, putting them in order from dark gray to silvery white, clucking as he moved the pieces back and forth as if they were on a chessboard. Lorelei looked, and the names popped out at her—Urum. Liptumuno. Radum. Tonemeunrig. All of the chemicals that Barnabas had identified in his instructions to the reader as vital for creation of gates.

"I see that you completed the Hows of Gating in the Book of the Now. Good. You read much more quickly than you had said you could."

"It was...interesting," Lorelei replied.

"Yes, yes, Barnabas was a character. But he was a character with a purpose," said the professor, opening the vial containing the urum and inspecting it. "Take the story of Reverend Masters and the widow Greene."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, because Barnabas was trying to show what emotion can do to a gate. The emotional state of the creator can make a gate of incredible depth—or cause the gate to collapse before it ever forms."

"So was the Dark Tale...."

"No. That was just bizarre," said Zvonimir with a shudder. "Not everything Barnabas wrote was allegorical. But much of it was. Indeed, I suspect he threw in a few ribald tales in part to throw the overly devout off his tail. He was a hardened Deist, had no time for the Mithraists. Hmm...okay. Catch," he said, tossing a vial of white powder to Lorelei. She plucked it clean, feeling the warmth of the vial in her hand.

"Go to the alley behind the building, and create a gate exit."

"Professor?"

"You did read, didn't you? You weren't just flipping pages, hoping for pictures?"

"No—no, I read. I just didn't think I'd be tested this quickly."

"We need an exit," he said, opening a vial of charcoal powder. "Should the Cadre come, I'd like it to take us somewhere other than out of town. Besides, I don't think you're ready to build a gate to

Pipestone. But you are ready to build one to downstairs.”

“All right,” she said, not thinking this was all right at all. But she did as she was asked—walked down the stairs and out the front, around the back and to the narrow walkway between the inn and a stable. And she looked at the air.

She sprinkled the powder into her hand, much less than a spoonful. She would not need much, she thought. Just enough to make her hand appear to shimmer.

“If you be an Odinst, the exitway is easy to create. Spear of Odin, Sword of Odin, Diamond and Cross, inguz gebo. Make the sigil, and think of the entrance it is to connect to,” she murmured to herself as she drew gebo in the air. She envisioned the room, Zvonimir drawing kenaz and raidho in the air with a trace of liptomuno in his hand, he envisioning her exitway.

Her hand shook slightly as she traced gebo again, and she whispered the word: “Aperta.”

The ground shook as the wind rushed to the opening gate, its maw almost twice as wide as she. Zvonimir strode through, grinning maniacally. “Well done! And on your first try! That’s impressive work. Now close it.”

Lorelei reached out, expecting him to give her the urum, but he shook his head. “Remember the story of the thief in the temple?”

“Barnabas wrote that he closed the gate ’of his own accord.”

“Yes.”

Lorelei looked at Zvonimir, his eyes inscrutable. This was a test; it had to be. The Thief’s Tale told of a man, “singular in nature,” who could bend the gates by will alone.

“Well, if it’s a test you want,” she said. And then she turned and faced the gate. “Chiuso.”

It flickered and shimmered, but stayed open.

“Concentrate,” Zvonimir bade her, but she already was. Envision the gate a wineskin, being wrung from one end to the other, pushing all that is within out. Envision that, and raise your hand with the urum, and say...

“Chiuso.” It fluttered and shook, but remained steadfast. Lorelei took a step forward, determined.

“Chiuso!” she roared, and the gate flickered defiantly, a shower of blue sparks highlighting its recalcitrance. Lorelei breathed deep, and took another step.

“Chiuso!” she roared. “Chiuso, il cancello di Barnabas, ha chiuso!”

The gate pulsed, and then pushed forth a gale, knocking the two to the ground



as it shut itself.

Lorelei ran a hand across her forehead, pushing her hair out of her eyes. She turned back to Zvonimir, who was staring, eyes wide.

“I have introduced nine students to the Tome,” he said, slowly. “Every one I instructed as I have you. I have done so in part to force humility on students, to teach them that they are not the Thief, they do not have mastery of these forces.

“Every one of them I asked to help create a simple gate—a process that only you and Hakim performed successfully on the first try. And then, once the gate was created, I asked them to force it closed, of their own accord.

“Nobody ever succeeded, of course. Nor did I expect them to; the lesson was meant to teach humility.

“I have failed to impart that in you, I think,” he said, smiling weakly, “but it is a successful failure. Come. Our day is just beginning, and I suspect it will be an interesting one.”

## *Eighteen*

### *The Long Wait*

Lorelei leaned up against the inn, looking up at Lune, wondering at the day.

She had been pushed hard by Zvonimir—harder than she had ever been before. (And she had endured Reginleif’s two-day run. She’d come fourth, damn it—it still rankled her that Satu had defeated her. Miia and Annalie were one thing.)

At any rate, she was trying to come to grips with everything that had happened in the day. Zvonimir wanted to teach her humility, wanted her to reach her breaking point, and she had. When he pushed her to create a gate on her own, with no helper, she failed. Not that this surprised him; Barnabas himself had declared such a thing impossible. And she did not succeed in creating a gateway to another world, but again, such a thing would require an assistant in the other realm.

But those were the only tasks she failed to complete. Everything else he asked of her—from opening a gate with no chemicals, to opening a gate from its exit, to erasing a gate from existence— everything else she had completed, though not without significant effort.

Zvonimir had finished their evening with a sigh. “How can I teach you if you already know everything?”

She doubted quite a bit that she knew everything. Her shoulders ached, and her brain seemed to have the same consistency as Alexandra’s gruel. She had tried to read on in the Tome, but had only gotten halfway through the Profits to

be Made when she'd tired of Barnabas' odd revenge fantasies. (Though she did note that the fantasies always ended with him failing, or falling short of his goal. Perhaps that was his lesson. She'd have to reread tomorrow.) And the Whys of Gating—well, she still was trying to understand what the significance of EPR was, or what the metaphor of the string and the bug meant. She thought she kind of got that—but not really.

She could puzzle them down all night, she knew. Instead, she stood out in the night air, trying to clear her mind and prepare for the next day, when Zvonimir would no doubt push her again. And she'd go along, because she was starting to think that she'd need these powers sooner than later. They were going to have to go after Hakim soon, and then, once they rescued him, they would have to move along. She had to be ready.

She hoped she was as good as Zvonimir claimed.

She sensed a presence, sulking in the back of her head. "Hi," she said, quietly to the shadow within her.

She didn't quite know what else to say, so she simply began to talk.

"Look, first of all, whether you believe in me or not, I exist. I know, that's probably what you figured I'd say, but it's true. And strange as Meallan's sudden appearance here may seem to you, I've seen stranger coincidences.

"Anyhow, I know it upset you that I killed him. Well, you're right, it should. He's not the first man I killed, and Odin knows he won't be the last.

"But I shouldn't have executed him like that; Father Odin let me know that in no uncertain terms, and if I didn't get that lesson from him, I got it from you. If I caused you grief, I am doubly sorry." She sensed anger in Lori, and more than that, fear. Raw, naked terror.

And not a little bit of sorrow.

She tried to imagine what it would be like to live in Lori's world; she'd not witnessed one death in all her visions there.

It seemed nice.

Her own world must seem like Hell by comparison.

"I wish," said Lorelei, stumbling for the words, "that our worlds were more alike. Maybe then you'd believe in me more. Or maybe not. I don't know. I don't know what to tell you.

"I can't tell you that you're not mad, Lori. By the standards of my world I'm mad, and if not for Zvonimir's reassurances I know I would be as scared as you. And besides, if you doubt these visions are real, then a vision telling you that they're real will not convince you.

"But Lori, I know my world is real. Please, don't doubt me on that. You're the only one I know who

truly understands what it is like to picture another place, a place you can never go. I don't want to lose you, Lori. I've come to think of you as a sister, as a friend.

"I can't make you do anything," she said. "I know you're talking to a healer, and moreover, if she's the one I remember, she's Herja's twin; she is a good person. If you think she's right, you must do as you must. But Lori, if you think you're mad, you're wrong."

She sensed something from Lori. A wave of calm, followed by a hint of resolve. She didn't know what it meant.

"Godspeed, Lori," she said, as she sensed her friend slipping away. "I pray I'll see you again."

‡ ‡ ‡

It was around lunchtime that they broke; Zvonimir had her creating gates blindfolded, had her trying to create more ephemeral things—gates that winked out as soon as created, gates that opened in the same place every time but exited in different places every time, gates that only appeared to be gates, but in fact were meant to distract and confuse. She fumbled her symbolism a few times, but overall, he was pretty pleased with her progress.

"Well," the professor said, as they walked into the pub, "it seems to me that at this point, you should be reading the prophecies and getting a feel for the theory of this—if one can. As a practical matter, you're just unbelievably good at this. Two stews and two ciders, please," he said, offhandedly, to the barkeep.

"Make mine a mead," Lorelei interjected.

"Cider, Manny. We're still working."

"You're no fun," Lorelei said, collapsing into a chair.

"I'm not supposed to be. Besides, I'm not sure how you can drink that stuff."

"It's sweet."

"It's disgusting, that's what it is."

"It was Father Odin's favorite drink. Haven't you heard Gunnlod's tale?"

"Hmpf. You're a bright girl, Lorelei. You shouldn't put such stock in myth."

He must have seen the sullen look on her face, because he quickly added, "Oh, come now, don't take it like that—it's just...."

"You think I'm a fool, don't you? An idiot because I believe in Odin?"

"I don't think you're right, Lorelei. But...well, I've told you before, I believe in no particular God. But I believe in something. If 'something' is Odin, well, fine by me. He always seemed like a particularly interesting character. Much more fun than Mithras."

“Mithras is a myth,” Lorelei said.

“And Odin is not?”

She was at a loss. “Odin is the father of my kind!”

“And a Mithraist would say that the Sun is reborn each winter solstice. And yet you and I know it goes around the Earth and simply wobbles in its orbit. A myth is in the eye of the beholder, Lorelei. Do you think the Mithraists are wrong?”

“I think that they’re mistaken. But they’ll still be welcome in Helheim at the end of their days.”

“And you, I suppose, are off to Valhalla?”

“If Odin will have me. I would be more welcome there than Folkvang. It’s where I hope to go, anyhow. I know it’s where Herja and Reginleif and Annalie are—all my friends. They died bravely. He would keep a seat at the table for them.”

“Well,” said Zvonimir, “I hope you’re right. If the Jesuists are right, I’ll see you in a very different Hell—and if you’re right, after our deaths no doubt I’ll be in Helheim myself.”

“I would expect you’d end up in Helgafell. Where do you think we go?”

“I think that we go somewhere, Lorelei. But I don’t know where. I’ve read too many books. Knowledge can be the enemy of faith, my dear; I can’t see how my faith can be right and so many others wrong. But I am just a man. What do I know? Perhaps Odin waits for you after all, and Hel waits for me. If so, then drop me a line in the afterlife.”

“I wonder if you may not find your way to Valhalla after all. You have fought hard, if not well.”

“If we go charging in after Hakim, I well might,” said Zvonimir, quietly. “Ah! Is that saffron I smell? Manny, you’ve outdone yourself.”

‡ ‡ ‡

She groaned inwardly as the vision appeared. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to see Lori, more that she had ground herself down trying to understand what Barnabas was trying to say in his books of prophecy. At least Worlds to Come made some sense to her—he was describing Lori’s world, “laws in lockstep, ne’er departing/From those that the Creator wrote.” But he kept writing of “connections thrice” and “the poison’d dust” and “the tiny cannon,” and by the time she reached the point in the prophecy that Hakim (or someone else) had redacted, she really just wanted to drink three large flagons of mead. Or sleep dreamlessly, which she had finally settled on at Malcolm’s suggestion.

This wasn’t dreamless; she was in a washroom, by a sink with running water which was currently pouring out cold liquid. In her hand, she held two yellowish tablets.

She looked up at a mirror, at the face of Lori, tears streaming from her eyes.

"I suppose you would show up now," she said to the reflection, "to try to talk me out of it. I don't blame you, Lorelei. If you're real, you're allowed to act however you act. And if you're not real, you're my imagination at work, and I've got nobody to blame but myself.

"Besides, I'm not mad at you. Not really. I'm mad at me. I would've hurt him, Lorelei. More than you did. You didn't torture him, you just killed him. I would have hurt him but good. And that scares me. My world—you've seen it. Killing isn't acceptable here. And I'm afraid that if I don't do something, I'm going to find you and me blending until I do something that I regret. Even if you are real—I can't let that happen.

Lori paused. "You are real. I know you're real. I wish I didn't—maybe it's my insanity reasserting itself, but I know you're as real as I am. But I've made up my mind. I've got to see what these do. Maybe they break the connection, or maybe they make it stronger. Maybe I'm crazy, and delusional—and maybe the pills will have no effect, and I'll know...well, that I'm either sane or so crazy even drugs won't help."

Lori closed her eyes, and opened them back up. Lorelei saw her own reflection now. It was so similar to the one that had been there before that she almost didn't recognize it as a change—indeed, only the layer of grime and grease that she wore from the previous few days separated herself from Lori.

"I'm sorry, Lorelei," Lori said. "I know I'm not crazy. I just...I want it to end. I want to be free of this. I hope that you know I love you. And that I know I'm a coward for making this choice."

I do, and you're not, thought Lorelei. If I knew how to set myself free....

Lori popped the pills in her mouth, and swallowed.

Suddenly, the world began to swim. Lorelei felt like she'd been stabbed in her side, and yanked sideways. "Wait," she cried out. "Wait, Lori."

And the world faded into darkness once more.

‡ ‡ ‡

"You're sure about this," asked Miia.

It was a week since she'd had her last vision of Lori.

"Lass, I've come through worse than this. Don't you have any faith in me? 'Tis just reconnaissance."

They'd studied, she'd practiced. And she'd come to a decision. She would have to liberate Hakim Samara. And to do that, they would have to go straight into the belly of the beast.

She just wished she knew that she was right.

Miia looked at Malcolm with desperate eyes, and then turned her gaze to Lorelei. “Lor, are you sure about this?”

“No,” she admitted. “I’m not. But at some point I’m going to have to invade there. It would be nice to know what I’m getting into. But Malcolm, I’ll tell you again, you don’t have to do this. It’s sweet, and I appreciate it, but this is something I have to do.”

“Lorelei, are you trying to tell me now, at this late date, that you don’t expect me to help? I’m hurt. I’d thought I had convinced you by now that I’ve cast my lot in with you.”

“You have, Malcolm, but—”

“But nothing,” he said. “You expect Miia at your side when you engage the Cadre, no?”

Lorelei looked over at her friend. She was still unsure of the road she was leading them down—she knew she had to go, of course. And Zvonimir, too—Hakim was his friend. But she didn’t want her other friends to be hurt in the process.

As if sensing Lorelei’s thoughts, Miia said firmly, “Don’t even think that I won’t have your back, Lorelei. We stick together. You’d do the same for me.”

“Aye, and if you think I’m letting any of you get into this without adequate intelligence, you’re daft.”

“Well, then, it’s settled,” said Zvonimir. “Good luck, Malcolm.”

They turned to face the headquarters of the Cadre, a red brick building with a star, a moon, and a sextant above each door. They were in an alleyway about a block away, hiding in shadows—hoping that they wouldn’t be discovered before Malcolm had his chance to infiltrate their base. He nodded to them, and pausing just long enough to give his girlfriend a long, lingering kiss (everyone tried not to think of it as a goodbye kiss), he swapped his ring to his other hand, and dropped to his natural size.

“We’ll meet you back here every night at dusk,” Miia said quietly, kneeling to get closer to eye level. “If you don’t come out over the next four days....”

“...then I’m dead, lass. Then you know that I’ve met my maker, and you’ve got to make a decision about whether you want to meet yours.”

“Then we attack. Right, Lor?”

“Right, Miia,” she said, firmly. “If you’ve got my back, Malcolm, I’ve got yours.”

Miia nearly flattened him with one more kiss, and then he was gone into the shadows. The three of them and Radulf held their collective breath for a good

long time before withdrawing. As they walked back quietly through the dusky city, Miia asked, quite out of the blue, “If I marry Malcolm, I have to leave the sisterhood, don’t I?”

Lorelei, to her credit, had been expecting the question—but not her own answer. “No, I don’t see why you would.”

Miia looked back at her friend, surprised. “But sisters are never married. They leave the sisterhood if they do so. You know, the connections to someone else can cause one to falter....”

“I know. But that was the old sisterhood. They made their choices, and bless them. But Miia, if you and Malcolm are destined to be together, then I will not stand in your way. But I know that you’re destined to be a Valkyrie, too. I’m not going to force the fates to choose.”

Miia smiled wanly. “Yes, well, I’d miss you too. But you know...if we do get married...some day I might have to leave. If he has to go fight Domhnall....”

“Then I fight with you. I gave my pledge, remember? And if we win, and you end up Queen Miia, then...well, just save a seat for me at state dinners and such.”

Lorelei felt the pang as she said it. If Miia left, she was truly alone. She wanted to forbid her from marrying, force her to choose between Malcolm and herself.

But she knew that she couldn’t do that, and not just because she was unsure of who Miia would choose.

Miia was her friend, and Miia deserved happiness in life. Lorelei hoped she’d found it with Malcolm. She was jealous as hell of that, but she supposed that at least one of them should be happy. They deserved that much.

“You know, we never did talk about you executing O’Shea.”

Lorelei looked over, a bit surprised. “No, I suppose we didn’t.”

“Why did you do it? And don’t tell me he was a danger.” Miia asked.

“His doppelgänger raped Lori,” Lorelei said, quietly. “And I wanted revenge. And...I wish I could undo it. I was wrong.”

Miia looked at Lorelei, and nodded. “Well, I’m glad you can admit it. You know it’s forbidden.”

“Yes,” said Lorelei. “And since you are the only Valkyrie left, I submit myself to your judgment. I’ll step down if you want me to.”

Miia shook her head. “You need to apologize to Father Odin for failing to follow

His guidance, and to swear on all that is holy to us that you will not commit such a crime again.”

“I already have,” said Lorelei.

“Then we’re done. Lor, I would have executed Iorwerth even when he wasn’t armed for what he put you through. That you didn’t...You screwed up on this one. But I understand why you did. You’re not evil. You love Lori more than yourself. I’d be jealous...but I know you’d do the same for me.”

Lorelei put her arm around Miia’s shoulder. “I would,” she said, as they walked slowly back to the inn.

‡ ‡ ‡

It is an impotent feeling, being left to wait.

Three days, they came to their rendezvous point, and waited; three days, they waited in vain. As they walked back to their point on the fourth night, Lorelei had to admit, Miia was handling it well. She’d only once thrown a mirror to the ground while sobbing, and only occasionally lashed out with expletive-filled rants. Most of her time was spent seething, and plotting a three-person-and-one-wolf raid on a heavily fortified fortress.

So as they walked back for the fourth night, Lorelei armed herself to the teeth. She knew she wasn’t going to be able to restrain Miia from going in. And she wasn’t letting her go it alone.

They turned into the alleyway, and stopped cold.

The figure stood there, waiting patiently, as if he knew they were coming.

Well, of course he did.

Lorelei and Miia had swords out before they consciously recognized that it was a Myrmidon. They raised them up to strike, and Lorelei cried, “Wait!”

The Myrmidon had not reached for his sword. He was just waiting.

“Malcolm told me you would come,” he said.

“What have you done with him, you son of a bitch?”

“I am nobody’s son. And I have done nothing to him. He lives, for now.”

Lorelei kept her sword up, but ventured a question. “Don?”

“Yes, it is I. Malcolm asked me to seek you out. He told me where I could find you.”



“Now I know you’re lying. Malcolm would never betray us,” Miia said, edging closer, placing her sword at the Myrmidon’s throat.

“He did not. I offered my assistance. He accepted. He told me you would likely kill me, but he asked me to bring you this.” Don proffered a letter, which Miia grabbed. She looked it over for a long moment, and then handed it to Lorelei.

To my friends,

I have enlisted the Myrmidon to assist us. I believe we can trust him—certainly he is the only person who has shown me kindness since I was captured. Still, be on your guard; even this might be a trap. I alert you only because the alternative is you making an all-out assault tonight. I can envision you, Miia, already girded for battle. Most likely as you read this your sword is at the Myrmidon’s throat.

They want Lorelei badly. The rest of us they could care about. That doesn’t mean they’ll leave the rest of us alone, only that we’re more likely to face immediate death than she is. But make no mistake—they’re a lot stronger than I thought they would be. An attack on them is a suicide mission.

I would plead at this point for you not to attack on my behalf. Lorelei, you’re too important to risk. Miia, you’re the most important person in the world to me, and I would rather die than cause your death. And professor, you are needed to help Lorelei—and you’re no fighter, not really. You don’t belong in this battle.

But I know better, of course. Just be prepared for an environment unlike any you’ve seen. And use the Myrmidon, lasses. He’s on our side. I hope.

Love,

Malcolm

“Well, Don,” said Lorelei crumpling the paper, “how do we get inside?”

‡ ‡ ‡

“It’s a stupid plan.”

“No, it isn’t, Miia. It’s our only hope of saving Malcolm.”

They had returned to the inn with Don in tow, the better to plan. In retrospect, Lorelei almost wished they’d just charged ahead. It would have been simpler, and she would have gotten less push-back in return.

“I’m not letting you give yourself up, Lorelei,” said Miia, flatly. “I’m not saying the idea of faking a transport isn’t good. It’s solid. But for you to actually surrender?”

Lorelei was chewing on her lower lip. She wouldn't admit to Miia that she wanted to surrender to give the rest of them time to escape. She would have to find her own way out—or not. But she was responsible for this. She wasn't letting her friends die for her. Not again.

"I'll be okay," she said, quietly. "When you get in, I want you all to go get Malcolm and, hopefully, Hakim. And then I want you to get out with all deliberate speed. Then, professor, I want you to draw a gate exit tonight at midnight. That will be my escape route."

"It's a long shot," said Zvonimir. "Lorelei, if you're detained—or killed—"

"If I'm dead, then run for it. Run for your lives. That's an order, Miia."

"If you're dead, I'll be leader of the Valkyries, and you can't order me to do anything."

Lorelei rolled her eyes. "Just...please. We get one shot at this. If we fail, then any extra casualty is one to many. I'll take my chances."

"When I approach, let me speak," said Don, checking over Zvonimir and Miia. "They won't question you if you're with me. If I act as if you are brothers, you will be treated as such."

"Why are you helping us?" asked Miia.

"You showed me kindness. You spared my life. You did not have to. Ozymandias would not have."

"Time's wasting," said Lorelei, quietly. "It's time, folks. Don, if you would," she said, extending her wrists. He shackled them, and removed her sword.

"I hope you get that back," Miia said.

"It's Meallan's. I'm leaving mine here. Let's go," said Lorelei. She sounded far more certain than she was.

## *Nineteen*

### *The Moon, the Star and the Sextant*

Don rapped on the door forcefully. Lorelei stood behind him, head down, flanked on either side by Miia and Zvonimir. They were wearing their fake Cadre uniforms.

Funny that the last time they wore those clothes, they were breaking her out of jail.

The door opened, and another Myrmidon nodded as they passed. They walked down a hall to a desk, where a smallish man sat. He wore the same gray uniform Meallan had, and wore ratty brown hair combed from the left. Lorelei

could sense his despair at his lot in life from across the corridor.

“State your denotation and purpose,” he sighed, blankly.

“F-one-three, with prisoner for processing,” Don answered in monotone. “This is G-four-two and H-three-seven, they assisted.”

“Hmf. Do you know the name of the prisoner?” the man said, shuffling some papers around.

“Lorelei Voss.”

The man choked, and his eyes shot up. “The Valkyrie? You caught the Valkyrie? You, a Myrmidon?”

“Yes, sir, Director,” Don replied evenly. “Shall I transport her to the prison block?”

“No! You’ll transfer her into my custody, and report back to your holding area, all of you. Chain her to the chair.”

Don did as he was asked without further comment. When he finished, the Director barked, “Dismissed, F-one-three. G, H,” he added, diffidently.

Lorelei watched her friends disappear into the dark, and she was alone with the Director. He picked up what looked like a deck of tarot cards, and spoke into it.

“This is Brown. I need two blues to my area, now.”

“Yes, Director,” the box squawked, and the man smiled tersely. “Well, well. All the trouble you’ve put us through, and you get caught by a damn zombie. But what of your friends? Dead, I suppose.”

“Yes, you bastard,” Lorelei said, hoping that she was playing her part well. “Your Myrmidians killed Miia and Zvonimir.”

“Myrmidons. Too bad you never got a chance to read the classics.”

“Who cares what they’re called? They killed my friends, you jerk!”

“Oh, I’m so very sorry,” mocked Brown, shuffling papers while he watched her. “Next time, maybe you’ll be less difficult to capture.”

There was an urgent tone from the box on his hip. He picked it up, and looked at it, and smiled. “Well,” he said. “That was quick. Ah,” he said, as a door opened with a whoosh, “the guards.”

Two enormous men arrived, wearing bulky tunics of navy blue. “Donovan, John—take this prisoner to level one detention, room one black. You, my dear,” he said, turning to Lorelei, “you will be my ticket out of this hellish place and back to Earth. And about time. Enjoy your stay here.”

They undid the connections to the chair and jerked her to her feet. She struggled for a moment—just enough to sell it. As they drug her down the hall, she just hoped that the other three were on their way to save Malcolm. If it took her death to save him, it would be worth it.

She saw that the whooshing sound came from the doors, which moved aside as the men drug her through them. What magic is that? she asked herself, but soon saw magic beyond what she'd known—at least in this world.

Though it was night, the halls were bright—bright as daytime. She thought perhaps they were lit by some sort of torchlight, but as they passed torch after torch she could see they were not on fire, but simply glowed white-hot. It was something she'd seen only in visions of Lori's world.

Every few feet there repeated the logo that appeared over the doors of the building—a seven-pointed star, a crescent Lune, and a stylized sextant. Below each, words in a language Lorelei did not know—"Votis subscribunt fata secundis."

They drug her through a set of doors, and into a small closet. Placing her against a corner, the dark one—Donovan—moved a playing card over a small light, which turned from red to green. He pressed a button, which backlit, displaying the letter A, and then the doors to the closet closed.

It took Lorelei a second to realize why she suddenly felt lighter. They were falling. They were in an elevator! She had ridden along in Lori's skin in these enough to know them somewhat. The light one—John—looked at her. "Scared?"

"Of an elevator? No," she said with false bravado.

He reacted with a bit of surprise, which was what she wanted. But she couldn't help wondering—what was an elevator doing in her world? What was any of this doing here?

She didn't have long to ponder, as the doors opened and they were out in identical corridors again, and she was being drug down the hall to a small, plain wooden door. One of them opened the door while the other shoved her inside. It slammed shut behind her as she righted herself.

"Well, well, well," came a voice, instantly familiar, though Lorelei couldn't immediately place it. "You've caused me quite a bit of trouble, Valkyrie. Ozymandias was not happy when it became apparent that I'd missed my target."

Lorelei looked up at a sandy-haired man, squat and muscular, who was looking on at her with barely suppressed rage. "Anyhow," he said, "you have some information that we want. And I'm bloody well gonna get it. Where's the

Tome?”

“I don’t have it,” Lorelei said, calmly.

“Right. Good to know. We’ll do this the fun way then.” He reached to his belt and pressed a button, and the door opened up again.

Two new guards approached from either side, these ones clad in black. They grabbed her by each arm, and drug her across the room. This time she really did struggle—she’d expected a bit of torture, but that didn’t mean she was looking forward to it. Still, each of the men was nearly as strong as she, and together they had a decided advantage. It didn’t take long before they’d picked her up and forced her onto a hard board, and strapped her down with heavy belts. She struggled against them, but they were too secure.

“Nicely done. Now, I’m sure at this point you’re worried about hot pokers in the eye or us stretching you on the rack or one of the other bizarre medieval means of torture that you savages love to play with. But we’ve progressed since then. Don’t worry your pretty little head about any scars. We won’t leave any. Now....”

Abruptly, he leaned over, grabbed the hair on the top of her head, and yanked it upward. Painful, but nothing she couldn’t take. She let him see her wince—she could hardly avoid it, and she wasn’t afraid of him seeing a bit of her pain. Maybe it would give him pause—some men actually cared about a woman who showed pain. It made them feel guilty. Maybe she could use it to her advantage.

As he reached below her head, the memory finally clicked.

“So pretty. Such a shame.”

She realized that he wouldn’t much mind hurting a girl. He certainly hadn’t last time.

She had no further time to mull her situation; he quickly blindfolded her, then dropped her head back on the table, hard. She heard him say, “Now.”

Suddenly, the water was raining in on her, a deluge that she could not stop. She tried to calm herself—they wouldn’t just kill her. But the water kept pouring into her mouth, and she couldn’t stop it. It was the water cure—they’d told her of this in training. They’d fill her until her stomach burst—or until she drowned....

Then she was tipped abruptly backward into a pool of water.

She began to flail about, trying to free herself, but she couldn’t; the restraints were too tight. It seemed like eternity since the water started flowing. Suddenly and quite without warning, it stopped, and she was raised back up.

“Good one, right? The Yanks—you’ve got to respect their ingenuity. So, ready to tell me where the Tome is?”

Lorelei wanted to scream, but she shook her head no.

“Beaut. Let’s try this again, shall we?”

Again she went under, and again was pulled up, and under, and up, and under.

Around the seventh or eighth time, she broke.

“I threw it into the river,” she said. “I didn’t want you to get it, and I knew you were closing in. You might be able to fish it out downstream.”

“Codswollop. But we’ve knocked the stoic out of you, haven’t we? All right, boys, we’ve tenderized her enough for tonight. Tomorrow is another day.”

‡ ‡ ‡

She was tossed back into a brightly lit cell like a piece of rubbish. Music she couldn’t identify blared loud enough to give her a headache. No band was evident, but she already suspected it was one of the other uses of otherworldly technology—some sort of automated music maker.

She lay on the floor and cried. She had been strong; she hadn’t given in—yet.

But she knew she would. It was just a matter of time.

She was more terrified than she had ever been, more terrified even than when fighting Phobos, more terrified than when the Myrmidons had broken the line and come racing at her, and she’d seen her sisters defeated utterly. It was a different kind of terror, one that seemed primal, animalistic. She’d faced pain before. But this was different altogether.

She wondered how Dr. Samara had borne up under this. Perhaps they’d tried something different with him. Perhaps he’d just gone to his death willingly, his faith in his God bearing him through.

Or perhaps he’d been broken—and they’d been just waiting for her to take the bait.

She cried until, finally, she rose. She had to get out quickly. She couldn’t wait around for them to torment her more. She didn’t trust her ability to hold out forever—especially if they asked her once more where her friends were.

And so she drew the square, the circle, the inverted triangle, and she closed her eyes and murmured, “Cancello.”

She wasn't surprised when nothing happened. It would take time, this spell—if Zvonimir had completed his gate exit, she was still doing this by force of a battered will.

But she tried again, drew the signs, muttered the incantation. And again. And again.

She tried until she was exhausted, and collapsed back onto the floor. She couldn't create a gate without help. And Zvonimir wasn't helping.

She hoped the twist in her gut that told her he was captured was wrong; she hoped they'd gotten out and he'd simply been unable to make the connection. She hoped they got to the inn, picked up Radulf, and that they were even now running free, southbound for Freeport.

She was well aware, as she cried herself to a fitful sleep, that they were not.

‡ ‡ ‡

Days passed. She knew not how many; they played with her like a toy. They would wake her just as she dropped to sleep, shackle her so she had to stand, bent over, until her body ached desperately for just a little bit of rest. They dunked her back under the water, and they challenged her to tell them where the Tome was, where her friends were. And she lied to them, and wished for death, and death did not come.

They were dunking her under again, the third session in what she thought was one day. She was hanging on as best she could, knowing full well that her sanity was a thin reed that was holding a lot of weight.

"You're a tough one, aren't you?" asked Steve, leaning right into her face. "Thought sure we'd have broken you by now. Kay-Ess-Em was confessing to kidnapping the Lindbergh baby by this point.

"But I'm glad you're tough. It means we can keep playing."

Her tears mixed with the water rolling off her face, but she said nothing.

"Anyhow," said Steve, sternly, "It's time...."

He was interrupted by a squawk from what Lorelei now realized was a communication device

"Bloody—Warne here," he said, lifting it to his ear. "Yes, sir. We're in process. No, nothing yet. Agreed. But—sir? You must be...you can't be serious."

He cursed under his breath. "Right. Understood. Warne out."

Steve looked back at Lorelei, his eyes shooting daggers. "Dunk her under

again.”

She was plunged back into the water, for longer than ever before. Her lungs burned, her mind ached, and reality began to swim. This was it; he was going to kill her.

Frightened as she was, there was a peace to it.

She closed her eyes and prepared for the end. She hoped she'd see Annalie in the afterlife. She hoped they could make amends.

And then, just as she felt about to fade out, she was pulled out of the water, and her mouth was cleared. She gasped for air and lay limp, afraid to open her eyes.

“Get her cleaned up,” Steve spat to his henchmen as he stormed from the chamber. “Lord Ozymandias wishes to speak with her in the main conference room.”

‡ ‡ ‡

She was drug down the hall to a set of large wooden doors, ornate in their plainness. The guards opened the doors and brought her into a large darkened room, with one wall made of glass and the others ghostly pale, save for a series of strange scribbles on one side of the room, full of equations and numbers and incoherent asides like “3q burn rate 2122kg Pu. Kobolds?”

They led her to the table that sat in the middle of the room, sat her forcibly onto what she had to admit was a very comfortable chair, shackled her to it, and told her to wait. They left the room, and the door locked with a click.

“Pretty stupid,” she mumbled, wondering what they were thinking leaving her alone. She pushed the chair back, and found that it rolled on wheels. Strange, she thought. But useful to her; she scooted herself toward the window. Perhaps there she could get her bearings.

She turned to the wall of glass, and gaped at what she saw.

The room was perhaps three stories up, looking into a huge rotunda, brightly lit. At the middle of it there was a spinning, pulsing vortex—a gate of unimaginable depth and power.

A beam of lavender light pierced the heart of it, which Lorelei traced back to a huge block of crystal, which was itself glowing almost white.

“Incredible, isn't it?” She spun the chair, and for the second time in her life, she was face-to-face with Ozymandias. He stood in the doorway, wearing a simple blue shirt and blue pants of a type that Lori called “jeans.” He flipped a switch, and the room was bathed in soft, friendly light. “And to think it isn't even our primary gate. I remember the first time I saw it, eleven years ago. Marvelous.

“Now,” he said, approaching Lorelei, “let's get those shackles off, hmm?”

She waited passively until he unlocked the last of her restraints, and then she



leapt up, tackling him and grasping him by the throat.

“Now, now,” he gurgled, “is this any way to repay my hospitality?”

“I could kill you now, you know,” she said. “I should kill you for what you did to us.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, smiling. “But then your dear friends Zvonimir and Malcolm and Miia would be killed by my men—as they will be in one hour, unless I countermand my orders.”

“I told Steve—Zvonimir and Miia are already dead. And I don’t know about Malcolm. He’s been missing for days.”

“You don’t bluff well,” said Ozymandias. “Drop screen.”

There was a whir and a click, and a picture frame dropped down into the room. No—a television, Lorelei recognized.

“Image, prison block, main holding bravo.”

The television clicked on, and Lorelei saw her friends—all four of them, Don included. There was another man, too—Samara, perhaps? They were shown in a series of images—Zvonimir bent over and shackled, Malcolm laying prone on the ground, unmoving, Samara being berated by a large man, Miia...underneath the water....

“The Myrmidon is beyond redemption of course. He will have to be destroyed. Would have been by now, but we’ve been trying to figure out where he went bad. Anyhow, it’s just possible your friends can be saved. So shall we discuss my terms?”

Lorelei looked into his eyes with fury. If I die and they live....

“All right,” she said, backing off him. “What do you want?”

He laughed. “Lorelei, Lorelei, Lorelei. Do you know how much consternation you have caused me? Do you think my associates were happy when I revealed that there was a Valkyrie who had survived our raid? I told them beforehand, of course. ‘Prophecy actually works on this world. It’s not like Earth.’ But they never listen.

“A massive raid, charge right into the heart of the Valkyries, and we kill everyone except the one person we were supposed to. And so the prophecy remains.”

“Earth is a world of logic. Prophecy wouldn’t work there,” said Lorelei numbly, barely listening, staring down at the gate.

“Indeed it is, Lorelei.”

“So you’ve been there.”

“I’m from there, actually. I was born in a town you’ve never heard of—Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Nice place. A lot of good schools around there, the Red Sox, the bracing New England winters—I miss it.”

“Nobody’s keeping you from it,” Lorelei said, petulantly.

“Hah. Lorelei, you’ve read the Tome, I assume?”

“Almost all of it. Everything but the prophecy of balancing.”

“Then you’ve read more than I have. But I have a secret, Lorelei. I know much more about these things than you do.

“Do you know how old your world is?” he asked, apropos of nothing.

“What?”

“The age of your world, from the day it was created to now. Not to the second or anything. I’ll take a nice round number.”

“Well, thousands of years, I think. It’s been a long time, certainly, since Father Odin strode the planet.”

“Thousands. Yeah, that would seem right to you. It’s funny; you know how long your world has actually been around? Thirteen years.”

Lorelei laughed. “Right. I’ve been around for nineteen years.”

“It would seem like it to you. Indeed, in a sense you have been—this world, like mine, is four-and-a-half billion years old. But this world was also created in an experiment in a laboratory in Palo Alto, California just over a decade ago.”

Lorelei laughed again at the insane turn the conversation had taken. “I’m not six, Ozymandias. I no longer believe in tall tales.”

“The man who created it was named Aleksandr Bobrov. He was the son of defectors, made his home in America, and became a renowned physicist. And one day, he sat down with a millionth of a gram of matter and decided to try to create a universe. Didn’t tell anyone but a few grad assistants, which was unbelievably stupid, but that was Bobrov—smart enough to build a world, not smart enough to remember to wear pants. Fascinating man.

“And you know what? He succeeded, sort of. He was supposed to create a universe like our own, one that would rapidly expand and then disappear into another dimension. Instead, he simply created one world, and a weird one as well. Your world, Lorelei

“It didn’t square well with anyone’s theory of what was supposed to happen, and so it was hidden, except from a few people. At least, that was the case at first.”

Lorelei stared at him, her smile having faded away. Could it possibly be that her world was just a creation of Earth’s? No, that was impossible. She was more than thirteen years old. She remembered her childhood.

“You know, if that had been that, I imagine that things would’ve been left alone—it would have gone down as an experiment that failed in an amazingly interesting way. But that was not all. Once they figured out how to travel here—”

“Gating?”

“Sort of. As they followed this world, they soon realized something shocking; it was not just another world, but a surrogate world. It existed in a curve in space-time, and its footprint was expanding.”

“Does that even mean anything?” Lorelei asked.

“I’m not a physicist, Lorelei; my parents were history and theology professors, and I studied political science. But the people who studied this were physicists—some of the best on Earth. They did the calculations, and realized that if this world wasn’t destroyed, that it would someday expand enough that it would quite suddenly wink into place in our universe, supplanting Earth and destroying in an instant our home.”

Lorelei suddenly rose. “You’re going to destroy this world to save Earth?”

“Well, that wasn’t the original plan. We looked into saving both. But they became convinced that it was too risky—and if one of our worlds had to go, well...”

Lorelei turned away. This couldn’t be right. It couldn’t.

“First, some of us agreed that we should get out of this world what we could before it was eliminated. Natural resources, of course—but also artifacts of your world. And so we have, and then some—and we have gained significantly.”

“Who has gained?”

“Our patrons. Oh, we have many names, Lorelei. On Earth, we’re referred to as ‘business interests,’ ‘lobbyists,’ ‘NGOs,’ ‘Big Oil.’ In the eleven years since we first realized the implications of your universe’s existence, we have found that by leveraging control of this world we have had influence on our own. The worlds, we have discovered—and you have as well—are connected intimately.

“And that is why I didn’t kill you as soon as we captured you. Oh, I had to test your resolve—you’re awfully strong, Lorelei, there are plenty of tough, burly men who have cracked long before you.

“But I have come to believe that this world is governed by the prophecies of the Tome. I believe that you are the one who must choose which world is to exist in the future. And something else.

“I want the world that survives to be this one.”

“Right,” said Lorelei, sensing a trap. “You would sacrifice your world for mine? I doubt it.”

“Of course you would,” he said. “I destroyed your village; I authorized Steve to engage in enhanced interrogation with you, I’m using enhanced interrogation techniques on your friends right now. I’m not a nice guy, and certainly not somebody you’d trust. But I have come to love this world, and what’s more,

I have come to believe that of all my allies, I am the only one who realizes this place's true potential.

"I was never a fan of Earth, Lorelei. Oh, parts of Maine are nice, but really, I loved the fantasy realms. I was a gamer back in college. I always dreamed of a place like this, with warriors and mages and faeries and magic. And it's real now, and I don't want it to die. That doesn't mean I intend to let it go on exactly as is. I intend to rule over all, Lorelei. But I don't wish to rule over Earth. I intend to rule over this world, the new world, The World."

Lorelei looked at Ozymandias, gobsmacked. "I still don't understand what you want me to do."

"Well, this is where things get complicated, Lorelei. You see, my associates do not share my vision. That's partly due to our patrons' influence, but mostly because they do not see the beauty of this place. If our association has its way, within four years they will pull the plug on our operations here. And the only way to prevent that is to defeat them, utterly."

"And to do that, I'm going to need your help. I've given up on negotiating with them. But I'm not strong enough to rebel on my own. With you on my side, though...we could win. And save this world."

Lorelei turned again. This sounded too good to be true. It probably was.

"If you wanted my help, why were you trying to drown me ten minutes ago?"

"I must admit, I thought you might give up the Tome under duress, and that I might be able to find another way. I don't trust you any more than you trust me. But I grow impatient. And truth be told, I think you may be a better ally than an enemy. Not that I can't kill you if I have to, mind you."

She didn't like the answer. He was hiding something about his motives.

She didn't like much about the situation.

But if Ozymandias was telling the truth about the worlds, what choice did she have but to play along? Could she refuse him, and consign Miia, Malcolm, and Zvonimir to death?

But if she helped him, wasn't she doing the same to Anna and Molly and Lori?

"I...I need time to figure this out."

"Of course you do," he said, reaching for his communicator. "This is Oz, bring the detainees to the SunCruz Suite on Level B. See that they have ibuprofen." He turned back to Lorelei. "You are not free to go, of course—not yet. But you will be well taken care of during your deliberations, Lorelei. As will your friends."

"The Myrmidon, too. He's a friend."

"Lorelei, he's...well, I guess he's 'real,' but he's just a genetic construct. He's of no concern to you."

"He's in, or I'm not."

Ozymandias sighed. “This is Oz again. F-one-three—bring him to the suite as well.”

“Sir?” the handset chirped.

“That’s an order. There, happy?”

“Delirious. One question: what if in the end, I say no?” she asked.

“Saying yes is in your best interest, I won’t lie to you, Lorelei. If you say no, I’ll have no choice but to kill you. But don’t let that affect your decision. I’d hate to think you decided this out of anything other than pure altruism.” He walked to the door, and depressed a switch. “John, Donovan—take her to B level, the big suite. Get her something good for dinner, and make sure her bed’s turned down. Good night, Lorelei. We’ll talk again tomorrow.” And with that, he was gone.

## *Twenty*

### *The Sprig of Mistletoe*

The blues opened the door, and guided Lorelei through; they were being at least somewhat more polite to her—they had actually allowed her to walk the distance from the conference room to here.

It was a well-apportioned apartment, one that would have looked right at home on Lori’s world. It had no business being on her world, of course, but she sort of understood why it was here.

She paced as she waited for her friends to arrive. She hated her options. But they were the only options she had.

She wished for the umpteenth time that she was back in Ravenwood, bickering with Annalie and taking orders, rather than giving them. If only....

But her thoughts were interrupted as the door swung open.

“Lorelei!” came a cry from the entryway. Lorelei quickly rushed to embrace Miia.

“Good to see you,” she said. “That’s a nice shiner.”

“They made us minutes after we got down there. We barely had a chance. I’m still not sure why they brought us up here—or what ‘here’ is.”

Lorelei looked around, and shrugged. “It’s a house, like houses in the world from my visions. Well, I suppose it’s not really a house—it doesn’t stand alone, but it’s a home. They call it an apartment.”

“It beats the dungeon, that’s for damn sure,” came a small voice from behind Miia.

“Malcolm! Man, it’s good to see you.”

“Wish I could say the same, lass. I was hoping you’d not try to save me—we had no chance against this lot.”

“Which begs the question, why have we been moved to this facility?”

Lorelei followed the voice to a dusky man, young and handsome, with a serious countenance leavened barely by light brown eyes which seemed to have a twinkle embedded in them. “Dr. Samara?”

“Yes, your Highness. Do you know what they have planned for us? I must confess, I felt more certain of my future when they were torturing us.”

“Ozymandias wants me to help him,” she said flatly.

“What?” Zvonimir exploded. “How?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say exactly—something about beating his allies. But he says this world is doomed, unless I help him to save it—but if I help him to save this world, the other world is doomed. It’s...complicated.”

“Did you say yes?” asked Miia softly, accusing eyes already boring through her.

“Not yet,” said Lorelei. “But I’ve asked for time to think about it. If I agree to help him, I think he’ll spare your lives.”

“Ha! And you trust him?”

“Not as far as I can throw him. But if what he’s saying is true, I may not have a choice.”

“The choice is yours, Lorelei. It is all yours. You are the one who will bring balance to the worlds,” said Hakim. “You must—”

“—embrace my destiny. Yup. I’m all about embracing my destiny. If someone would like to fill me in on what my destiny is, I’d be more than happy to embrace the sucker. But all anyone tells me is how I have to ‘balance the worlds.’ And thank you, Dr. Samara, for getting rid of the last section of the Tome, the part that’s supposed to be about me, because dang it, that wouldn’t be helpful or anything, would it?” She turned and wheeled, looking for something to throw or strike or otherwise destroy, but seeing nothing convenient, she simply hopped, screaming in impotent rage.

There was a long silence, broken by Miia. “Lor, I know you don’t want this. But everyone thinks that—”

“They were coming for me, Miia,” Lorelei said, not turning to face her. “When they came, wiped out Ravenwood, killed everyone we loved? They were trying to kill me.”

“Fools,” Hakim said. “They can’t stop the prophecy.”

“I wish they had,” said Lorelei. “I’d rather they caught me on the road, unaware, and took me there, and Ravenwood lived on. But I’m the reason,” she said, to nobody in particular. “I’m the reason Herja’s dead, and Satu, and Annalie...it’s my fault.”

It was sinking in now with a horrible twist in her gut. It wasn’t right. She shouldn’t be alive, not with all of them dead because of her.

She slowly began to walk away, only to feel herself wheeled around by her left shoulder. Miia was staring her down. “Don’t you dare walk away, Lorelei. Don’t you dare! May I end up in Helheim, I’m tired of you wearing this so heavily.

“So they were trying to kill you when they came for us? Good. Because no matter what they did to our friends, they failed. You got that? They failed. They tried to kill us all, but they didn’t get the one who mattered most. And that’s you, you idiot!”

“I don’t matter any more—”

“You matter more than anyone. Lorelei, look around you! Ozymandias was trying to kill you, now he’s trying to recruit you. Why?”

Miia didn’t wait for an answer. “I’ll tell you why, because he knows the truth—that you have a power, a gift, that nobody else on this world has. He wants to use you. Because he’s figured out it’s easier than opposing you.”

“Use me for what? Damn it, for what?”

“To—”

“Don’t tell me it’s to balance the worlds! Until someone can tell me what that means, I don’t want to hear it. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do, much less how I’m supposed to do it! Power? Importance? Feh!”

“‘There came a Valkyrie with second sight/The Fox would take the worlds and put them right./Though doubt possessed her, soon she saw the light/And knew exactly who she had to fight.’ Balancing, Chapter One, Verses one and two.”

“Who should I fight, Dr. Samara?”

“Destruction, Highness.”

“Thanks for clearing that up.”

“The prophecy is unclear,” he said. “It says that you must learn to trust your instincts, and listen to the voice within. It will steer you right, and take you down the proper path.”

“Well, I’m doing a bang-up job so far. All of us are imprisoned, I’ve got a choice between serving a man who destroyed the sisterhood and not helping him and possibly hastening Ragnarök, not to mention

getting us all killed. Yeah, my instincts are rock-solid.

"I need to sleep," she said, quietly, to nobody in particular.

"Aye, we all do," said Malcolm. "Are we bunking on the floor?"

"Looks to be four rooms," Lorelei said. "Probably a bed in each one. Here, Miia, you go in here," she said, idly flipping a switch.

"How did you do that?" Miia said, shocked.

"What?" Lorelei said.

"You – you just made it bright in here. I...I know they've got some crazy stuff, but don't you have to light a torch or something?"

Lorelei laughed. "No, you just turn this switch up or down. Up for bright, down for dark. It's part of the other world. It does have its advantages, I suppose. Anyhow, you guys get yourselves settled. I'm going in that room over there. I'll see you in the morning."

‡ ‡ ‡

It was less a vision than a psychic breakdown.

"Yhoo ndeded to stopppp...."

The words were disconnected, confused. She tried to understand them, but they seemed to slide from her grasp as they were said.

"...smemeeem werzzz then yhoo whirrrrrr...."

"...lhorrrrrrrreeeee...plez...."

The world was off kilter, seeming to pulse and thrum with each movement of her head. They were right, she didn't feel right, she'd felt better before the drugs but without the drugs she was insane but she wasn't insane, not really, she was really sane, and the doctor was wrong, but how could that be? A different world was impossible it had to be they were just delusions (but they seemed so real!) and yet she missed Lorelei, she did, she felt bad about the way they parted, I was just getting revenge for you Lori and I know he wasn't Allen but it was all I could see, what he did to you, what he did to us, and I couldn't let him live. And don't worry about it, because I'm glad you did it, even if he wasn't Allen he was his twin, he was a bastard, he deserved it (no he didn't) well maybe not, but he didn't not deserve it. (You're right.)

"...hhhhere...let mee help yhoo...."



You're real. I'm real. We're real. She was wrong, she meant well but she was wrong, and I was wrong, and I'm scared, Lori, I'm scared and I'm trapped and I don't know what to do, and I don't know what you should do either Lorelei, what are either of us supposed to do? He said one of our worlds has to be destroyed, yours or mine, but how do I choose? I don't know, I don't know, Lorelei you can't go away, and you either, Lori, we are a part of each other and we are one and we are not ourself without half of us.

We have to find a way to balance the worlds. Balance. But how? Don't know. Doesn't matter, we'll know when it's time. We will? Yes, we will, we have to have faith.

We'll have to play along. Yes, yes, only choice, we agree. Miia won't like it. Can't tell her everything. Maybe we should talk to Molly. Maybe it will get through. Good idea.

I'm getting off the medicine, Lorelei. Even if you're a figment of my imagination, you're a part of me, and I'm sorry I tried to get rid of you and don't worry about it, Lori, I know why you did and besides, I didn't go anywhere, sister mine. We're a team.

I'll see you soon.

"Are you okay?"

Lori suddenly snapped back into reality, and looked at Anna and Molly, who were holding her up, one on each arm.

"Yeah," she said, wearily. "I think maybe I am."

‡ ‡ ‡

Lorelei awoke into darkness, and got up out of the bed. It was a bit of a struggle—it was, she had to admit, the most comfortable bed she'd ever slept in. The other world had quite a bit to recommend it.

She walked out into the main room, with an eye out for the bathroom. She had awoken along with Lori enough times that she felt certain she could figure everything out okay. She flipped the light switch automatically, and realized what she'd done only after she'd done so.

She wondered idly if Lori might find herself with some skill as a swordsman. She hoped so—though in her world, it was a fairly useless skill.

Lucky her.

Then again, the ability to turn on light switches and utilize indoor plumbing wasn't usually helpful to Lorelei, either.

“Salaam,” came a voice from the couch. She jumped, then calmed herself.

“Professor Samara! Sorry, you startled me.”

“I couldn’t sleep. Strange—over the last month I got used to sleeping on the hard floor. A soft bed is too big a jump, too soon.”

Lorelei’s face must have betrayed her feelings, because Hakim said, “I don’t blame you for your anger and frustration, Highness. The prophecy is confusing enough for those of us who don’t have to live it.”

“What did you do with it?”

Hakim laughed. “The walls, Lorelei. They have ears. Have you decided to cast your lot with them?”

“I don’t know,” she said, flopping down on a love seat adjacent to him. “I just had a really strange vision—even by vision standards.”

“Those visions are referenced in Chapter Three—” She saw the other world, the world of laws/Gained knowledge from her twin, and used it well.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. But I can tell you that I think it’s barely possible that I know what my goal has to be—if still not how to achieve it.”

“Worldly honor is derived from riches, Highness. The honor of the hereafter is derived from the performance of good deeds, insh’Allah. You must dedicate yourself not to what you think you want, but what is the greatest good and the greatest glory to God (peace be upon him).”

“What is that, Doctor?”

“Only you may know that, Lorelei. So says the Tome of the Gates, and I have found it to be accurate more often than not. I will only say this: you know your heart. Seek to know what lies inside the heart of Ozymandias.

“I will tell you: what you will find there, I believe, is as black as pitch. They are not good men who live here. Bear that in mind as you make your decision.”

She nodded. “I will, Doctor.” She started to rise, and then paused. “Dr. Samara, something I’m curious about.”

“Yes, Highness?” he said, as he started to turn back to writing.

“Isn’t it forbidden by your religion to...well, talk to me, be in the same room as me, and so forth?”

“Yes, it is, astaghfiruallah. But I have come to believe that God (peace be upon him) wills us to fight this fight, Highness, and that I am doing His will by talking with you and assisting you. I beg His forgiveness constantly for the transgressions I have committed in His name. I pray that I have interpreted my religion

correctly, tawak kalto ul-Allah.”

Lorelei walked a lonely path in thought to the restroom, and back to the bed. She thought she knew what she had to do.

‡ ‡ ‡

The smell of food woke Lorelei. Bacon and eggs, she thought, and some sort of bread.

She stumbled out into the main room, and saw her friends already arrayed around a table, eating to their hearts’ content. “I’ll give the bastard this—the food here is good. You should try one of these—what are they again?”

“Waffles, Ms. Aalto.”

“Waffles. They’re pretty good. Of course, it requires a whole bunch of stuff that looks a lot like sorcery to make ’em, but I swear, assuming we survive this ordeal, I’m going to invent these for our world.”

“Who’s the guy?” Lorelei asked, yawning.

“Marc Laurent, Ms. Voss. I have been assigned as your butler by Lord Ozymandias. This one,” he said, gesturing to a maid in the kitchen, “is Rebecca Montague, my assistant. Is there anything I can prepare you while you wash up?”

“I’ll trust Miia. Wash up?”

“A shower—or so Marc here tells me. Very relaxing. It’s like it rains on you, but warm. I haven’t been this clean in—well, ever, I think.”

“It is a shower,” said Lorelei, stretching. “Lori takes ’em now and again. I’ll get one after breakfast, thanks.”

“I tell you, these people know how to live. If they weren’t evil, I’d say we should stay.”

“Bacon, Madam?” said the butler to Lorelei.

“Yes, thank you. Dr. Samara, would you care for any?”

“It’s forbidden, Lorelei. Pork.”

“Ah. Forgot, sorry.”

She settled in to the table, and for a brief while forgot all about the decision she would soon have to make. It was nice just to be served a decent meal. (Better than decent—Miia wasn’t lying about the waffles. With strawberries and cream—they might be the perfect food, Lorelei thought after her second.) The group chatted amiably, largely about the fact that they shouldn’t be enjoying imprisonment this much, and by the time Lorelei stepped into the shower, she

felt good and relaxed, and a bit jealous. This was the way Lori usually lived. The lucky devil.

The water started, though, and she jumped just a little as it hit her head, and she remembered that her captors, whatever their merits, were not her friends.

“Ms. Voss?” came a voice from the door. “I have clothing for you.”

“Thanks, Miss Montague.”

“Rebecca, please.”

“Then you’d better call me Lorelei,” she said, rinsing herself off.

“I couldn’t, m’lady.”

“Then I’ll have to keep calling you Miss Montague. Too bad.”

She heard a chuckle as the maid exited the room. A few minutes later, she exited the shower, and grabbed the cloth that Lori always used to dry herself off.

The clothes were odd, but no odder than the rest of her surroundings. They were comfortable, fitting her well all things considered, and affording her freedom of movement. She even liked the color—a deep hunter’s green.

As she exited the bathroom, she wished she could just enjoy the time. But the sight of the blues in the room told her that her rest was over.

“Mistress Lorelei?” said Donovan, “Lord Ozymandias would like a word.”

‡ ‡ ‡

“I trust,” he said, sitting at the head of the table, his back to her as he stared down at the gate, “that the accommodations were to your liking?”

“On your world, they would have been nice. On this one, they were far too much, Ozymandias. I thought you wanted my decision based on altruism, not on bribery.”

The man swung around, and she saw that he was wearing the white coat that he’d worn at Zvonimir’s house, a few weeks and a decade before. “I’m not above showing you that you’ll be well taken care of. Marc is a good cook, no? You should see what he does with dinner. He and Rebecca are your servants—yours and your friends’, I should say. As long as you’re here.”

“Actually, Lord Ozymandias, I want to talk to you about that,” she said, the course of action slowly revealing itself to her. “I want my friends freed. Now. Before I make my decision.”

“Lorelei, please,” he laughed. “I can’t free your friends even if you become my second-in-command. Surely you understand that?”

Of course she did, but she just sighed. “I knew I couldn’t trust you. I shouldn’t even talk to you, not after what you did to Ravenwood,” she said, turning.

“Wait, Lorelei, please,” he said. She didn’t show her smile.

“I truly, truly regret that. I hope you realize that. I mean, you were the target, and we didn’t get you. I lost eight hundred Myrmidons and nine human officers. The officers were irreplaceable; the Myrmidons...well, they don’t just grow overnight. We’re still not back up to capacity, and that’s with the tanks overloaded. I mean, look at your friend—he’s not even supposed to have free will, much less be able to exercise it. He never should have made it through QC. But such is the problem that’s been created.

“And that’s just the cost to me, Lorelei, not the cost to you. Believe me, if I had it to do over again, we’d have come with gold and recruited the Valkyries into our service. You could have been powerful allies. Hopefully, you still can be.”

“How can you even say that?”

“On my world, sixty years ago, there was a great war, one that makes the Fowler/George scrimmage look like kids playing with popguns. Millions of people died. But you know what? A generation later, the nations that fought became friends. Allies. Comrades. We didn’t go after you because we hated you, Lorelei. We went after you out of fear, fear of your power. It was my partners’ idea anyhow, not mine.”

Lorelei approached, and grabbed a seat to Ozymandias’ right. “You said I could help set up this world as the one that survives, not the other one. How?”

“There are a variety of things that will need to be done. Energy will have to be pumped out of this world, as well as gating materials—they destabilize the world. There’s more, of course, some I don’t know—but the Tome will help us figure out parts of the rest. We will need to begin working on the other world to create effects in this one—rather than the opposite, which is what’s happening now.”

Lorelei nodded, even as she had the sense that something important was being left out. She didn’t blame Ozymandias, however. She didn’t trust him, not at all. But she sensed he wasn’t telling her everything because he didn’t know it.

“That’s great in theory,” she said, “but what do I need to do?”

“Well, first, I need you to open a gateway to the other world.”

“You already have one.”

“Yes, and it goes right into the den of my confederates. Hard to slip things through there, I think. I need a back channel.”

Lorelei laughed. “Do you have a friend waiting on the other side, ready to

create an exit in your world? Because if not, I won't be able to create one."

"I didn't ask you to create one," he said. "I asked you to open one. There is a second gateway here in the facility. We will need it open—after all, if we try to move things through the main gate, they'll know what we're doing instantly."

Lorelei leaned back in her chair, found it leaning back with her, and quickly leaned forward. "Why don't you want your allies to know about this, Ozymandias?"

"Because if they knew what I was trying to do, they'd kill me. They want the other world. My supreme commander intends to take that world when the time is right, destroying this one in the process."

"Eventually, I will have to fight them all. I want to be in position before they know what's happening."

Interesting, that. Lorelei had assumed that Ozymandias himself was the supreme commander.

He was just a platoon leader.

"Is that why you wanted the Tome? So that you could match your commanders?"

"Yes, damn it. They've got a copy at their headquarters. Not me. I've learned a bit, here and there—but it would be nice to have a copy. They don't really trust me."

"Well, obviously, they shouldn't."

Ozymandias laughed. "True," he said.

She thought about what she had to do. She knew, really; she just didn't want to admit it. It wouldn't be easy.

But it was the only way.

"All right," she said. "I'll help you. On one condition."

"What's that?"

"I want my wolf, and my sword. They're all at the Three Legged Goat Inn, room five. Ask for Manny, he's been watching them."

"I won't rearm you—not yet, anyhow."

"You will eventually. Also, if you go to Room Five, and look under the first bed on the left, you'll find the Tome of the Gates. Bring it here as well."

Ozymandias smiled. "You're going give us the Tome?"

"It's missing a section—but yes, I'm going to need it if I'm going to put the balance of the worlds to

right.”

Ozymandias considered. “This wouldn’t be a trap, would it?”

“No trap, and no games. I’m on your side, Ozymandias—provisionally. I want to know what you know, and see what you think you see. If you don’t help me, I can’t help you.”

“I know that,” said Ozymandias, smiling. “You won’t regret this, Lorelei. I’m not evil—I just want to rule the world. And you and your friends will have a place in my order, I promise you that. Shall we toast our alliance?”

“Just don’t make me regret my decision,” said Lorelei, bitterly.

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“You what?”

“I agreed to help him,” said Lorelei, facing down Miia, Malcolm, Hakim, Zvonimir, and the ghosts of her sisters. “I had no choice.”

“It was your decision to make. I only hope it was the right one. I have my doubts.”

“Dr. Samara—”

Hakim folded his arms. “You don’t know how they’ve run this city. They are bad people—horrible, in fact. They rule by fear, not by God (peace be upon him).”

“Nevertheless, we don’t have a choice.”

“Lorelei, those bastards killed Satu, and Annalie, and—”

“I know who they killed,” she said sternly. “If you think I like this, you’re cracked. But Miia, if you think I’m going to sit back and let this whole world perish, you’re doubly cracked. I’ll do what I have to do, even though I don’t like it.”

“Don’t like it?” interjected Zvonimir. “Lorelei, you’ll keep us alive—as slaves to Ozymandias. What’s to like?”

“The ‘keep us alive’ part,” said Lorelei to her mentor. “Do you have any better ideas?”

“She speaks wisely,” said Don, who was sitting at the table placidly. “Between my brothers and Lord Ozymandias, I don’t think you would survive ten minutes after they wished you dead.”

“Not now, Don,” Miia and Lorelei shot back.

“Lorelei, call someone your lord, and he’ll sell you in the slave market,” said Hakim. “Ozymandias is not trustworthy.”

“I never said he was,” said Lorelei, huffing. “But as far as I can tell, this is the only chance we’ve got.

Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"Hold it. Mistress Lorelei, I need to speak with you."

"Go ahead, Miia."

"In private."

Lorelei rolled her eyes. "You can say whatever you want to. It's not like these are our enemies."

"No, Lor," said Miia, quietly. "I can't. In private, please, Mistress."

Lorelei caught her meaning the second time. "All right," she said. "In my room."

They entered the room and Lorelei closed the door quietly behind her. They were silent a moment, before Lorelei said, "All right, Miss Aalto. What do you want?"

"Permission to speak freely, Mistress."

Lorelei groaned. "Miia, when have I ever—"

"Please, Lor. Permission to speak freely."

"Granted."

"Mistress...I am doubting your judgment on this matter."

Lorelei paused before answering. She wanted to lay into Miia for that, ask her how she'd like to have all of their fates on her back, but she didn't. Instead, she simply said, "Oh?"

"It's not just this. The incident with O'Shea—that was anger and bitterness overriding your senses. I told you I understood, and I do, but it doesn't excuse it. Now, you seem to be doing the opposite—shutting down your emotion and deciding this like you're deciding whether to order ale or mead. You're erratic, Lorelei, and I don't blame you, but I urge you to reconsider. This is too important."

"I was wrong about O'Shea," said Lorelei, evenly. "And you're right to say that was me letting my emotion get the better of me. I can understand," she said, with evident pain, "why you think I've been erratic. But Miia, what would you have me do about this? We're outmanned, we've got no exit plan, we're not going to do anything by fighting them but die—and hasten the end of our world."

"So what should I do? Tell me, Miia—tell me my options. Tell me how I can be less 'erratic' and more 'stable.' I'm all ears. Tell me!"

"I know, it's tough, but—"



“No buts! What’s your plan?”

Miia sighed. “I don’t know, Lorelei. Maybe we should die fighting.”

Lorelei looked at Miia, and smiled sadly. “It would feel better, wouldn’t it? It would feel just. I’d rather do it than what I’m about to do.

“But we will always have the chance to die. There’s no need to rush into it. My sister, do you remember the story of the death of Balder?”

Miia looked at Lorelei, nonplussed.

“Balder was invulnerable, because Frigg had gone to all the objects in the world and asked them to promise that they would not hurt him. Well, all the objects save one.”

“Mistletoe.”

“Exactly—I see you were paying attention in Alexandra’s class. Yes, mistletoe. And the Trickster found this out by disguising himself as an old hag, and he asked Frigg why Balder was invulnerable, and she told him how she’d asked all the objects to promise not to hurt him, except for lowly mistletoe, which was too young and tiny to promise anything.”

“And so Loki went and made a spear of mistletoe, and gave it to Hod, and convinced him to throw it at Balder, and it killed him. Yes, yes, Lorelei, I remember.”

“Consider the story, Miia.”

“Are you saying there is only one way for you to succeed, and that’s to join with Ozymandias?”

“I am saying,” said Lorelei, in the tone of an exasperated schoolmistress, “that you should meditate on that story before you decide that I have failed in my duties. When you have considered carefully what I am telling you, then you may challenge me. Until then, I have made my decision.”

“I wonder,” said Miia, “if I was right to have given you Herja’s necklace.”

“We shall see, Miss Aalto,” she said, returning her gaze to the door. “Dismissed.” She strode through and headed directly to the exit to the suite, pausing only a second to wipe the tear from her eyes.

She strode through the corridor at high speed. She had a lot of work to do, and not much time to do it. She hoped that in the end, they’d understand.

*Twenty-One*

*The Unholy Army*

To say the next few days were uncomfortable would be an understatement.

It wasn't that her friends had abandoned her—they hadn't. Indeed, when she had returned that first night to the suite, she entered to the sound of Miia passionately defending her.

"I don't like it, Zvonimir—but she doesn't, either! Look, just because we don't agree with Lorelei doesn't mean we just give up on her. You think she'd bail on us? You can do what you want, but I'm sworn to her side, and right or wrong, I'll go down swinging...anyhow, I think we should get sleep—hi, Lorelei—and talk in the morning."

No, her friends were not pleased with her—but they were her friends. And they wouldn't give up on her.

But they did continue to lobby her, quietly and insistently, to consider other paths.

"You know," Zvonimir said one day, "we could still escape. It wouldn't be easy, but if you could convince them to give you some liptomuno...."

"And one of us could get free, then I could build a gate, yes, I know. And we could escape, if we can overcome the effects of the massive transplanetary gate at the center of the building. And if we did, then what? Look, Professor, I know—I know—this isn't easy, but if Ozymandias is telling the truth...."

"You trust him?"

"Of course not," she said. "But consider the Thief's Tale."

"Hmpf. Never liked that one. Still, I understand—you think, like the Thief, that you have abilities that you must challenge. Well, I understand—but I don't have to like it."

"I don't know if you do, Professor. And I'm certainly not asking you to like it."

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Most days, she studied in a quiet library that she'd been given access to. She looked at the Tome again, of course, but also the plans for Task Force Charlie—as this arm of the Cadre was called.

They had two other units on this world—Task Forces Alfa and Bravo, both located across the Great Western Sea, each tasked with the same basic mission:

- To gather natural resources from this world and to bring them back to Earth,
- To secure cultural and other artifacts that may be of interest,
- To insinuate themselves into the governing authority of their regions,
- To destabilize the New World and degrade its position relative to Earth, and

- To take action against people and organizations within the New World as directed by Command.

Each Task Force was headed by someone like Ozymandias, each one working to slowly eat her world up until it simply winked out.

The documentation was long on organizational charts and short on detail. Most of the direction appeared to come from a unitary command on Earth, but who that was and what they were basing their decisions on was not covered. Still, it gave her some idea of what she was up against.

She rubbed her eyes. "Well, well. Looks like Ozymandias is trying to bore you to death now. I imagine you prefer being dunked under, don't you?"

She groaned. "Steve, what do you want?"

"Oho! You seem to be under the impression that you are not still our prisoner. Talking to me like you're my equal? You'll address me as 'Captain Warne,' and you'll bloody well like it."

"All right," said Lorelei. "Captain Warne, what do you want?"

"To go back to interrogating you. But Ozymandias wants me to show you around the place instead. So that's what I'll do."

"Show me...around?"

"Specifically, he wanted me to show you where we make the Myrmidons. Follow me. No tricks."

Lorelei did not reply that she had enough tactical sense not to try anything while unarmed in a compound where she was outnumbered something like 2500 to six, nor did she add that had she been armed, she would have happily taken all 2500 on alone for a chance to separate Steve Warne's head from his body. Instead, she sighed, rose, and said, "All right."

They walked in silence to the elevator, and rode in further silence until they reached their destination. "Out," commanded Steve perfunctorily, and he led Lorelei to a darkened door.

"Have you read about how we make Myrmidons, Lorelei? Or is that a trade secret Ozymandias hasn't spilled yet?"

"I'm still not sure what you mean...'make' Myrmidons," said Lorelei, honestly.

"It's the ultimate fusion of the technology of my world and yours. A bit of recombinant DNA, a bit of magic, a bit of persistence, and a bloody powerful computer, and you get an obedient, loyal, and expendable soldier. Come on in," he said, keying a code on the wall.

The door slid apart, leading to a brief hallway blocked by another door.

“Airlock,” said Steve, as if the word should mean something to Lorelei. “Don’t really need it, but we didn’t know that at the time. Anyhow,” he said, punching another code into a keypad. The door behind them slid shut, and there was a hiss of air.

And the door at the end of the hall slid open.

Lorelei walked out into the room, a room unlike any she had ever seen. It was bathed in a sterile white light, almost dazzling, really. There were large cylinders, several hogshead in capacity, made of glass. Lights flashed on the outside, but she ignored them. Her eyes were focused on the first one she encountered.

Inside the tank, floating weightlessly, was a Myrmidon. He was clearly just a boy in development—not nearly as tall as she. Tubes were connected to his nose and mouth, and wires sprouted from dozens of ports on his head.

“We train them in vitro, using a standard template. The only thing that differs is the callsign that we encode as their identity. Otherwise, they are uniform. These here will be ready in another week or so; the ones further on have a bit more to go.”

Lorelei stepped back, and saw that the room went on a good deal farther than she expected, filled with tanks that held Myrmidons who grew progressively younger, until mere babes were floating suspended, dead to all appearances, save for the glow of the wires piercing their skulls.

She closed her eyes. “This is...it’s awful.”

“Really?” said Steve. “I think it’s lovely. Fewer humans have to die. We have this lot to die for us—and to do our killing for us. I lost a brother in Iraq. You know where that is? No, of course you don’t—and you probably wouldn’t care.

“Try this: imagine if you could have had your sisters simply manage this lot while you stayed safely behind. All your friends would still be alive, wouldn’t they?”

“A warrior fights her own battles,” said Lorelei. “She doesn’t pick someone to die in her place. She certainly doesn’t force someone to fight for her against their will.”

“Oh, they’ll agree to fight—they can’t do anything but. We don’t let them.”

Lorelei was about to argue further, when Steve’s communicator beeped. “Crikey. Gotta go for a second. Wait right here. Don’t touch anything.” And with that, he headed into the airlock at the exit of the room.

She walked just a little bit further, looking at the children—for they were children, even if they were destined to grow up to be Don’s twins—who were being created as slaves. This was the blackest of magic. She fought back the urge to smash the nearest tank. It would do no good; she regained her composure. She needed patience.

That, and strong mead.

Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck stood up. If she had been wearing a sword, she would have drawn it, but instead she let herself drop into a defensive crouch as she scanned the facility.

In a moment she saw him—a Myrmidon, wearing only a pair of breeches, bearing a sword in his right hand. “Stand down,” she said. “Commander Warne brought me here.”

“We know,” he said, advancing on her, raising his sword and swinging.

She leapt backward, avoiding the blow by inches. She spun, only to see another Myrmidon approaching from behind. Cursing, she looked to her left and squeezed herself between a grouping of four cylinders. Leaping, she grabbed the top of the chamber and pulled herself up to the high ground.

There were four of them altogether, surrounding her. “I’m not a threat,” she said. “I was brought here by Commander Warne. He was told to bring me here by Ozymandias.”

“You are mistaken,” said the Myrmidon who had initially struck at her, “if you think we will hesitate to damage the incubation chambers in order to kill you. We are all made to die for our leader. If these Myrmidons must be destroyed to destroy you, so be it.”

Obviously, she wasn’t going to be able to talk her way out of this one.

She looked at the Myrmidons, trying to get her bearings. There were two in each aisle, one on each side of her position. That led her to smile, just a bit.

Lurching suddenly rightward she grabbed hold of a tube that fed into the incubation chambers, and aimed herself for the space behind the Myrmidon on her right. He tried to swing at her with his sword but his reaction was late; no sooner had her right foot touched ground than she was spinning and kicking at his back, knocking him flat. She leapt onto his right arm hard, forcing his hand to let go of his sword—which she flipped up into the air with her right foot, bringing it into a parrying position just as the other Myrmidon in her aisle came swinging into his attack.

She disarmed him quickly, and decapitated him shortly thereafter. Grabbing the second sword from the ground where it lay, she took a moment to ensure that both of their owners were dead, and then called out, “Well, what are you waiting for?”

They rushed her from both sides, just as she was expecting. But they were tactically weak; she had them both disposed of before a minute was up.

Breathing heavily, she heard the whoosh of the airlock opening.

“So, are we done here?” said Steve, cheerfully. She watched him scan the room, and his eyes widen when he saw her. “Where the hell—what the hell are you doing with those swords?”

Lorelei moved into a defensive position. “Your Myrmidons tried to kill me,” she said, matter-of-factly. “They didn’t.”

“Bloody! Well, that’s...good. You can put the swords down now.”

“Really? Because I’m not going to.”

“Oh, come on, Voss. Don’t even think I’m going to let you run around armed. I mean—”

“I know, it will make it difficult for you to kill me, Commander. But that’s why I’m remaining armed until I’m out of your sight.”

He stared at her, angrily. “I told Ozymandias you’d be trouble. He wouldn’t listen. All right, suit yourself. I’ll escort you out. And I’ll escort you to the library where it’s a nice public place, and I’ll take the swords then, and if you try anything I’ll have you back on the board under the water no matter what it is Oz tells me to do, and that’s a promise.”

“Good. And if I think for a second anything you just said appears to be a lie—that you are trying to harm me in any way—then I slice you open from crotch to chin. Agreed?”

Steve looked at her in mute fury, before spitting out, “Come on.”

He didn’t talk to her in private ever again after that day.

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“I was born as they were,” said Don, sadly, when she told him about it. “They give us all the same memories, the same training. But for them to attack you...I do not like it. It is not right.”

“They have to follow orders, don’t they?” Lorelei asked. She had told Don of the attack, hoping he could shed light on what had happened to her.

“They would only have attacked if ordered, yes. But even so...we do have free will. We can think for ourselves. Just because we are trained alike does not mean we are locked into our training.”

Lorelei nodded at that. “You know, they think you’re an error of some sort.”

Don nodded. “I am, but not for the reasons they think. You showed me kindness by setting me free. The enemy, we were told, is not kind. I realized that my training was wrong that day, and I simply decided to learn from that. The same would have happened to any of us in that situation; it gives me hope.”

“Hope for what?”

“I want my brothers to be free, someday. To be able to give themselves orders.”

Lorelei smiled at that. “I hope so too, Don. It seems only fair.”

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She stayed busy. It was a blessing, she supposed. There were things to learn, gates to open—especially Ozymandias’ secret gate.

Lorelei opened the new gate on the third try—it had collapsed quickly of its own accord (as one would expect), but it was enough for Ozymandias to determine its endpoint—a place called “Nebraska,” he’d said. They’d have to secure the other side, which he was already in the process of doing, and then they’d work to force it open in the same fashion as the main gate.

As for the main gate, she’d already worked on it to make it more efficient—she could tell from looking and rereading a bit that it was out of balance. She resigned the runes, restated the incantations. The liptumuno crystal at its heart now fired a beam as white as the crystal itself, and the gate had expanded by a fa. Moreover, she now knew how it worked, understood the process inside and out. They had answered every question she’d asked, from how long the gate stayed open without the crystal firing (57.2 seconds), how they activated the crystal (something called “lasers,”) and how they replaced the crystal (shut it down, put the new one in, and turn it back on—and quickly.)

Soon, she was wearing her own sword too—but at a cost she didn’t want to pay.

It had begun with a quiet discussion with Malcolm about their imprisonment—it was late, only she and he were awake, which was unusual. She enjoyed it, really; of all of them, Malcolm was probably the most like her, the most level-headed in a crisis, the most cunning strategist. And of all of them, he spent the least time chastising her.

They had talked about the situation, the past, the future. It was a fairly typical conversation, really.

Then, Malcolm said something that surprised her.

“At some point,” he said, “someone’s going to have to make a move.”

“What do you mean?” Lorelei asked.

“Well, you’re tolerated, I suppose, but it’s not like they trust you, lass. Have they given you a sword? Easy access to everything? Have they given you any indication they will?”

“No,” said Lorelei. “But I can be patient.”

“Aye, I know, but ’twould be easier to be patient if you had a sword at your side. Until they trust you,

we're all in danger. After all, they can always decide their little experiment of trusting you isn't working out, can't they?"

"Well, sure, but what do you propose?" Lorelei said. "Our tactical situation isn't any better than it's been since we were captured. We're still outnumbered a million to six. And frankly, I'm working to earn their trust. I want them to really believe I'm on their side, because we're all trying to save this world, after all. No, I think we should stay with what we're doing."

"And I think that I should start looking for ways to gain an advantage for ourselves."

Lorelei looked at Malcolm, and said, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing much. I'm stealthy, lass, you know that. I could go snooping about sometime when you're on duty. Maybe in the operations center downstairs."

Lorelei was silent for some time. "Malcolm, that's a really bad idea. All that will happen is that you'll get caught."

"Well, that depends on if I'm seen, doesn't it, Mistress? If someone found me, well, my goose would be cooked and good. But if I could get in and get out without being seen, maybe I could get some information we could use."

"High risk, low reward, Malcolm," Lorelei sighed. "Besides, I'm in that operations center every day."

"And you've no time to snoop about, not freely. I could."

"Doubtful. And even if you succeed, it would be a betrayal of our hosts, wouldn't it? You talk about trust, but if they found you, and I didn't do anything about it, they'd never trust me for a second. You, Miia, me—all our geese would be cooked and good."

"Aye, maybe."

"You know they listen in, Malcolm; you know they're going to be on their guard for you."

"I have some tricks up my sleeve, Lorelei."

"I'm not going to sign off on this. It's a stupid, dangerous plan. You do this, you're on your own."

"All right," he said. "Then it's settled."

"No, Malcolm," she said. "I really mean it. If you try anything...I'd have to report you to Ozymandias. The fate of the world is at stake. That's the most important thing."

"So, you'd pick Ozymandias over me, then, would you?" said Malcolm, sounding angry. "Well, I see where your loyalties lay then. I'll have to do what I have to do."

"Malcolm...I don't think this is smart. Come on, there are other ways."

"No, lassie...sometimes, you have to make a decision between what's best for yourself and the group."



I've made up my mind."

"Have you talked to Miia?"

"Nay, she'd just try to talk me out of it."

"You're stubborn as your girlfriend," said Lorelei, quietly, scratching her cheek. "And she'd be right. Don't try anything."

The next afternoon, Malcolm tried something.

Lorelei caught him—he'd snuck out of the suite, made his way past the guards and down to the control room by the main gate. He was looking at some wires near where she was stationed when she saw him.

"Damn it, uruig! I told you not to try anything! Lord Ozymandias, come quickly!" she cried, seizing Malcolm in her left hand.

"Bloody traitor! Better dead than a servant of Ozymandias, says I!"

"That can be arranged," came the reply as Ozymandias approached. "So, attempting a little sabotage, are we?"

"Just looking to see how I can kill you bastards."

"Chiang. Smith. Take our diminutive friend to the detention level," said Ozymandias. "Make sure to find out what he thought he was doing."

"Try not to kill him," said Lorelei. "I'm having enough trouble keeping my friends in line."

"Sir?" one of the Blues queried.

"Oh, there's no need to kill him. He may wish for death, but we don't need to grant his request."

"Lorelei, you'll pay for this you know!" Malcolm shouted.

"I know," said Lorelei, softly. "I know."

"Impressive," said Ozymandias. "You know, I've been wondering when one of your friends would pull something—and which side you'd end up on. Glad to see it's mine."

He'd given her sword back to her that afternoon, along with an official commission of Second Lieutenant in the Cadre, Charlie Company.

It hung heavy as she tried to explain to her remaining friends why she had chosen to turn Malcolm in.

Okay, it hung heaviest when she tried to explain it to Miia.

“Listen—you don’t understand—”

“What’s to understand?” shouted Miia, eyes blazing. “You sold out Malcolm, you bitch! I should kill you right now!”

Lorelei knew better than to chastise her sister for insubordination; indeed, she tended to agree with Miia’s assessment of the situation. So she had simply said, “Listen, you don’t understand everything, and you can’t. And I wish you could.”

“Odin’s missing eye, Lorelei, don’t try that on me! I’m as smart as you are, I can figure things out plenty fine, thank you very much. You want me to understand? Tell me what genius plan of yours we’re working on that has Malcolm being tortured so you can get your stupid sword back? And a nifty little ensign on your shoulder? Are you kidding me? You should take that necklace off, Lorelei—clearly Zvonimir’s right, it’s just glowing because it glows. No leader of the Valkyries would do something that cowardly.”

“Miia, you don’t know how hard it was for me to do this. You don’t know how hard it was for me to turn Malcolm over to them. You think I wanted to?”

“Maybe you did,” Miia said. “Maybe you felt like with him out of the way....”

“What?”

“Maybe you were jealous,” Miia said.

“What? Now you’re just being crazy.”

“Crazy? I’ll show you crazy.” Miia rushed toward Lorelei with murderous intent, but Lorelei sidestepped and tripped her, grabbing her arm and bringing her into a stress position.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Miia.”

“You’re doing a poor job of it, Mistress.”

“I know,” said Lorelei. “Consider the story of Balder’s death.”

“Go eat lutefisk.”

Lorelei released her sister, carrying her gently to the floor. She calmly rose, and retreated to her room.

She locked the door, and ignored the pounding and shouting of Miia until she cried herself to sleep.

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It only got worse from there. Lorelei spent most of her time in the control room, sleeping only when she was sure Miia was already asleep. Zvonimir and

Samara would not talk to her either, though they didn't threaten bodily harm each time they saw her.

Malcolm hadn't broken, and he hadn't been killed—and Lorelei had managed to convince Ozymandias that Commander Warne's methods of interrogation would be counterproductive. Instead, Malcolm simply got a cold cell and minimal clothing and the occasional night where he wasn't allowed to sleep.

But it wore on her, all of it. If not for her occasional visits from Lori—and visits to Lori—she'd have broken down.

"You know why I'm doing this, don't you?" she'd asked one day, while readjusting the crystal.

"Of course I do," Lori had responded when next she visited. "We both agreed on it, didn't we?"

"Yeah. I just—I hate having everyone mad at me," responded Lorelei as she showered and got ready for bed.

"Not everyone's mad at you. You had to do it, Lorelei. It was the only way," doodled Lori as she half-listened to a lecture.

"This had better work, that's all I know," Lorelei responded over breakfast, trying to convince herself that it could.

## *Twenty-Two*

### *The Spear of Hod*

The morning meeting was dull as usual. Lorelei was getting used to them; senior staff gathering to talk about a need for more Myrmidons to fight on Fowler's behalf, or their success with their casinos, or the urgent need to secure numoplio in a leaden case before shipping it through—"I know, this seems like it would be obvious, but one officer in Bravo Company brought through just a vial of it, and now he's dying of radiation poisoning and half the watch in London got a dose that will likely cause them all to get cancer, all because someone forgot to do a pat-down before gating. And now the media's gotten wind of it and the cover story—well, it's weak. It'll work, but it's a serious problem. Come on, let's be smart, people," Director Brown said, morosely.

"Indeed," said Ozymandias. "Now, I understand that the crystal for the main gate is nearing the end of its operational life; Lieutenant Voss, I want you to head up the swap-out tomorrow. Dane, that's not a demotion—I want you monitoring everything. But Lorelei is simply the most talented gater here. You think you can handle that, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," Lorelei said, smiling. "Also, if I may have a moment of your time after the meeting—"

"Of course. Any other business? Steve."

Lorelei looked over at Steve, and had to fight anew the temptation to fillet him. “Thanks, Oz. Now, I’m the last one who should be complaining about this, given my own failure, but just a reminder that when we’re liquidating an opponent, make sure that everyone’s dead before you leave. Not that Ms. Voss is complaining, but I failed to liquidate her village properly, and we all know how that’s turned out.”

There was a chuckle at the table from most everyone save Lorelei.

“That’s going to be important, mates, given tomorrow’s scrum between Foster and George—we’d better make darn sure that George’s leaders are dead, dead, dead before we leave, or we’ll still be fighting weeks from now.”

“A good point, Commander. And do we have our teams assembled? Good. We’ll plan to depart tomorrow at 0600. Anything else? Very well, dismissed.”

Lorelei rose, and walked over to Ozymandias, pausing only to shoot Steve a dagger from her eye. “Lord Ozymandias, I’ve been thinking; I agree that we should seek to make this world the lone survivor if necessary, but is that necessary? Is there any way to save both worlds?”

“Good question, Lorelei. Dane, can you come over quick? Lorelei has a question that you’re best suited to answer.”

Dane waddled over, a fat, bespectacled bald man who Lorelei knew primarily because he stared at her creepily whenever they were in the same room.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Lorelei wants to know why the worlds can’t both survive. If you’ll excuse me,” he said, walking away.

“Ah. Well, theoretically they could, but it’d be really hard. It’s all about dark energy and its effect on the two worlds—too little energy and the world goes ‘poof.’ The flow was working against Earth—but now that we’ve started moving the radioactive minerals in that direction, it’s going to be okay. Plus, we’ve taken steps to curb creation of it here, too, so that’s gonna work well.”

Lorelei frowned. Something about his explanation tugged at her memory.

“So...how do you keep both worlds around?”

“Well, there’s a tipping point when this world gets too big a surplus of energy, and then Earth goes bye-bye—or vice versa. Now if you could get them into a steady state, keep the energies balanced, then they’d both survive in superposition, just like now. But that’d be really hard—if it got back out of balance, it’d rapidly and unpredictably tip, and we’d have no chance to pick which one survived. And indeed, worst-case is that it drops into some new energy state, and then both worlds are gone.”

Lorelei nodded. It fit with what Worlds to Come said. “So...why hasn’t this world disappeared already?”

“Too new,” said Dane, already starting to turn away. “The connection’s only thirteen years old. Models

show we've got at least another nine before simple inertia stops helping, and then another five to ten years before this world collapses. Or Earth. Depending.

"So it's not that it can't be done, it's that it's too risky. One world is a steady state. Two worlds is not. Make sense?"

"Yes, it does, thanks," she said, as she suddenly made the connection. "So, you okay with me handling the swap-out tomorrow?"

"Me? Yeah, sure. Just a quick question—can you lift forty pounds? 'Cause that's what the new crystal weighs."

"Absolutely," said Lorelei. "I try to stay in shape."

‡ ‡ ‡

She slept comfortably that night, with no dreams or visions to disturb her sleep.

Nothing would disturb her until she awoke.

It was a soft noise that woke her, just a shuffle. But she quickly woke up completely, as one tends to do when one has one's own sword at one's neck.

"Good morning," Miia said. "Have a nice sleep?"

Lorelei looked up the sword to Miia's right hand, and calmly replied, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. You?"

"Not really. You know, I was tossing and turning last night, trying to figure out why it is you'd sold out the sisterhood and the man I love and me, and I finally came to the conclusion that I should stop asking questions of myself and start asking them of you. Like this one: why shouldn't I kill you right now, like I would any traitor?"

Lorelei closed her eyes. "Miia, have you considered the story of Balder's death?"

"I asked you a question, Lorelei."

"And I answered with a question. Have you considered the story of Balder's death?"

Miia spat. "Of course I have. Because it's all you gave me to work with. And I don't have any damn mistletoe, and Loki was a fink. I'm waiting for my answer, Lorelei."

Radulf, sensing the confrontation, awoke at just that moment, and growled at Miia.

"Down, girl," Lorelei said. "Leave Miia alone."

“Oh, come on, Lor, don’t act all high and mighty. You’ve got a sword at your throat.”

“And I’m not going to parry, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“That’s lousy strategy, you know. Reginleif wouldn’t approve.”

“I asked you before,” said Lorelei, paying no mind, “to consider the story before you concluded that I have failed. Obviously you have not. Consider it, Miia. And then, if you believe that I am a traitor—strike me down. As you would any other traitor. For that is your duty as a Valkyrie.”

Lorelei opened her eyes and stared down Miia, who was holding the sword firmly, trying not to be distracted. “I’m not going to fall for any tricks, Lorelei.”

“Of course you won’t,” Lorelei responded. “You’re too good to fall for tricks, which is why I’m not trying to trick you. I just thought you might think about Loki’s actions in the story of Balder’s death, and why they suggest you shouldn’t kill me.”

Miia frowned, and she looked distant for a second. And then her eyes grew wide. “Loki was angry, and justly so.”

“Yes, he was, Miia. Justly so.”

“And he disguised himself to secure the knowledge—”

“—that he used to kill Balder, yes.”

Miia dropped the point of the sword, just a bit. She looked down and away, then back at Lorelei. “It still doesn’t explain everything.”

“It isn’t supposed to. Only Odin knows what He whispered into Balder’s ear on the night of his funeral, after all.”

Miia removed the sword from Lorelei’s neck, though she still held it in an attack position. “You’re saying I should trust you?”

Lorelei sighed in relief. “I’m saying you can trust me, Miia, not that you should. You have to decide that for yourself.”

Miia looked at her friend a good long while, before she swung the sword around, and pointed the hilt toward Lorelei. “I’m sorry Lor,” she said. “But you’ve got to admit, you’re not making this easy on us. On me. Malcolm—”

Lorelei stood, and took the sword, and quickly sheathed it. “He’ll be okay, Miia. I tried to talk him out of it—it was a stupid plan, and if I hadn’t found him, someone else would have—but he’s stubborn as you are. I’ve done everything I can to keep him as unharmed as I can, which isn’t perfect—but I swear on Odin’s hat, I didn’t want to hurt him. Or you.”

“I know,” Miia said, wiping a tear from her eye. “But you did.”

“I know,” Lorelei said, “and I hope you can forgive me someday. And it’s okay if you can’t.

“Anyhow,” she added, quite out of nowhere, “I’m changing the crystal today, along with a couple Myrmidon helpers. You, Don, Zvonimir, and Hakim can watch from the window. I think you should. I’ve been trying to teach you all about gating, and this is a rare opportunity to see a very powerful gate in action. It’ll be interesting, I promise.”

Miia wiped her eyes, then looked at Lorelei carefully. “We’ll be watching,” she said, finally.

Lorelei hugged her fellow Valkyrie, and said, “Good.”

As she left the apartment, her sword on her belt, she whispered to the presence in the back of her head, “Today it is.”

‡ ‡ ‡

The fortress was largely deserted, with most of the officers and Myrmidons off fighting in Novi. Lorelei was okay with that; this was a routine switchover, and she knew exactly what she had to do, but all in all she thought she was happy not to have a large audience.

It was time.

“All right, lasers off,” she ordered, calmly.

The twin beams that shone into the crystal terminated, and two Myrmidons removed the darkened crystal from its pedestal. Lorelei nodded as another brought the crystal up.

“Okay, nice and easy, Lorelei,” Dane said. “Place the new crystal.”

“I will, but let’s get this right,” Lorelei said, grasping it with both hands. She looked in the direction of the gate, which was already fluctuating. It would collapse in about thirty seconds if she didn’t place the crystal right the first time. She’d only get one chance at this.

“Gate at 45% integrity.”

“I know, Dane. Calm down. I’m placing the liptumuno crystal...now.”

She held it over the pedestal, lowering it slowly into place. As it reached a fingers’ width above its resting place, she smiled quietly, and looked up, and began to slowly utter a prayer.

“My Father, my liege, hat hiding thy forsaken eye, father to raven, friend to wolf, hear my prayer. Protect me from those who would do me harm, guard those who would stand at my side, and should we

die in thy service today, send thy Valkyries to retrieve us and bring us to Valhalla.”

“All right, Lorelei, that was beautiful, but time’s running out. Place the crystal now.”

“So let it be,” she concluded. “Dane, I’m putting it right where it needs to be,” she added, and she suddenly spun around thrice and threw the crystal straight through the gate, which bubbled and churned into chaos. “Chiuso, il cancello di Barnabas, ha chiuso!” she cried, as she drew her sword and began to fend off a swarm of attacking Myrmidons.

“You bitch!” Dane shouted, and suddenly alarm klaxons began sounding throughout the facility. Lorelei felt the temperature behind her rising, just as she expected it would, and she quickly leapt to her left as the gate spat out its grayish-blue tendrils of distortion into the chamber, striking down a half-dozen Myrmidons.

Dane was onrushing her, a dagger in his hands. He never got the chance to strike at her, though, as she wheeled and severed his carotid artery. She looked at the Tome, then saw the elevator, which was just beginning to seal itself off. She rushed for it, turned herself sideways and slid through the entryway. “Emergency, Code Alpha. This elevator is on emergency service only,” a monotone female voice intoned, repeatedly.

Lorelei swung her key card across the sensor, as she’d grown used to doing in the past few weeks. It lit up green; that was something. At least they hadn’t locked her out yet. Pressing the button for her friends’ floor, she hoped she could get there in time.

The elevator swung open, revealing three blues; she sliced through two of them quickly, ducked down and attempted to stab another in the gut, only to find her sword glancing off his body armor. He scowled down at her, so she leapt backwards and kicked him in his face, sending him staggering backwards, holding his nose. With a roar, he raised his sword up and charged her; she had to parry fiercely to hold him off.

She quickly realized that he was trying to push her back to the elevator; that would never do. If he wanted her to go there, she needed to go anywhere else. So as he swung at her she dropped to her back in what was a near-defenseless position. He stabbed down at her as she rolled back and forth, finally getting the opportunity she needed to sweep his legs.

The blue fell down with a thud, and Lorelei spun herself around on her back, bringing the sword up and over her head and onto his stomach. She wasn’t using it to pierce him, but to give herself leverage to rise and spin, and gain the high ground. She leapt onto him as he swung at her, and brought her sword down between his eyes. He ceased following through, instead tossing the sword off into the corridor.

She raced down the hallway to the suite, and reached it just as the door opened. She raised her sword, then dropped it as her friends exited, knives to the throats of the butler and maid.



“Leave them in the apartment,” Lorelei said.

“Don’t you think we need hostages?” asked Zvonimir.

“No. They don’t care about these folks. And I’ve got no problem with them; they were good to us. Marc, Rebecca—please just stay here. Don’t make us kill you.”

“Very good, madame,” said the butler, warily. “We’ll just stay—”

They shoved the two back inside, cutting him off. “Good work,” Lorelei said. “Let’s go, we need to spring Malcolm.”

“So this was the plan all along?” asked Zvonimir as they raced toward a stairwell. “You meant to double-cross Ozymandias, destroy his gate the first chance you got?”

“Not necessarily. I meant to get as much information out of him as I could first, and figure out if we could trust him. We couldn’t. Besides, this was too good an opportunity to pass up, and if I didn’t do something soon, Miia was gonna kill me.”

“I was going to kill you this morning until you talked me out of it.”

“And aren’t you glad I did? All right, grab those swords and get armed,” Lorelei said, gesturing to the fallen blues. “Miia, Hakim, Don—you guys go to the prison level, free Malcolm, and get the hell out of here. Professor, you and I are going back down by the gate to retrieve the Tome. Go!”

They split up, Miia, Hakim, and the Myrmidon racing up the stairs, Lorelei and Zvonimir and Radulf running down. “I’m sorry I doubted you,” Zvonimir said, huffing.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be clear. I tried to give you a hint; why do you think I kept talking about the Thief’s Tale? He pretends to be someone else throughout the story.”

“I hoped that was it, but I feared you were trying to say you didn’t care about anything but success,” Zvonimir admitted. “At any rate, good job.”

“Thanks, Zvonimir,” she said, pushing the door open. “The Tome is at Dane’s workstation, right over here—” she said, turning a corner and then suddenly stopping.

“Well, Lorelei,” said Ozymandias, face red. “I turn my back for one minute, and this is how you repay me.”

Lorelei smiled. This was getting interesting.

She twirled the sword in her hand like a drum majorette twirling a baton. She twirled the sword unconsciously, and faced Ozymandias.

“Did you really think I’d forget what you did to my sisters? Did you really think I’d forget you were abusing my friends? Honestly? How did you get put in charge of anything, Ozymandias?”

Ozymandias looked ready to explode. “How dare you! I treated you well, Lorelei! I could’ve killed you the second I saw you!”

“You could’ve, Ozymandias. You should’ve. But you didn’t, did you?”

“Double-crossing bitch!”

“Who was double-crossing whom, Ozymandias? Do you remember what you told me when you were trying to convince me to back you? How we would need to move energy out of here to stabilize this world? Do you know what Dane said yesterday?”

“Are we playing twenty questions?”

“He said we needed to move energy from this world to stabilize Earth, Ozymandias. Which is it?”

Ozymandias stood staring at her. “He—he must have misspoke. Or you’re misremembering. I mean—”

“He didn’t misspeak, and I know what I heard. It squares with Worlds to Come, now that I think about it: ‘Where the river of power flowed, it blossomed/And the source of the river dried up and died.’”

“Are you sure? Because....”

“Oh, stop it. You’re not that good a liar, and this is getting pathetic. You were going to use me to destroy this world, weren’t you?”

Ozymandias smiled thinly. “The prophecy requires you to choose the world that is saved. I did what I had to do to save my home. You would do the same.”

“No, I wouldn’t. That’s the difference between us.”

“Be that as it may,” he said, “I’m tired of this conversation. Too many times I’ve had you in my sights and missed. Let’s finish this, once and for all.”

“Draw your sword,” Lorelei said. “I’ll give you a fair chance.”

“Haven’t you learned, Lorelei, that I’m not interested in playing fair?” he asked, reaching inside his vest and withdrawing a small metal object which fit neatly into the palm of his hand. “Do you know what this is?” he asked Lorelei.

“No,” she said, stepping sideways slowly, watching for the chance to strike.

“It’s a gun. A Beretta 92FS, to be specific. Nothing like this on your world, except in my possession. I wouldn’t even let Steve have one. It works on the same principle as a cannon, but it’s obviously a bit more portable.”

“Thank you for the lesson, Ozymandias. I’ll remember it years from now when I think back on your death.”

“Stupid girl, you have no idea what this thing can do. You want a lesson? Here,” he said, aiming the gun at her chest, and pulling the trigger.

She heard the crack, not as loud as a cannon, but just as sharp. She saw a flash of light from his hand, and then a flash of something crossing between herself and Ozymandias.

Zvonimir.

Reacting on instinct, she began her charge as he passed, falling backward and howling in pain. Ozymandias raised the gun again, but she’d closed the gap too quickly; she brought the sword through his wrist, and then brought it to his neck.

“Do you know what I’m going to do, Lord Ozymandias?”

The leader of Charlie Company stared into her eyes in terror. “You’re going to kill me,” he mumbled.

“Yes, I am. But then, I’m going to balance the worlds. It will take time. Years, maybe. But I will find a way to save both Earth and my world.”

“It’s impossible, you naïve fool.”

“It’s our destiny,” she said, slitting his throat.

She turned and raced back to Zvonimir, who was laying on the ground in agony.

“We’ve got to get you to a healer,” she said.

“It’s too late, Lorelei,” he gasped. “This weapon of his—it’s too much for a healer of this world to fix.”

Lorelei looked up at the gate. “I could try—”

“Don’t even think about it. Lorelei, listen to me,” her mentor said. “When you get out, you must do what you’ve said. You must balance the worlds. It is the only way to save yourself, the only way to save the others. It is a long road ahead of you. Do not waver.”

“I won’t,” said Lorelei. “I promise.”

He smiled, weakly. “It was...an honor...to teach you, Lorelei.”

“It was my honor to learn,” she said, wiping away a tear.

“Good girl,” he whispered. “Proud, but not stupid. I hope I will see you in Valhalla.”

And with that, Zvonimir died.

Lorelei rose. She had no time to waste; she would mourn him later. Drying her eyes, she continued to Dane's station, closed and recovered the Tome, and then regarded the gate.

It could still be repaired, possibly. She decided not to give it the chance. She grabbed Zvonimir's pack, recovered the numoplio. She withdrew it, and poured a medium-sized helping into her hand. "Termini," she chanted, making the figure of hagall with her hand. The crippled gate sparked and groaned, trying to fight her will, but it was not to be. She felt it beginning to dissolve and threw the numoplio at it with a flourish. She should've been prepared for the resulting explosion, but she was unhurt by its force, even as it tossed her backward onto her back.

"All right," she said, rising, "it's time to go, girl."

She and Radulf raced up the stairway toward the prison level; Myrmidons were moving up and down the stairs rapidly, sweeping past Lorelei and Radulf, seeming to ignore them. They seemed almost as if they had no direction whatsoever.

Actually, Lorelei realized, it was exactly because they had no direction whatsoever, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

The Valkyrie and her wolf reached the entrance to the prison level as the door opened, and her friends spilled through.

"Good timing," said Miia, cradling Malcolm in her left arm. "Where's Zvonimir?"

"He—he didn't make it," she replied. "Come on, we've got a ways to go."

They rushed up the stairs for what seemed like forever until they reached a door at the top. Lorelei kicked it open, and then dropped the Tome and drew her sword.

"So I assume you killed Ozymandias?"

"Yes, Steve, I did," said Lorelei, advancing. "And now I'm going to kill you."

"Not a chance," replied Steve, bringing his sword up and crossing it with hers.

He was skilled, that much was sure. He was also righteously angry, which was helping him. "You know," he said, "I was Ozymandias' right-hand man. And that puts me in charge of Charlie Company. And after I kill you, I'm going to have the returning officers kill your friends. Slowly and painfully."

"Good to know the stakes," said Lorelei, as she began working him backward, going on the attack.

“You only get one chance to kill me, Steve,” she said, forcing him further back. “And you blew yours.”

She then deftly and literally disarmed him before stabbing him through the heart. “That’s for Ravenwood, prick.”

The exit was ahead. She turned and retrieved the Tome. “This way,” she said.

“Stop!”

Lorelei sighed heavily. This was getting annoying. She looked toward the voice, and saw Brown approaching, his sword shaking along with his hand.

“You—I won’t let you leave. You can’t.”

“Brownie, you idiot,” said Lorelei. “Do you think you’re as good a fighter as Steve?”

“I just have to hold you for another hour, and then the officers will start coming back—Andrei and Jake can take care of you.”

Lorelei turned, and twirled her sword. “Do you think you’ll last more than a minute?”

Brown looked at her, and closed his eyes as she quickly and effortlessly spun the sword out of his hand.

“Go,” she told her friends. Then, to the Director, she said, “I have a message for you to give to your comrades. Tell them that I’m not going to let my world be destroyed, and I’m not going to let them take their world, either. Tell them that the Fox is coming, the worlds will be balanced—and she will bring horror to anyone who gets in her way. Got it?”

Brown nodded dumbly, and collapsed to the floor.

Lorelei sheathed her sword, and ran for the exit, laughing all the way.

At the exit, she turned, and faced the Cadre’s headquarters. She saw that Don was hanging back.

“Aren’t you coming?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “My brothers are confused. We were designed to follow, and there is nobody for them to obey. I will try to reorganize them, try to teach them what I have learned.”

“But you heard Brown. They’re coming back, the officers anyhow. There’ll be a human in command again.”

“It will take work, I know,” he said. “But I have faith, Lorelei, in myself. You gave me that,” he said, raising his sword in salute. “Go. Until our paths next cross,” he said, bowing.

Lorelei paused. She wanted to go help him, but knew he was right; this was

the fight of him and his brothers. “All right, Don,” she said, returning the salute. “I look forward to the day the Myrmidons run this town.”

She turned, and rejoined her friends. She wondered what would happen to Don. She hoped that some day, she’d find out. But for now, it was time to regroup.

‡ ‡ ‡

It was a somber gathering. They’d rented a room at a broken down inn in Newton, near the Northeast gate. Malcolm was recovering from the beating he’d taken, but he seemed unperturbed by the turn of events.

“I was afraid that you’d try to hide me when you found me, lass—I knew too well ’twas not a plan you favored.”

“So you gave yourself up in order to...what, make Lorelei look better?” Miia asked, shaking her head.

“Aye. I thought it would help get her into position to spring us, and I was right.”

“It was a stupid plan then, and it’s no less stupid for having worked,” said Lorelei. “Plus, it about got me killed by my second-in-command.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry about that,” said Miia. “Thanks for warning me, honey. If Lorelei had been one iota more inscrutable—oh, and thanks, Lor, for being completely inscrutable, it really helped a ton—then Lorelei would be headless, and you’d still be in the dock, and I...I’d probably have committed ritual suicide, because I don’t think I would have ever been able to forgive myself for killing Lorelei, even if she did deserve it—which you’ve got to admit, Lor, you did, at least as far as I could see.”

“I’m sorry, love. They had the room monitored. Lorelei and I had to pantomime for about an hour to get the plan worked out, and that was made easy by the fact that she really was trying to talk me out of it. And you would have done the same as her had I told you, except you would’ve stopped me, one way or another.”

“You know I would’ve given myself up instead. Heck, I would much rather have given myself up,” Miia said.

“Aye—and I couldn’t let you, because your sword is quicker than mine, and that’s what you needed.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“It was a stupid plan—but it worked,” said Lorelei, finally. “And while I’m glad you didn’t behead me, Miia, I’m really glad I don’t have to refer to obscure things Alexandra taught us anymore. Because I really don’t like being on your bad side, especially when I know that if I was in your shoes, I’d hate me too.”

Lorelei smiled at Miia, who looked down. “Don’t,” she said, quietly. “It was my fault.

“So, Hakim, you’ve been quiet.”

“Yes, I’ve been reflecting on my friend Zvonimir. He died gallantly. I’m proud of him.”

“I know,” said Lorelei. “He gave his life for mine. That’s happening too much lately.”

“He was right to, lass,” Malcolm averred. “But now what happens?”

“What happens,” Lorelei said, “is that I need to find the Prophecy of the Balancing, and see what it says.”

“We will go to the University in the morning. I have secured the section there.”

“Really?” said Lorelei, looking up. “That’s excellent, Doctor. We’ll go in the morrow. But first, let’s get some sleep. Sorry, Miia—no waffles in the morning.”

“It’s a fair trade for freedom,” Miia said, yawning.

“Aye,” said Malcolm. “Though we can still try to make them in the future, lass. You said as much yourself.”

“I did,” Miia said, grinning. “I look forward to eating waffles with you for breakfast someday soon.”

Lorelei laughed at the two, wondering exactly when Miia would approach her for permission to wed. In the next few days, she supposed. She got into the straw-filled bed, and though she had grown used to otherworldly mattresses, she found that she slept that night better than she had since Ravenwood was lost.

‡ ‡ ‡

The morning broke, cold but full of promise.

The news was already about the city that Fowler’s army had suffered a defeat at Novi. It was said that they were near victory when suddenly, the battle reversed, almost as if many of Fowler’s men had simply lost the will to fight. His victory was still viewed as inevitable, but it would be at least a few more months of fighting before George succumbed.

The other bit of buzz, just barely beginning to warily spread, was that the Cadre had suffered some sort of calamity. Details were sketchy, to be sure—few knew what went on in their headquarters. But the usual collectors had failed to come about that morning, as had their usual private patrol. It put everyone on edge; the end of the Cadre was something to be hoped for, to be sure. But what could be powerful enough to take them down without a major fight? Rumors swirled—it was a great wizard, a group of George’s men, the kobolds, the Fay—but nobody knew for sure. All they could do was hope.

It was in this world of swirling gossip that Hakim and Lorelei came to the University at Two Rivers. They entered the main building, and to Lorelei's great pleasure, the noise of a sputtering Leonard Doubleday.

"Doc-doc-doctor Sam-ma-ma-ma...."

"Don't strain yourself Leonard. I need to see Provost Sokol."

"You—but—the Cadre...."

"Yes, they tried to kill me. If not for this woman and her friends, I'd be dead by now. But as you can see, I am most certainly alive."

"Then it's true," he said. "They've been destroyed."

"I hope so, Leonard, insh' Allah."

He started to say something else, but Doubleday rose and quickly ran out of the office in abject terror.

"It's going to be hard on him," Hakim said dryly. "His brother was a Cadre officer. In fact, his brother was the one who took me prisoner, so I imagine he's a bit concerned I'll mention that to—Provost Sokol!"

Carl Sokol walked in as if approaching a ghost. "Hakim! By Mithras, it is you! I'd thought you dead!"

"Not at all, Doctor. Please, may we talk in private?"

"Of course, of course. This way," he said, gesturing up the stairs offhandedly. "We have much to discuss."

### *Twenty-Three*

#### *The Tree of Life*

"So," said Sokol, ushering them into his office, "I assume you are the cause of the Cadre's destruction then—or at least that your liberty is a happy result of it."

"It is this one's doing," Hakim replied. "She slew Ozymandias. She destroyed the source of their power. They will not bother this city again, insh' Allah."

"Is this true?" the Provost asked Lorelei.

"Well, not exactly. I killed Ozymandias, yes, but it was hardly my action alone. I had a great deal of help, not least from Dr. Samara."

"Yes, yes, but you killed him. You brought the Cadre down, correct?" Sokol asked, fixing his eyes on



Lorelei. She looked back at him querulously; she couldn't say why, but she didn't like this line of questioning.

"I did, I guess," she replied.

As if reading her mind, Sokol allayed her fears. "Well, lovely. Splendid! That's good news for everyone, and I must say, quite the impressive accomplishment. Now I assume, Hakim, you're back to resume your post?"

"Actually, no sir," Hakim said, quietly, causing Lorelei and the Provost both to look up in shock. "I have come to retrieve some personal effects from my office; it is my duty before God (peace be upon him) to assist Lorelei in her upcoming quest, as my late mentor Zvonimir before me."

"Professor...Pasternak, right? He died?"

"To God we belong and to Him is our return. Yes, yes, he did his duty, and paid with his life. Lorelei is gifted, to be sure, but her next journey will take her to places even I am unsure of."

"My...next journey?" Lorelei half-said, half-groaned.

"All will be clear shortly, Highness. Dr. Sokol, if you would be so kind as to open up my office, I will remove my things. And I thank you for your kindness during my tenure at the University; God willing, I will return here someday."

"Not at all. I hate to lose you, Hakim. Come, we'll go to your office. What is it you want?"

"The remainder of the Tome of the Gates."

They walked through the cramped hallways to Hakim's office, which lay behind a dusty oak door. Sokol withdrew a skeleton key and opened the door, revealing a cramped room scarcely larger than a closet, dominated by a large desk. Bright daylight shone through the windows. Lorelei coughed at the dust that was kicked up as Hakim entered the room.

It had obviously been ransacked at some point; either that or Hakim was a horrible housekeeper. But he simply walked toward the back of the room, and began to reach beneath the floorboards.

He retrieved something, and almost simultaneously Lorelei felt the point of the blade in her back.

"All right," said Sokol, "Let's see it. And no tricks, Hakim, or your friend here dies."

Hakim looked abruptly up at the Provost, and Lorelei could sense the flinty glare from behind her. "And I thought you were my friend, Carl."

"You knew what the Cadre was up to, Hakim. You think you're the only one who'd heard of the Tome? No, I helped them with research before you ever reached this town, helped piece together what I could. And when they established their base here, they placed me in this position...and another one."

“But—the Cadre is gone, Carl. Dead and buried, or at least scattered.”

“The Cadre is far from dead. I will report this information to Bravo Company—they will need a new man in the new world. They will certainly reward me well for succeeding where Ozymandias failed—indeed, by this time next year this town may be mine.”

“Bravo Company is based in Angeland,” said Lorelei, quietly. “How do you know of them?”

“Because they’ve been very generous to me,. Because they let me know of their concerns about this particular sector last spring. They will be thrilled to see me, believe me. Enough talk. Come on, Samara, out with it.”

Hakim sighed. “Very well,” and he turned to open the long container, walking slowly around his desk until he was but a few inches from Lorelei.

“Come on, come on! Give it to me!”

“Insh’ Allah,” Hakim replied, and then suddenly whirled, his left hand sweeping up and leading flashing steel, which landed its blow inches to the right of Lorelei’s ear. She heard a howl, and felt the dagger drop as Sokol stumbled back; she turned, her own sword drawn, and saw him holding his ear, blood pouring out of it. She stabbed him through the heart, and he fell back into the wall, dead.

“He who seeks knowledge, Paradise seeks him, and he who seeks misdeeds, Hell seeks him,” Hakim said, stepping forward. “My father’s sword,” he said looking down at a beautifully decorated scimitar, streaked with the Provost’s blood. “He’d been an officer in the Algarian calvalry, you know. He told me to dirty it only in self-defense. I hope this falls under that definition.”

“Here,” Lorelei said, offering a towel to clean the blade. “What of the prophecy?”

“Come,” Hakim said. “These things are best discussed in a more pleasant locale.”

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They enjoyed lunch at a small restaurant in an out-of-the-way corner of East End, at perhaps the only Moorish restaurant in the Western Lands. Lorelei liked the meal (falafel, Hakim had called it; she was somewhat afraid of what it might be, but at least it tasted good), and the tea was minty and strong and bracing. But the sandwich stayed half-eaten and the tea half-drunk after Malcolm produced eight sheets of paper from the scabbard of his father’s sword.

Much of it she knew, at least by inference—the meeting with the madman, the destruction of her friends, the appearance of Malcolm—all were referenced, at least obliquely, by the iambic couplets. Oh, Barnabas hid the ball and used misdirection often as not. He didn’t exactly say that they’d win, but hinted it; didn’t exactly say that Zvonimir died, but hinted it. Through seven pages she read a condensed version of her recent life. And then she came to something new.

*The Fox found her mission was completed  
And wondered what the future held for her.  
She hoped that her journey would be ended;  
But go she would, if still she must, she swore.*

*The Tome she read, its lessons she desired;  
A chance to rest she hoped that it would give.  
“Sail East,” it said, “With friends thou hast acquired;  
This you must do, if both worlds are to live.”*

*To Angleland, young Warrior, young girl  
Seekst thou the other words of James the Mad  
To find it, seek the ones with flags unfurled  
And those who are in robes of sable clad.*

*To others reading this, you will not know  
That these words but one soul can comprehend  
Thou and thy sister joined may yet show  
A way to balance worlds, and stall their end.*

*But only you together can succeed;  
Apart will cause disaster this is sure  
So work together, do as each doth need  
And these divided world’s diseases cure.*

Lorelei reread the five verses repetitively, her lips pursed in frustration.

She didn’t want to go to Angleland. She hated the very idea.

They had destroyed the Cadre. Surely that was enough, wasn’t it?

All she wanted to do was to go back West, to reestablish the sisterhood, to help Malcolm regain his crown, to never think of balancing worlds again.

She could, of course; all it would take is handing the sheets back to Hakim.  
And she started to, before pausing.

“You will want to rest on your laurels. Don’t.”

She sighed. “Angleland, huh? Are you sure you want to go there?”

“I am sure you want to go there,” he said. “Or more appropriately, that it is the will of God that you go there.”

“Yeah, evidently. Do you think you can help me with the ‘other words’ stuff? James the Mad—that’s Barnabas, right?”

“Yes. But the work this references—none has ever seen it before. We must seek it.”

“I was afraid of that. Do we go straight away?”

“It’s too late in the year,” said Hakim, stretching. “No ships brave the ocean this late in the season. No, we’ll have to wait through winter. But for a variety of reasons, I think it best if we wait out the winter farther south.”

Lorelei nodded. They’d be leaving from Freeport anyhow; they may as well head there now. It would be good for them. They had enough gold saved up to keep them in modest comfort until the spring, and then they’d sail east. This would give them time, which they needed, and a rest, which she deeply desired.

Besides, she had a promise she had to keep.

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They journeyed down the Great River Road, Lorelei on point, Miia guarding the rear, right behind Malcolm and Radulf. Lorelei was grateful that Miia and Malcolm had agreed to see them to Freeport, and hoped they might see her beyond it. She knew that she was asking a lot for them to cross the ocean to Angleland, and didn’t mind that they had asked for time to consider before they committed to the trip.

“It’s not that we don’t want to back you, Lorelei. It’s just—well, I’m afraid if I leave the Western Lands that my brother will be able to breathe easy, and begin his attacks anew. And, well, there is another reason.”

Miia had smiled slightly. “Lor, we wanted to wait for your permission as my commander first, and it’s not official until you sign off, but…”

“If you’re asking for my permission to wed, it is granted, but unnecessary. I am honored to be consulted, though. When’s the ceremony? I’d better be invited.”

“Invited? I’d say there’s a good chance of that,” Miia said, smirking, “depending on the size of the wedding. We did want it to be a small affair. And we were thinking of having it soon.”

“You see, lass,” Malcolm said, elbowing his fiancée gently, “you are the leader of the Valkyries and a daughter of Odin. ’Tis holy enough an officiant for us.”

And so Lorelei had married the two in the name of Odin, at an altar that was simply her own sword, driven into the ground jointly by the pair. She called them to commit themselves for all time, through Ragnarök and until the stars faded from sight, in the name of Odin and Thor, Tyr and Freyr. And then she withdrew the sword from its berth and laid it flat, and bade them jump over it, symbolizing the end to their separate past and the start of their joint beginning.

And then they had all cried and hugged and celebrated, and Miia had repeated the name “Miia MacChaluim” to herself a few dozen times as if to convince herself that the name was really hers.

“Someday, Odin willing, Princess Miia,” Lorelei had teased.

“Don’t make me regret this,” Miia had said, sticking out a tongue.

“She isn’t very royal, Malcolm.”

“I know. Wonderful, isn’t it?”

Lorelei smiled at the memory, though it was but a few days old. They were a day or two north of Saint Stewart, a bit less than a fortnight from Freeport. They came up over a rise in the road, and she saw it, standing lonely in the valley below.

It was enormous—it had to be hundreds of years old, gnarled and twisted as only an ancient, untended tree can become. Its roots wound along the ground like a thousand tentacles, reaching deep for something more than mere sustenance.

“Yggdrasil,” she breathed.

It mattered not whether this was truly the tree that held heaven and earth together. It was its kin. And it was the place.

She led them down the hill slowly, toward the tree, and approached it reverently. And then she removed her mail, and knelt.

Miia approached her, finally, and said, “Do you need anything, mistress?”

“It is here,” Lorelei said. “It is here I must keep my vigil.”

“Then here we will wait. I will inform the others.”

“First, Miia,” Lorelei said. She turned her sword to Miia, hilt first, and raised her mail to expose her side.

“Please.”

Miia nodded, and carefully grasped Lorelei’s sword. “In the name of Odin, Father of us all,” she said, and she pierced Lorelei’s side.

Lorelei heard Malcolm and Hakim cry out, felt the anguish as the wound burned hot. She cried two tears, but betrayed no other sign of her agony.

“Help me into the tree...and secure me.”

Miia nodded, and did as she was asked, bound Lorelei hand and foot in the tree, kissed her friend once on the forehead. “I said some things in the Cadre’s stronghold, Lorelei—I am sorry. You wear the necklace well. Forgive me.”

“I love you, sister, and you have nothing to apologize for,” said Lorelei, smiling through the pain. “I hurt you deeply, I know, and I just hope you can forgive me.”

Miia kissed her forehead again. “I have,” she said, and she climbed down to the foot of the tree to wait, a vigil for the vigil.

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The first day Lorelei spent in near-silence, praying to Odin for each one of her slain sisters, from Satu to Reginleif to Annalie to Herja all the way through to Thrudor, who was the eldest of the archers under Hlökk’s command, a woman Lorelei had spoken to no more than twice in her life.

She paused on each of her friends, paused especially on Annalie and Herja, for different reasons, of course.

The second day was much the same, though she felt lightheaded and dizzy for most of the day, and the pain in her side was far worse than it had been on the first.

On the third day, Odin quenched her thirst, sending a rain shower that lasted throughout the morn, allowing her to drink deep and regain some of her senses. She thanked him for it, and prayed anew for her sisters.

That night, Herja came to her.

“So, Mistress Lorelei,” she said, sitting in the tree by her head, “you are finally standing the vigil. It took you a while to get around to it.”

“I was busy, mistress,” said Lorelei. “I am sorry for the delay.”

“You were focused on what you had to do. As you were trained. You have done your duty in its proper order.”

“I hope, mistress, that I have not presumed too much in my time since Ravenwood fell.”

Herja laughed. “No more than Svava and I presumed after Ulris fell. Heilwig had given the Chain of Jord to me on her deathbed, and I gave it to Svava, just as Miia gave it to you. We had even less right than you two—I was twelve and she was sixteen. Neither of us had gone through the trials. We were both apprentices.”

Lorelei wiped the tears from her eyes—which was impossible, given that her hands were bound, but she didn’t let that stop her—and said, “It’s my fault, your death. And Reginleif’s, and Annalie’s, and....”

“It’s Ozymandias’ fault, and you saw to it he was punished properly.”

“But I should’ve seen their scout.”

“Yes, and so should the twilight watch. And we should have been on guard, what with the tactical situation out east. And that is my fault, Lorelei. And my failure to bear. But all of us make mistakes. We just have to learn from them, and not repeat them.”

“When could you repeat them, mistress? You’re dead.”

Herja let forth a gale of laughter that sounded like a thunderclap. “I eagerly await you in Valhalla, Lorelei. We will pass the mead and tell warriors’ tales, and we will prepare for our next battle. I have been assured by Odin that I will command a platoon in His army at Ragnarök. If you do not have your own command, I would be honored for you to serve at my side.”

“I will be there, if Odin will have me,” Lorelei said. But nobody answered but the gale wind of the fall storm.

‡ ‡ ‡

The fourth and fifth days were excruciating, though Odin continued to send enough rain that at least she didn’t thirst. A few times, she thought she heard her friends call up to her, but she paid them no mind; instead, she prayed for forgiveness from one person.

The fifth night, she appeared in a dream. Sort of.

“Lori?” the woman asked, in her dream state.

“Lorelei,” she corrected.

“Lorelei. Oh! I’m finally dreaming about you. I think. This seems like a dream,” she said, looking around at the tree.

“Anna...you’re Annalie’s double, aren’t you?”

“Yes! How—oh, right, you’ve seen me before. I can’t believe I’m talking to you!”

Lorelei looked at Anna, who was wearing Annalie’s mail and sword. “Maybe you’re here because I can’t tell her, but Anna, I’m sorry I let your twin down.”

“You didn’t let me down, Lorelei.”

“Annalie?”

“I loved you, you know. I hated how I couldn’t tell you that. But you—you were always Reginleif’s favorite, and Alexandra’s too. And I wanted to be—but that was jealousy. You deserved it.”

“You sacrificed yourself. For me.”

Anna/Annalie shook her head. "I'm still alive, Lorelei. Aren't I?"

"I don't know," Lorelei said to the wind.

"A foolish risk," came a voice. "A stupid, foolish risk."

"Zvonimir?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps I'm just your brain, enfeebled by the lack of food and the infection in your side, dreaming up past friends to pass the time before it ceases operation."

"It's nice to hear you too."

"So I understand you're going to Angleland. When you get there, remember that Barnabas was crazy, but not foolish, and never without purpose. You will remember, no?"

"I will, Zvonimir. I will."

"Good girl. Now try not to die."

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Four more days she hung on the tree, twice more doused by showers, once hanging on as the wind whipped the branches up and down, threatening to dislodge her.

The ninth day came, and she could barely see or hear the world around her. She was conscious of a neverending pain in her abdomen, which felt like it was being consumed from within by flame. She tried to pray, for her fallen friends, for guidance, but her mind would not cooperate. Finally, she began to sing:

"Vindum, vindum  
*vef darraðar,*  
*pars er vé vaða*  
*vígra manna!*  
*Látum eigi*  
*líf hans farask;*  
*eigu valkyrjur*  
*vals of kosti!"*

She opened her eyes, and saw the runes—Othila, the homeland in her past; Jera, the harvest, that sown being reaped in the present; Teiwaz, the sigil of Ravenwood, the sigil of Tyr, the God of War. She would soon again have to fight. She reached out for them, for she knew they were her destiny, and as she did she fell toward them, howling.

She landed with a bang in a room that was both utterly alien and completely familiar. She rose, and turned toward the bed, where she was sitting up on her



elbows with a look of shock.

Well, not her exactly. Her sister, her friend, herself.

“Lorelei?” Lori gasped, rubbing her eyes as if they would give a different answer the second time around.

“Lori? Is this—your home?”

“Yes, yes it is, but what—how—what in God’s name are you doing here?”

“I was standing my vigil, praying for guidance from Odin, and He brought me here,” Lorelei shrugged. She could not explain it better than that, and yet it seemed somehow to explain everything.

Lori got up and walked to her, and with trembling hand, reached out to touch her—the hand was clammy with fear, as was Lorelei’s arm. “You’re real,” they both said in unison.

“Do you know how to get home?” asked Lori.

“No,” Lorelei replied. There was no pain here; her side was still pierced, she knew, but it did not hurt. “But I will go back soon, I trust. What I don’t know is why I was brought here.”

“I don’t know,” Lori said, walking over to a refrigerator. “You want a Coke?” she asked, then chuckled at the question.

“I don’t have any idea what that is. Okay,” Lorelei said with a laugh. Lori popped the top on a can, handed it over. Lorelei sniffed it, then poured a bit of liquid down her gullet. It tickled her throat, but cleared her head a bit.

“Glad Molly’s gone for the night. Actually, maybe I’m not glad—she could verify you were here. But at least we’re not waking her up at two in the morning.”

“So you think we’re to talk?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Lori said. “I’ve seen bits and pieces, of course—you blowing up the gate, Zvonimir dying, Miia’s wedding—Molly really wants me to find Malcolm’s permutation in this world now.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Lorelei said, drinking deeper.

“And—well, there might be some confirmation of your existence in a news story,” Lori said, walking over by her computer and retrieving a printout. “Here,” she said, handing Lorelei. She took it, and began reading with interest.

Fourteen Injured, Three Dead in Bretton-Hall Nuclear Accident  
THOMSON REUTERS--Nacogdoches, Tex. Three employees of Bretton-Hall Industries were killed and another fourteen were injured when several pounds of highly refined plutonium were brought outside of a safe area. The accident is the most serious nuclear power-related incident since the 1979 incident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant.

The cause of the incident is still under investigation. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has identified substantial irregularities in the handling of radioactive materials at the plant. “We cannot comment at this time,” NRC director Niles Mendoza said in a statement. “But nobody has yet accounted for where this material came from.”

It went on like that for some time—Bretton-Hall employees denying comment, the Governor of Texas expressing condolences. Lorelei completed the story, and said, quietly, “They’re part of the Cadre.”

“More like the Cadre’s part of them. Bretton-Hall is one of the biggest military contractors in the world. This world, anyhow.”

Lorelei looked at her twin, and said, “Maybe I’m here to tell you that you’ll have to fight them on this side of the gate.”

Lori groaned. “Don’t tell me that, Lorelei. You know, I’ve accepted that I’m going to have you wandering through my brain from time to time, but I figured I could ignore that as long as you didn’t ask me to do anything. Now you’re asking me to take on a company that buys and sells senators. I’m not strong enough.”

“Yes you are,” said Lorelei. “You’re a part of me, and I’m a part of you. And we’ve been strong enough so far.”

Lorelei felt lightheaded suddenly, and set her can of pop down. “Lori—I think I’m leaving.”

“You just got here! Lorelei, wait—I’m sorry I tried to medicate you away....”

“Don’t be,” said Lorelei, as she embraced her sister, her friend, herself. “Just help me in the coming time. I need you, Lori, and you need me. The fate of our worlds hang in the balance.”

“I know,” said Lori, who suddenly found herself embracing air. She sighed, and chided herself; a vision so strong she was sleepwalking! She picked up her can of Coke, and Lorelei’s half-empty one too...and paused. And smiled.

‡ ‡ ‡

She felt the pain in her gut, spreading and searing her whole body. She cried out as it flowed through her, scorching her fingers and her eyes and her hair. And then, suddenly, her eyes snapped open. “Ouch! That hurt!”

“I bet it did,” said Miia grinning. “But look.”

Lorelei looked down at the place her side had been pierced, and ran her hand over smooth, if slightly scarred skin. “Malcolm?” she asked, turning to the

foot-tall healer.

“Aye, and the next time you get the bright idea to hold a vigil, try not to die on me. Bad enough I’ve got my wife to require me to switch back and forth from gigantic to tiny, but now you’re going and forcing me to go beg Loroki for ambrosia—and you can imagine how much fun it was dealing with Puck on that one. Aye, but you’re as good as new, so lassie—for Odin’s sake, or Mithras’, or Allah’s, or Whomever’s—stay that way!”

“Yes, your Highness,” Lorelei said with a bow. Then, she struggled to her feet. “All right,” she said, “best we were on our way.”

“You’ll take a few days to recover,” Malcolm said, but Lorelei waved him off.

“I’m as strong as I’ve ever been,” she said, and meant it.

“On to Freeport?” asked Miia.

“And points East,” said Lorelei. “I think things are only going to get more interesting from here on out.”

She raced down the road with reckless abandon, feeling the morning sun on her hair, the firm ground beneath her feet.

She ran forward laughing toward whatever the fates held for her.

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