

WolfHeart

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By

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Prologue (Twilight's Child)

The small band sloshed through the sodden field, hands on their hoods to keep the wind-driven rain off their faces. A sudden strong gust assaulted them. The second-to-last man in line pawed at his baldhead to retrieve his bit of protection as the wind tried to slide it back. The one right behind the woman lost his completely. His long red hair slapped against his neck as he reached back to regain his cover.

Squinting against the cold drops pummeling his face, he called over the storm, "I say, this is nasty weather!"

"Lady, do you put up with this all the time?" asked the bald man. His hood now on square, he held it firmly against the wind.

"Not usually," she called back. "Thank you for helping me gather my tubers."

"You are most welcome, m'lady, especially since you are going to shelter us from this heavenly onslaught," the man with the thick waist shouted from the end of the line.

The bald one half-turned to him. "You needed a bath anyway, Erin!"

"Ha! No more than you, Charles--the lady may need nose plugs!"

"What she will need is new chairs, should she let you sit!" Charles shot back with a laugh.

Erin gave him a slight shove, his hand quickly returning to its grip on his hood. "I would warn her to keep the lighting low, in fear of the glare from your head!"

"Both of you show some manners!" the red-haired man barked. "Or else the lady may refuse you entry."

"Mayhap she'll refuse you entry for not having the manners to ask her proper name, Gordon," Charles retorted.

The woman glanced back with a smile. These men liked to tease each other; she knew now they meant nothing mean-spirited by their words.

When she saw them approaching earlier in the day, she had been wary of them. Even after she sensed that they were not wicked, she took their bantering for anger. Ever cautious of strangers, she accepted their help only because the rains were ruining her crop, which was her winter food supply. For a while she stayed apart from them, feeling for their intent with her mind. When she was comfortable that they were, indeed, who they claimed to be, traveling priests, she lowered her guard. These were good men, not like the others.

"My name is Sam, and I will not refuse you entry to my hut. You all need hot food and rest before you go on," she told them.

Another gust howled by, driving the rain horizontal. They leaned into the gale, heads down. As they made their way up to the log hut, the wind ebbed to a stiff breeze.

"Tis a shame such a pretty lady has the name of a man," Erin said sadly.

Charles waved the hand holding the bag of tubers skyward. "When did you see her face in all this?"

Erin frowned at him. "I have seen a glimpse of the lady's beauty--the gods have smiled upon her."

"Perhaps Erin wishes an extra plate to smile on him!" the red-haired Gordon laughed.

Everyone chuckled except Sam. She stopped before the door to her hut and turned to them. Doubt once again filled her. Was she doing the right thing?

She remembered the last man who had visited her; it had hurt her deeply to kill him. His visit proved that she could not escape cruelty and death completely. The only solace she got from that visit was that she had finished him as humanely as possible. She did not share her mother's taste for watching people suffer; that was why she had run away from the underworld. The things her mother did to innocents turned her stomach.

"Erin, you said you have seen my face?"

She said it so seriously the men were taken by surprise.

"Have I offended you?" Erin asked. "Some hide their faces because it is their religion. If I have transgressed, please forgive me."

She peered up slightly at him and shook her head. "No, you did not offend me. I just wanted to be sure..." Sensing them again, all she felt was concern, no fear yet.

They gathered around her in a semicircle, almost as if to protect her. From Erin she got the feeling he wanted to hug and comfort her. That would be pleasant, indeed; she had always dreamed of sharing something besides endless bitterness and hatred.

Her pause made them all listen closely.

"Please go on," Erin urged softly.

She looked up a little more, concern in her large brown eyes. "I do not appear normal to most. I thought I might be offensive to you."

"We can stand to look at Charles here, and that takes some doing." Gordon grinned, trying to lighten the moment.

Sam's heart was in her throat. She would just as soon stay under the safety of her hood. These men were going to spend the night, and one might see her by accident. That was how the other man had died. It had to be done now, when she could retreat inside if things turned bad. Gathering her nerve, she slowly pulled her hood up to show them her whole face.

In the dim light they could all see the apprehension in her finely cast features as she gazed back at them. A few strings of dark hair looped low on her forehead as the wind flapped the cloth against her face.

Gordon studied her, wondering how she could possibly think herself offensive. She was young and very pretty, more so than any other woman he had ever seen. If she lived in the city, it was easy to envision a small army of men trying to gain her attention.

Erin looked into her eyes and smiled. "Lady Sam, I see nothing to be offended by. Understand, we are holy men; your looks are not as important to us as your heart is. That is where true beauty or ugliness lies."

Charles wrapped his cloak a bit tighter. "And now we see you are not a monster, may we go inside and dry out?"

She beamed at them, exhaling the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Finally, ones who didn't care. Men who could see past her appearance.

"Yes, please." She opened the door and went in, followed by the others. Using a spark from her finger, she lit the candle by the door then tipped another to it.

"You have magic?" Erin asked as she handed him one of the candles.

Sam shrugged slightly. "Nothing great, just a few useful tricks. I hate messing with flint and steel."

“Especially in wet weather.” Gordon chuckled. Raising his bag of tubers, he asked, “Where do you want these?”

She pointed off to the right. “There are bins against the wall, if you would be kind enough to put them in.” She then moved to the table, lighting two more candles that stood in plain iron holders.

In the growing light, the simple cabin took form. The fieldstone fireplace sat square in the middle of the back wall, with cooking pots and fire pokers hanging from metal pegs set in the stone. On the far right wall, rough-cut timbers made shelves and bins for storage. A table with two stools sat to the left, and beyond that was a dark doorway.

“It must be lonely, living out here by yourself,” Erin called over his shoulder as he dumped his bag into the bin.

Sam had moved over to get a fire going. Kneeling down, she paused at his words. *It was* lonely. She was becoming weary of her isolated life. She was tired of hiding from the few who did venture down the weed-infested road, fearing they would see her and attack, or run away to bring many down on her. She thought about telling them these things but held back.

“Very,” she replied softly.

Gordon, who had finished emptying his bag, perked up at her melancholy reply.

“Perhaps you would like to travel with us to Newburg?” he suggested brightly. “We are going there to take sabbatical. It is a quiet little town with good people; and if you don’t want to stay, it’s only a week’s travel back.”

Sam pulled her hood to one side as she looked up at him. The offer was genuine and very tempting. Maybe the town was full of people like these, a place where she would not have to be so wary. She let herself daydream briefly about being on a street in broad daylight, walking and talking with others. Maybe even to walk arm-in-arm with her own man, as she had seen others do in the distance from the safety of the trees.

“The people in Newburg, are they all as nice as you?” she asked.

“Most are.” He grinned. Waving a hand at her, he said, “Think about it. If you want to go with us, you are welcome.”

She nodded. Hope at last, she thought. She had never believed that everyone in the world hated her. When she ran away, she just hadn’t run far enough. This place, this Newburg, would be her salvation. Her heart was lighter as she dipped her candle under the tinder. The fire caught, and as it spread to brighten the room, her spirits brightened as well. She had a chance for a new beginning.

“Our cloaks go by the door?” Erin asked from behind her.

“Yes,” she said as she stood. The flames were licking up and starting to dance. Soon, she would have more than the dancing of the flames at night to entertain her. She took off her own cloak, shaking loose her long dark hair and stretched her small batwings, fluttering them briefly. Turning to the men to find out if they would prefer venison or beef, she saw they were frozen in various stages of removing their cloaks, gawking at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, now sensing fear from them.

Charles was first to raise a badly shaking finger. "You...you...have horns...and wings!"

Sam reached up and touched the rounded nubs on her forehead. "Yes, I thought you knew I had them."

The men now reeked of fear. It didn't make any sense! "Erin, you said you saw--"

"You are a demon!" Erin cried.

"Half demon, yes," she started to explain, "But, you see, I--"

"Eeevill!" Gordon hissed.

She shook her head as she cowered from them. *This cannot be happening!* her mind screamed. These were good men--she couldn't have been wrong about that.

"I am not evil!" she cried.

The men spread in a wide half-circle, trapping her by the fireplace. Gordon pointed an accusing finger at her.

"You lured us in by pretending to need help. You tricked us!"

Sam shook her head--how could they even think that? "Please, calm down for--"

A vial crashed across her nose, blinding her and cutting her cheek.

"The holy water affects her, she is *evil* !" Charles pronounced.

Sam tried to get the water and glass cleared out of her eyes as she held up a hand to stop them. Half upright, not quite facing them, she had opened her mouth to tell them they were wrong when something round and hard slammed into her stomach. She stumbled back into the wall, mouth and eyes wide with pain. Before she could do anything, Charles grabbed a poker and slammed it down on her shoulder, driving her to the floor. She got out a tiny scream and tried to crawl away.

"Kill the vile beast!" Charles yelled as he held the poker aloft to smash it down on her again. She managed to roll to on side; the poker cracked into the floor beside her.

She was not so lucky with the mace Gordon produced. He swung the iron ball down, making solid contact with her side. Erin missed her head, but the shovel he wielded caught a piece of her wing and ripped a good portion of her blouse away. The poker struck her hip then a boot slammed into her face.

She tried desperately to escape the pounding. They were going to kill her if she didn't do something soon. Their attack had surprised her--these men had laughed and helped her dig out her tubers before the rains ruined them. Now they were beating her to death.

Doing the only thing she had presence of mind to, she screeched and cast the room into darkness. She was still being hit and kicked as she scrambled towards her bedroom. One wing was broken, smashed into her back; then something hit her ankle hard enough that she felt it shatter. Bright spots appeared

before her eyes. The pain was great, but she had long ago learned to deal with pain. She crawled for her life.

The three men stayed in the living area, banging on the floor and calling for their god to give them light. When the light did come back, they didn't see her anywhere. They looked about wildly.

"Over here. You wish to try and kill me then have at it!" she snarled in a low, rough voice.

They turned to see her leaning against the doorway holding a large sword set to slash anyone who came close. Her face was bloodied and her body bruised, the remains of her blouse hung off her shoulders and one upright wing was in shreds. She was breathing heavily, her mouth turned up in a snarl, showing a set of fangs. In this state she truly looked like a thing from hell.

Gordon was the first to break his stare. "Now, all at once--we must rush the thing and kill it!"

She had been shocked at their attack, now she was enraged. Letting her demonic heritage run free, she no longer felt the pain of her wounds. The one thing she had learned from her mother was how to inflict pain. She didn't shy away as they came at her but growled in defiance.

Jumping at Gordon first, she screamed and swung with all her might, slashing deep into his left arm. Yanking the blade free, she drove it into Erin, burying better than a foot of the blade into his large stomach. His eyes grew wide as he clutched at his wound and stumbled back. Something slammed into her back, breaking the fragile structure of her remaining wing. Howling, she swung her weapon in an arc that tore through Charles's throat. Blood spurted from the large gash in a cascade.

Her ankle gave way. She went down, screaming and ranting "Get out! Get out of my house!" as she chopped at the men from the floor.

The men retreated--or tried to. Erin stumbled to the door, both hands holding his bleeding stomach. Charles took two steps back and fell flat, lying still. Gordon backed away, shouting every curse he had ever heard at her as he danced to avoid her sword. She caught a bit of his shoe, clipping off a corner and his little toe. He turned and hobbled after Erin out into the rain.

Crawling to the door, she got it shut and worked the bar in place. Leaning against it, she pulled her good leg up and hugged it. As she calmed down, her snarling faded into weeping. The pain of her wounds came back with a vengeance. Through the haze of her tears, she noticed Charles bleeding all over the floor.

"Why!" she cried at him. "You are not dead yet--answer me! I let you into my home and you try to kill me. *Why?* "

Charles rolled his head over to look at her. There was a pleading look in his eyes as he mouthed "Demon." His one arm spasmed and his eyes saw no more.

"*Damn you!*" she screamed, throwing the sword at the corpse. "*Damn you to hell!*"

Crying in wracking sobs, she knew now that she was cursed to be alone. Even these kind, holy men turned ugly when they found out what she was. There was no place on the surface world for her, just as there was none below. There was not one who would ever accept her--she was doomed to live alone for all time. That knowledge hurt worse than all the pains in her body.

Outside, as the two men staggered away from the hut, the wind seemed to amplify the banshee wail that rent the air.

Chapter 1

James Thatcher sat on Zeb Cartwright's roof, working the last cedar shingle into place. Jamming it up under the one above, he drove in the nails then sat up and tried to work the kink out of his back. The last storm had done plenty of damage--a few missing shingles and a hole where a branch had gone through. He loved living here but would love it even more not to have trees right over their heads.

The village was nestled under the great canopy of the forest. The trees around the log houses had the lower branches pruned to clear the roofs and to keep children on the ground. The road passing through the village made up the main street, widening at the square where a wide dirt path intersected it. Children played in the square as Zeb fixed the wheel on Olan Weavers's cart. Across the street, a woman with gray streaking her dark-brown hair shucked corn as she kept an eye on the children from a bench on the side of the square. Stopping to warn one of the Pickler boys away from the well, she stood up long enough to make sure the child became involved with another game before she returned to making dinner. At the base of a stout ash on the far side of square, three of the older boys were gathered around a slim brunette, eager for her attention.

Screams from up the road caused the children to stop their game, the woman to snap her head up. James was the first to see the group of people running towards the square. Behind them was a pig-faced giant carrying an immense halberd. The giant swung, chopping holes in roofs with his blade and bashing in doors with the haft of his weapon.

The children screamed and scattered. Zeb left the cart to run in and grab his bow. The giant caught a dark-haired woman in the back. She gurgled out her last cry as the blow threw her to the ground, landing folded in half like one of the girl's rag dolls.

James cried out in horror. His best friend's wife had just been butchered, and now the huge thing was bearing down on his father. Gripping his hammer, he took aim at the creature's head and threw with all his might. It hit the monster on its shoulder; the giant stopped to glare at him, letting the old man escape.

Locking eyes with the giant, James felt his heart seize in panic. He turned and ran over the peak, ready to jump down and lead the thing away from his fellow villagers. He skidded to a stop, mouth open in a silent scream. On the other side of the hut a second giant stood thrusting its weapon at him. Before he could dodge, it impaled him. Lifting him high, it slammed him down through the roof he had spent the day repairing.

Below, Zeb got off two arrows into the giant in the square. Both hit the heavy leather on its chest, but neither penetrated far enough to do any damage. He ducked back inside as it charged with a deep bellow. Together, the giants rammed into the hut, collapsing it.

More giants attacked, kicking in hut walls and killing anyone who could not avoid them. Men and women were speared and thrown aside, those who tripped were stomped on by huge feet. The few men

who tried to stand against them were killed without inflicting serious wounds on a single giant.

Two strangers ran into the chaos while terrified villagers fled for their lives. They were dressed in grayish-green shirts and brown shorts, though the woman's shirt was cropped to show her flat stomach. Both wore wide belts around their waists with many pouches attached and carried an oak staff and a curved sword. The ones who saw them cried in relief, quickly pointing behind them.

The black-haired man glanced at his companion. "Odif, we wait for the others?"

Odif sensed at least two more pilgrims besides the one she saw. If they waited for the rest of the team more villagers would die.

"No, we have to keep the pilgrims busy until these people escape," she decided with a flash of her pale gray eyes. "Keep your distance, but get their attention."

Nodding, the man broke off to run behind a row of huts as Odif slowed to deal with the threat before her.

She faced two giants on the main street. Spreading her arms, she concentrated on the tiny lives that filled the forest and called forth insects. Bees, wasps, horseflies--every kind of flying, stinging insect came to her summons. The giants who were setting themselves to kill her found themselves beset by clouds of bugs, biting and stinging them all over. They pawed at their eyes and ears, trying to kill the hundreds of tiny creatures swarming over them. They staggered towards her.

Backpedaling, she held the insects on the two giants.

"I got two here!" she yelled.

From the alley to her right, the man came running.

"There's another back there," he said. By the look on his face, he was afraid. Fear was only good for flight; to help her stop these pilgrims he needed will and strength.

"Stop him, Leifelm!" she barked.

"How?"

"Grow thorns!"

Digging quickly in a pouch, he threw seeds into the alley then held his arms out, palms down, as he began a chant. Sprouts came up almost immediately. The giant appeared and started through the alley, its weapon raised high, its small pig eyes glowing in triumph. Liefelm's chant began to waver. The carpet of bushes stopped growing only a few inches high.

Odif cast him a worried look. If he didn't remain strong, the thorns would not grow.

"For the love of our Goddess, concentrate!" Even as she yelled at him, she knew fear was consuming him. She foresaw what would happen a second before it did.

Liefelm started backing up; his chant became unintelligible babbling. The giant took one last step and swung down hard. As Liefelm tried to duck away, the large axeblade cleaved through his thigh to bury

itself in the ground.

Shifting her attention to the giant about to finish off her apprentice, she thrust her arms out and spoke firmly.

"Pioga flammar!"

Flame shot from her hands in a stream towards the creature, splashing on its face. The coarse hairs on its cheeks caught fire. It screamed and swung wildly, trying to stop the burning. Backing up, it tripped and fell in the alley, taking down pieces of roofing it clutched at.

Odif had been forced to let the insects go in order to stop the third giant. Once again she set her tiny allies on the remaining two as she ran backwards. One giant threw its halberd at her. Odif saw it coming and threw herself to one side. The weapon sailed harmlessly by, but the action disturbed her control. By the time she had regained her feet, the giants were too close to use insects. Her staff lay nearby, but there was no time to retrieve it. Drawing her sword, she got ready to fight.

"Odif, to us!" came a cry from behind her.

Three men ran towards her with a blond woman in brown robes behind them. The man in full plate armor, Scorpio, ran to her, holding his shield up as he motioned for her to get behind him with his sword. The one in the middle wearing hardened leather over his buckskins, Tayan Montara, went at the giants at a dead run, his red hair flying behind him. The third man, Glier, charged with a two-handed grip on his six-foot broadsword. Amber, the woman in robes, knelt to assist a villager who'd lost his arm.

"Disarm him!" Scorpio yelled to Odif as he stepped in front of her to face a giant. It swung down at him hard. Deflecting the blow with his shield, he staggered against a hut. He dropped to the ground as it swung a second time, and the creature missed him to knock a hole in the wall.

Tayan and Glier confronted the other giant. Tayan's blade was a blur of motion as he chopped at the weaponless creature, while Glier landed a blow on the pilgyn's arm that made blood fly.

Odif concentrated on the giant Scorpio was fighting, the insects were still milling about, so she set them to help Scorpio before the pilgyn killed him. They arrived in time to keep the giant from chopping him down before he could get back on his feet to face it.

Dropping its axe, the pilgyn pawed at its face with a squealing cry of anger. Scorpio raised his shield and looked for an opening to strike.

"Use your crossbow!" Odif barked at him. The boy was handsome, but sometimes he wasn't too bright.

A quick glance over at Glier and Tayan showed they were slowly hacking the weaponless giant to the ground. Every time it tried to follow Tayans' quick moves, Glier shifted behind it to deliver a solid blow. It would take a while, but she figured they would finish it.

Watching his pilgyn closely, Scorpio dropped his sword and looped the sling of his crossbow over his head. Loading a bolt, he took aim at the creature's head. His shot landed square in its temple with a loud crack. The pilgyn gave a final squeal as it fell then lay twitching on the ground.

The fight was far from over for Glier and Tayan. Their giant still tried to grab the smaller men and kicked at them. Tayan managed to hamstring one leg, slicing through the tendons on the back of the knee. The

pilgyn fell screaming with a crash. Deftly avoiding its flailing, he ran off down the street to where the one with the burnt face was getting up.

"Tayan, no!" Odif yelled. The pilgyn Tayan had downed was still thrashing, looking for something close enough to hit. There was no way around the fight in front of her.

Her mind raced for a way to help Tayan. The giant's face was burnt, but all that had done was anger it. As she summoned up more energy from the forest, Tayan closed on it. He ducked a swing, thrusting his sword out at maximum reach to clip its leg. The giant spun its weapon around; and the butt end slammed into Tayan, pitching him away to land in a heap. He lay motionless as it snarled at him, raising its weapon high to chop him in half.

By some miracle, the giant hesitated, giving Odif time to act. Pulling together all her strength, she shot fire at it again. The flame came out as a long spear, once again landing on its face.

The release of so much energy in such a short time drained her. She was physically able to fight, but her concentration was weakening. The fire worked--the giant forgot about Tayan as it slapped its face out. The hamstrung giant was struggling up on its good leg to lunge at her. Her sword lay at its feet. She dove instead for her staff, grabbing it as she rolled away from the monster's grasp.

She finished her roll on her feet. The pilgyn's face was open for a shot; she jumped closer and, swinging with all her might, bashed it on its round snout. It had barely recoiled when Scorpio charged up and drove his blade into its heart as Glier chopped down in its exposed neck.

Panting, Scorpio and Glier turned to see the last monster bearing down on them. One eye was charred shut, and it stumbled as it came. All Odif could do was keep it busy as Scorpio and Glier attacked it on the sides. The blind eye marked the creature's doom, for Glier was able to drive in and slash high, opening its throat.

The pilgyn tried to escape, one huge paw attempting to staunch the flood of blood. They didn't pursue, knowing the wound was fatal.

Amber ran towards Odif, her eyes wide as she saw Tayan on the ground. "Is he...?"

The young priestess was talented, but she didn't take stress well. Odif could sense Tayan's life-force from where she stood--he wasn't the one in immediate danger.

She clapped a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You go look after Tayan, I'm going to try to keep Liefelm from bleeding to death. *Go!*"

She helped Amber along with a shove then ran to her apprentice.

At sight of the pool of blood and Liefelm's severed leg, her emotions threatened to cloud her consciousness. She had to remain strong, hard and unfeeling, like the mighty oak. To give in to a bout of sickness at the sight or beat him for his weakness would only serve to let him die.

She knelt in the red goo and studied him. The only good thing about the wound was that it had knocked him unconscious, slowing his heart rate. By thinking of the raw end of the stump as just another piece of meat, she was able to fold over a flap of skin and seal the edges before his blood drained out. It used the last of her energy, but she had saved him for now. The rest was bandaging and keeping him warm.

"Will he live?" Scorpio asked.

She didn't need to look up to sense his presence. "He'll live. Go see how Amber is doing with Tayan while I finish up here."

While she got Liefelm bandaged, she surveyed the damage the giants had caused. Wrecked huts and bodies lay strewn about. This was the second group of pilgrims they had found in Longforest. Lord Zodiac was right--evil was trying to drive them out of the northern end of the forest. Now that she and her friends were here, though, the tables would be turning on those monstrous creations.

Yelling got her attention. She looked over to see Scorpio and Tayan glaring at each other. Apparently, Amber was able to heal him quickly.

"Idiocy--you know, the thing that makes smart people act stupid," Scorpio yelled as he smacked his helmet.

"You're calling me stupid?" Tayan cried.

"Charging off by yourself is something I would not call smart. You nearly got yourself--and Odif--killed. That is not how we fight."

Tayan took a deep breath, letting his voice roll out in a growl. "I was fighting a hundred years before you were born, do you forget that?"

"No, but *you* have. If you want to be brave to the point of suicide, go see the Tolinic Knights!" Scorpio yelled with a flail of his arm. "We fight as a team, everyone looks out for each other."

"I know how to fight!"

"Then act like it!"

Scowling, Tayan turned and scooped up his sword. Scorpio wandered in place like he was lost, one hand rubbing his forehead.

"He is still in pain." Amber said, her brown eyes sympathetic.

Scorpio nodded with a sigh. "Go...help these villagers. Some of them are still alive."

As the priestess moved off, Odif went up to him. She knew he was having a tough time being leader of their team, and Tayan's behavior wasn't helping him any. Seeing the anguish in his face, she gave him a sad smile.

"You did fine. I have to talk to you about Liefelm, though."

Looking over to the man covered with a blanket, he sighed again. "He's done, isn't he?"

"Even if he had both legs, he'd still be done," Odif explained. "Liefelm panicked. It's my fault, I thought he was ready for battle."

Scorpio couldn't help but look down at her magnificent body. He had never before known a woman who was chiseled in lean muscle, but it looked good on her. Her pear-shaped breasts held her shirt out

like a curtain over her trim stomach. It took all his effort to force his eyes up and not start caressing her. In his opinion, the sharp V of her torso and the ripples of muscle on her stomach only enhanced her beauty.

Pulling off a mail glove, Scorpio cupped the side of her neck. Rubbing his thumb tenderly behind her ear, he said, "You had no way of knowing he couldn't take battle. At least he's alive--he will still be a good Druid."

She ignored the soft words and the loving hand. Now was not the time.

"I heard you talking to Tayan--he'll come around."

Scorpio gave a half-nod. "I'll send him back with Liefelm, I'm sure Zodiac will give us replacements."

As he took his hand down and put his glove back on, she knitted her brows. c

"So you would rather he sit and do nothing? Just let him sit by himself and dwell on it?"

"Keeping him on our team is endangering him...and us."

This was the hard part of letting him be in charge. She wanted to tell him they had to keep Tayan; but if she did, it would undermine his authority. A simple trip to get rid of unnatural creatures was becoming more complex as the days went along.

"He'll be all right," she repeated.

"Tayan is not 'all right,'" he told her firmly. "Odif, I like Tayan, too. To be honest, he's my idol. Look at him, though. He barely eats or sleeps; and if he's going to madly charge into battle, how can I trust him?"

Odif sighed and gave him one of her "I know best" looks.

"Right now he needs us. Tayan is an emotional wreck. Other than a few heavy tears at Lucinthia's memorial service he hasn't cried."

She had agreed to let Scorpio lead them but hadn't promised Zodiac anything about not molding his brother's decisions the way she wanted them to go. Laying her hands on his face, she looked at him tenderly.

"If he goes back, he may never recover. We may return to find him at the bottom of a bottle."

When she looked at him like that, she knew there wasn't anything he'd deny her.

Shrugging one shoulder, he blushed. "I guess we can wait and see."

Satisfied for the moment he wasn't going to send Tayan away, Odif looked back the way they had come. The villagers were gathering nervously in the trees just beyond the village. Here and there men held bows, anxiously searching for more pilgyns.

"Some of the people are coming back. I'll get them to help with the huts."

The battle over, Odif could not block out the smell of blood and the anguished cries of villagers as they

knelt by the bodies of their loved ones. Holding in her emotions, she began directing frightened people to help dig out those trapped in ruined huts. The killing blow to her control was when she followed the soft sound of a girl crying.

Beside a tree, just outside the line of huts, a young brunette sat holding the body of a boy with her remaining arm. The girl's lips were blue; her skin was as pale as a dead fish. The trail of blood told the story--she had dragged him here and was desperately clinging to him even as the last of her own life drained away.

Odif dropped to her knees in front of the girl. She wanted to tell the child that she would be reunited with her young man soon, in the gardens of their Goddess. She wanted to give her some comfort as she died. All she could do was end her suffering. Gently, she held the girl by her chin and the back of her head. She kissed the child on her forehead then broke her neck. Only then did she cry for both of them.

The sun was going down by the time they had tended to the wounded and buried the dead. Even though much of the village was in ruins, the villagers insisted their defenders stay to share their food and beds for the night. They ate by one of the standing huts, Scorpio and Odif sitting together as Glier and Amber kept Tayan nestled between them across the fire.

Liefelm sat with his back to the wall of the hut, his one leg stretched out in front of him. He took the tin plate of stew from the village woman with a muffled "Thanks." After a moment of studying his food, he said weakly, "Odif, I let you down." Gazing up at her sadly, he added, "I did not trust in our Goddess."

Odif regarded him for a few seconds. "You did not trust in yourself. The Goddess of Nature has made the power over living things available to you. To wield that power, you must stay strong."

Liefelm shook his head. "All I could think of was that pilgrim coming at me. I failed our Goddess."

She, too, was disappointed at his failure. In practice, he worked the elements of nature like a master. Liefelm was a quick learner; she had seen great potential in him. When it came to large plant life, he commanded it better than she could. No matter how well he was trained, though, he had yet to trust in himself. The moment his skills were pressed, his brains scattered. She sensed that no matter how much more time she spent on him, he would not improve in that area enough to be of any use on the battlefield.

"You are not meant for fighting," she told him. "There are ways to serve our Goddess other than battle. You are a good healer, both physically and spiritually. Few know more about crop grasses or how to process Elonga sap. Being a priest of nature means using your talents our Goddess gave you. You must find out for yourself the limits of those talents."

Glancing down at the stump of his leg, he said, "Walking is no longer one of them."

His self-pity made her angry. The sooner he gathered his wits, the sooner he could grow a new leg. She was tempted to tell him so, but that would do him no good. He had to figure out some things for himself.

"If our Goddess wants you to regain your leg, she will give you a sign. If not then she has determined you will not be needing it," she told him firmly.

Scorpio watched the druid nod and dip the wooden spoon slowly into his stew.

"Like Jo-Jo's regeneration spell?" he asked her.

Turning on him, she scowled at the insult. Unlike druids, wizards had no understanding of the forces they manipulated. Instead of learning why the world worked, they sat in labs experimenting and repeating what others had done.

"No. We hold the power of the land, striving for something greater than personal gain. You know this."

"Yeah, keeping the balance." he replied.

Raising an eyebrow, she said, "You cannot have men without women-"

"And no good without evil, joy without pain, or life without death." he finished.

She thought it was cute the way he said it. Hopefully, one day she could get him to mean it. He was young and full of energy--she was becoming attached to him. He had the makings of a fine man, once he grew up.

"Exactly," she agreed with a smirk. Leaning closer to him, she cooed, "We've had our pain for the day. How about some joy after we eat?"

The twinkle in her eye made him flush. He nodded with a grin.

"Stew for dinner, you for dessert?"

Beaming a smile, she gave him a nudge. "Actually, you'll be my dessert."

"I'm all yours."

Sweeping her eyes over him, she licked her lips then gave him a wink.

Across the fire, Tayan got up with his plate.

"Hey, where you going?" Glier asked. Amber looked like she was about to jump up after him.

"I need some time alone," Tayan told her quietly and walked off around the hut.

Glier watched him go then gave a hard look at Scorpio and Odif.

"You two could try being a little more subtle. You aren't helping him any."

Scorpio's face fell. Looking at Odif, he nodded toward where Tayan had gone.

"You know him best. Would it do any good to go talk to him?"

Odif shook her head. "I've tried. When he gets like this, he won't even acknowledge you're there."

Looking to each of them in turn, Amber asked, "I know his wife died in battle, but what happened?"

Taking a deep breath, Odif said, "No one knows what killed her. I met what was left of the caravan at Castle Zodiac. From what I learned from Prince Glenarin, they had been ambushed and were running from vlaks. They fought the vlaks and killed them. She was still alive after the actual battle. They were put to sleep with magic, and when they woke up her head was torn from her body."

Amber clapped a hand to her stomach. "Dear Leighna!" she breathed in horror. "He found her like that?"

Odif shook her head. "Tayan never saw her. By the time he was healed enough to come around she was wrapped up for the funeral. I went with them to Elrad and it was clear they blamed humans for her death, but I couldn't get any details out of them. If it wasn't for the fact that I was..." Odif paused for a second to pick a word for her relationship with Tayan. "...a close friend of Tayan, they would have sent me away."

Amber shook her head in wonder. "Vlaks are agents of evil. Why would the elves blame humans?"

Odif shrugged. "I don't know. There were humans escorting them, knights and soldiers from Tolina. By the time they reached Castle Zodiac, King Alderlan had sent them back. If they had been there, I'm sure I would have learned something."

"They did not fight to save them?"

"They fought," Glier told her. "And were cut to ribbons. One squire and a few soldiers were all that returned. That was what drew me and Pynlee back here. The attack was too large and too well organized to be bandits. The evil from the plains is spreading."

"Right into Longforest," Odif concurred. "Unnatural creatures like the pilgyns and hoarcs are in our woods. Trelem thinks they're out to exterminate us."

"If what my brother says is true then they're attempting to isolate Elrad from Zayton. Longforest just happens to be in between them," Scorpio told her.

"Preparations for something bigger," Glier added.

Amber frowned. "The largest populations are downriver. Why attack the wilderness?"

"Water runs south. Our biggest fear is that they will poison the river. That will kill without an arrow fired," Odif explained. "The river is the life of Longforest. All the halshaken would die, as would all who drink or eat food taken from the river. Not only druids and wildlife will perish--Capetown draws most of its water from the Mason River. Countless thousands will die."

"They have to be stopped," Amber stated.

"That's why we're here," Scorpio said then tried to give her a grin to lighten her mood. "But dinner first."

"Then...other things," Odif added in a seductive tone.

* * *

In the morning, Odif found a solution to Liefelm's disability during their prayers. Seeing a bluebird in the oak they knelt at, it occurred to her they could use a scout. Liefelm couldn't walk, but he could fly as a bird. He wouldn't have to fight, and it would save his self-esteem.

Scorpio got the group together while they waited for Odif and Liefelm to return from their morning ritual. Tayan sat on the rim of the stone well, gazing unseeingly at the ground. Amber was on the other side of the square with Glier, talking to a couple of the villagers. As Scorpio approached Tayan, Glier and Amber waved goodbye to the villagers and joined him. Tayan didn't take notice until they were standing on either side of him.

"Have Odif and Liefelm come back yet?" Scorpio asked.

"They should be back soon," Glier told him. Giving Tayan a slight shove, he asked, "Got your stuff?"

Tayan looked at him and nodded. "We ready to go?"

"Just waiting for the druids," Scorpio told him.

Looking off to the woods, Amber pointed. "Here comes Odif."

Walking towards them with a staff in each hand, Odif noticed Scorpio watching her waist. The extra belt did accent the motion of her hips. She added a bit more sway to her walk, much to his delight. She enjoyed the fact that every time he looked at her was like the first time he had ever seen her.

Forcing his eyes up to meet hers, Scorpio asked, "Where is Liefelm?"

Looking up, she pointed a staff at the sky. "He should be coming soon."

"What did you do?"

"We were praying and it came to me--he can't walk, but he can fly. I convinced him he's still useful to us, and he doesn't have to fight."

The cry of an eagle got Scorpio's attention. The large bird flew over them to land on the peak of a roof. Balancing on one leg, it cried out again, eyeing them.

"You turned him into an eagle?" Scorpio asked.

"He turned himself into one. Shall we go?"

Looking up at the eagle, Scorpio called out, "Can you scout ahead?"

With a cry, Liefelm launched into the air and flew down the road.

* * *

For the next few days they traveled farther north. Odif translated the cries Liefelm gave from overhead. Scorpio had trouble calling him Liefelm, even though he knew the bird was actually a man. Odif explained he had found the rest of the Company converging on a fishing village a day ahead. Trelem himself was coming, as well as the shamans from the three largest halshaken tribes, bringing warriors with

them. There were hoards in the woods, but they were gathering on the western edges of the forest farther north, away from the river.

To Odif's relief, Tayan seemed to be getting into a better frame of mind. The fourth day from the village where they fought the pilgyns, Amber got him talking during the midday break about Glier and the rest of the company. The girl was no Lucinthia--she was a bit stout and her cheeks were pocked from a disease she had gotten as a child. Still, Odif knew she had a good heart, and she was exactly what Tayan needed right now. Tayan wore a smile for a change as he described their different personalities.

Sitting beside her on a log, he pointed at Glier. "This man here is the strongest man in the world. He's the only one I have ever seen that can knock out a troll with one punch."

"One punch?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. She was wearing a bright smile as she listened to him, bringing out her beauty.

Tayan nodded. "We were going for water, and this troll came at us. Neither of us had our sword, so as it charged Glier here punches it dead in the face. The thing was knocked out cold."

"It got up again, if you remember," Glier reminded him.

"Yeah, for about five seconds." Tayan chuckled. "When it got up, he hit it again then broke its neck."

Glier shrugged. "It shouldn't have gotten up."

Sliding a bit closer to him, Amber asked, "Glier lives in Hilltop with Pynlee, right? Is there anything special about her?"

"She's good at climbing, and she can move quieter than a cat on a carpet." Tayan told her then looked at Glier as he smirked, "But she's a little odd."

Amber frowned. "How so?"

"Well, she talks to her sword." Tayan grinned.

"That is not uncommon," Amber protested. "People often give words of encouragement to their weapons before battle. Some even kiss them for luck."

"You don't understand--she sits down and holds conversations with it, like I'm talking to you."

"She even does it at home." Glier chuckled.

Amber gaped at him then giggled. "You're teasing me!"

"No, we're not," Tayan insisted. "You'll see."

It was moments like this that Odif cherished, seeing Tayan the way he used to be.

"He's right." she agreed. "She told me her sword thinks I'm too...free with my affections."

Tayan glanced over at her. "You are."

Scorpio decided it was time to change the subject before the scrutiny turned his way.

"Amber, when did you decide to become Leighna's Priestess?"

She sat up proudly. "When I was ten. Father Bennet was our priest, and he did such good work with the homeless and was very understanding with everyone. He saved some fishermen from drowning and helped so many that I knew I wanted to be like him when I grew up. My parents thought it was a very noble choice, though my dad wanted me to wait. I think he hoped I'd forget about it, marry and stay close to home. Both he and Mom get worried about me."

"What do your parents do?" Scorpio asked.

"They're merchants...we have a store in Capetown; Dad trades with the ships that come in from all over the world." Smiling brightly at Tayan, she elbowed him and asked, "What does your dad do?"

Tayan's smile vanished. Stonefaced, he turned to look up the road at nothing.

Quiet descended on the group like a shroud. Glier hung his head, letting out a heavy breath. Odif felt her heart drop out of her chest.

Oh, Goddess, not now! her mind screamed. The day had been going so perfect! She had hoped to avoid talking about Eric until this was over, and she could get Tayan alone.

Scorpio tried to lighten the moment. "It can't be that bad. It's not like he was a murderer."

Tayan looked at him with daggers in his eyes. Odif slammed her elbow into his side before she knew she meant to.

"Shut up!"

Scorpio looked at her in shock as she glared at him.

Tayan's voice was like ice. "Shouldn't we get going?"

Glier got to his feet, giving Scorpio a scowl. "Yes, we should. We're wasting daylight." He walked off, waving for Tayan to follow. "We'll take the lead."

Tayan was on his feet and beside Glier while Scorpio was still trying to figure out what they had said to turn his mood foul so quickly. Amber was also confused, looking at him and Odif as if they could tell her what she had done wrong.

Odif looked sadly at each of them. As far as she was concerned, the only ones who had a right to discuss this were her and Tayan. Still, she had to tell them something.

"Tayan's father was not a very nice guy. He held his mother by force--slavery, I think. She died not long after Tayan was born."

Amber felt like crawling under the log she was sitting on. "I didn't know."

Odif managed a weak grin. "It's not your fault. We should get going."

Scorpio let out a tired sigh. "His mother died a slave, his father was a bastard and the woman he loved was killed. No wonder he acts the way he does."

With a wave of her fingers Odif said, "Come on. We'll talk about it later."

She knew Amber was feeling bad about Tayan. The poor girl had been trying for weeks now to get him to at least smile. Having finally done it for a few short moments, she then caused him to drop back into his depressed state. Although she mouthed the words quietly, Odif heard her rehearsing ways to apologize to him. The more this kind girl struggled to think of a different way not to offend Tayan again, the more Odif's sadness for him turned into anger. Amber tried several times to get his attention, but only once did he even glance back at her.

Setting a brisk pace, Tayan went on until nightfall. As they set up camp for the night, he wandered off to get firewood. Amber started to go with him, but Odif held her back. She'd had enough of his foul moods. Her face was a blank mask as she passed Amber the staffs.

"Let me."

She walked up behind Tayan and tapped him firmly on the shoulder. He turned to glare at her. She grabbed him by the collar with both hands and slammed him against a tree.

"Are you alive?" she demanded harshly.

Grabbing her wrists, Tayan scowled back at her. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Answer the question!" she snapped.

"Don't I look it?" he sneered.

"No, you don't. You act like a walking corpse. Enough is enough!" she yelled, shaking him. Speaking softer but firmly, she said, "Lucinthia is dead. I am sorry about that, but people die and life goes on. You can't spend the rest of your life being a jerk to your friends."

Knocking her hands away, he shot back, "How do you know what I feel? You haven't lost a husband. She was my...everything!"

Odif backed up a step, planting her fists on her hips. "You think no one cares for you?"

Tayan opened his mouth to yell back at her, his body poised as if to fight. Pausing, he relaxed and turned away from her. "Leave me alone."

Odif grabbed him and turned him back. "No!"

They glared at each other, fists balled up tight. She was ready to talk this out or fight it out. Either way, he was going to listen.

"Damn it, Tayan, talk to me!" she barked.

"What for? Can you bring her back?" he shouted, throwing his arms up. "I'm the one who was suppose to die for her!"

"You were willing to give your life for her, right?"

"Yes!" he choked.

"Well, you didn't!" she shot back. "She gave her life for you, and now you're willing to waste her sacrifice by refusing to live. I thought you loved her!"

Tayan's face flushed in anger. "How dare you!"

She pointed a finger at him as if scolding a child. "If it had been you who died, you would want her to keep living and be happy, right?"

"I'm not the one who died!"

"Right!"

"Yes! She should be enjoying her hundred and fifth birthday, not be...ashes on the wind!" he cried.

"Lucinthia died so you could live. Show her you love her, remember her fondly, but live the life she has given you!"

Quietly, he said, "Maybe I don't want to live."

Dropping her hand, Odif shook her head. "You selfish bastard. Back there on the road are people who love you. I'm one of them. When you're in pain, so are we. You aren't just hurting yourself, but all of us. Don't you care about that?"

Tayan shook his head weakly.

"Yes, you do."

Tayan stepped up to her with daggers in his eyes. "I don't care!" he screamed in her face.

"Yes, you do!" she screamed back. Lacking anything else to do to prove someone still loved him, she threw her arms around him and held on tight. He tried to pry her off. She felt him punch her in the side. It wasn't a strong punch--she was willing to take many more to get him to feel something again. Anger and sorrow collided as he pulled weakly at her shirt. With her holding him tight, the gates that held his emotions back collapsed, filling him with grief.

He wanted to tell her again that he didn't care about them, or anything. As he opened his mouth, he burst into tears. His knees weakened, and Odif sagged down with him, still holding him as they sat.

"Yes, you do," she repeated softly, kissing his ear as he cried on her shoulder.

Amber watched them, a tear forming in her own eye. She turned and went back to the camp, glad that Tayan was getting his grief out but more than a bit jealous that she wasn't the one holding him.

As Tayan cried, his arms went around her. Odif stroked his hair as he poured out his pain. Her own eyes became cloudy, partly from sharing his grief but mostly from relief that he was starting to come to terms with Lucinthia's death. They stayed wrapped together as the forest deepened into night. Eventually, he quieted down and just sat holding her.

"You are the only family I really have," he murmured.

Odif felt her heart skip a beat. Did he know? Maybe she'd been worried about nothing. Tentatively, she said, "I guess you're right...brother."

Pulling back to look at her, he snorted. "If I'm your brother, we've been bad."

"Real bad." She grinned back. He didn't know. She wasn't sure if it was a relief or a disappointment. They had been bad; and, knowing him, he wouldn't take the news very well. Unsure of what to say, she patted his cheek as she mused, "We've had our fights, as well as our pleasures. No matter what, we look out for each other."

She wanted to tell him the truth; he deserved to know. Still, she was afraid to put him under any more stress or have him end up hating her.

"Like I said--you, me, the Company, we're family." Taking her hand from his face, he inspected it thoughtfully. "Maybe that's the real reason I came back here. Elrad is no place for me without Lucinthia. At least here I'm not alone." He was quiet for a few seconds then whispered, "I miss her so much."

At that moment she was on the verge of just letting it all come out. As she opened her mouth, she paused and lost her nerve. To convince herself that she was trying to tell him, she said, "Right. That means I'm your sister." Grabbing a handful of hair on the back of his head, she made him nod. "And little sister knows best. If it was me that died, I would want you to live on and be happy. I know Lucinthia would have wanted that, too."

"It's just so...hard." He sighed.

"I know." Pressing her forehead against his, she said, "I'm here if you need me. I love you."

He pulled her into a hug. "And I love you. Thanks...Sis."

"Any time, Bro."

* * *

Tayan and Odif returned to the camp to find the others around the fire. He stopped as they all looked up at him. He shifted in place and smiled sadly at Scorpio.

"I owe you an apology. You had no idea what my father was like. Neither did you, Amber. As Odif put it, I've been a selfish bastard."

Amber forced a smile. "You are forgiven. Please, come sit." she said, patting the ground beside her.

Tayan settled down next to her. His eyes were swollen from crying. He felt his mind was a little more organized, though. These people were his friends--they weren't the ones that had let his wife die. That anger was for someone else.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you back there in that village." Scorpio offered.

"You were right." Tayan told him. "I was endangering the rest of you--I deserved it." Turning to Liefelm, who was sitting beside Glier in his human form, he asked, "Those hoarcs you saw, are they heading towards us?"

Liefelm shook his head. "They're keeping ahead of us, and far from the river."

"They won't go near the river, if they're smart," Odif told him as she sat beside Scorpio. "Halshaken attack hoarcs on sight, and one-on-one, they're much tougher."

Her side was sore; but seeing Tayan start to act like himself, the soreness didn't bother her one bit.

"Have any idea why the hoarcs haven't bother us?" Tayan asked.

Odif nodded. "Liefelm figures there's around a hundred of them. My best guess is they're keeping track of us, waiting for more help to arrive."

"There's a human with them, too. He wears black armor," Liefelm said.

"A black knight," Scorpio explained. "Which means there are more we don't know about yet."

"If there are so many, why don't they attack us?" Amber asked.

Odif tipped her head towards the east. "The river is only a couple miles away, and if there is only one non-horc then they don't have magic. They know we could hold them off until halshaken come. Black knights do not like a fair fight."

Hoarcs were imitations of real halshaken, with scales instead of leathery skin, and their stubby snout and thin tail were no match for the long, heavy snout and wide, powerful tail halshaken used for swimming.

"Not unless they're nowhere near it," Glier added with a snort.

"They sent those pilgyns after us," Amber pointed out.

"They sent those pilgyns after helpless villagers. I don't think they knew we were here yet," Tayan corrected her.

There was a glint of eagerness in Glier's eye as he said, "They do now, and I can't wait to meet them in person."

* * *

The small fishing village of scattered huts and two community docks had been overrun. Not by any attacking foe, but by the tents of Lord Zodiac's Company on one side, the thick, bushy growths of the druid camps towards the woods and the reed-and-mud shelters of the halshaken along the riverbank. At first, the elven fishermen and trappers were terrified as they witnessed the large schools of alligator-like halshaken climbing onto the banks by their homes as druids and armored men appeared in large numbers

from the forest. Everyone hid inside with barred doors, afraid of what might be happening. It was a great relief to them when the three forces merely stood in the street and talked.

By the end of the day, the villagers ventured out cautiously. Children gaped wide-eyed at the leathery halshaken, having never seen the river people up close. The leaders--Lord Zodiac, his brother Scorpio and the white-robed wizard Duncan--stood with First Druid Trelem and his two next senior druids, Odif and Barkum, facing the three halshaken shamans, one from each of the largest tribes in Longforest.

To make the meeting easier, Duncan cast a spell of understanding on the group to eliminate the necessity for translators. Only Odif, Trelem and Zodiac could speak the lizard's tongue, and very few of the halshaken could understand human speech. Once his spell was done, the gray-haired wizard said, "We may speak freely."

The halshaken in front of Zodiac stood bolt upright, arms crossed over his chest in the pose of non-aggression. "We welcome the peacemaker and offer to fight by his people to rid our land of the evil impostors."

In the halshaken language, *hoarc* meant "evil impostor."

Zodiac resisted the urge to bow. Although it was a show of respect for humans, halshaken considered lowering one's body an invitation to do battle, much like the crouch they used to spring at an enemy. He crossed his arms over his chest as he stood upright.

"I welcome you, knowledge and wisdom of your tribe. We have found evil impostors gather near our dwellings--the way is by the water's arm on this side of the river."

The halshaken facing Trelem crossed his arms and addressed the green-robed Druid. "Knowledge and wisdom of the tree people, we gladly make our nests together to devour the impostors. Our warriors have seen flying impostors as well as those who walk. None may be allowed to escape."

"Be assure, none will. I have held council with the peacemaker and now hold council with our brothers of the river. As each of us holds our own strength, we should have our warriors also nest together. In that way, the combined power of our warriors will be greater," Trelem replied.

Standing behind him, Odif knew what that meant--each team would have halshaken warriors with it, and those who went by river would have to know how to swim. Stepping up, she crossed her arms, facing Trelem. To talk directly to the halshaken shaman would be an insult to both of them.

"Our knowledge and wisdom, as the river people cannot fly, so the peacemaker's warriors cannot swim. My humble request is to let those capable stay within their strengths."

Casting her a sharp look, Trelem nodded slightly. "Your words are heard, Odif."

She stepped back and listened as the six leaders hashed out the details, including when the cooperation would be over. Halshaken held no love for humans, as humans held no love for them. Not twenty years earlier, humans had hunted halshaken for their tough skins, as halshaken hunted humans and elves for their tasty meat. This practice by both sides built into an ongoing war. Lord Zodiac had managed to halt the fighting in southern Elrad and Longforest, and by endless talks with shamans and lords of the area had made an uneasy peace. In the interest of prosperity to all, territories were agreed on. Innocents were safe within their own boundaries, but if halshaken or human were caught in the other's territory, they were fair game.

An explosion in the woods made them all turn to see a large fireball rising into the sky. Fiery bits of debris rained down as the cloud of fire turned into smoke. At first, Odif thought that one of the wizards was showing off; then came another detonation on the north end of the village where a large part of the Company had gathered. At this explosion, she saw three spears arcing down towards them.

“Attack!” she cried. Focusing on one spear streaking down she waited until it got in range then pointed at it. “*Pioga Fammar!*”

The spear detonated in the air as her fire met it. A lightning bolt shot up to destroy the second. The third landed on a village hut, blowing it into burning shrapnel. Screaming villagers fled for their lives.

As Zodiac and the shamans screamed orders to men and lizards to find the source of the threat, Odif watched the sky for more spears. She felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Scorpio.

“Odif, we have to get back to our team. Tayan is in charge now.”

She nodded, not taking her eyes off the horizon. “Go back, tell them to stay low. I’ll be along as soon as I can.”

Another volley of spears shot up from the north. This time she saw where they were coming from. “There, you see?”

Beside her, Duncan nodded. “Yes, I’ll stop them. Go back to your team and protect them.”

Odif ran after Scorpio as Duncan used his magic to turn the spears around in mid-flight. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw five more descending on the riverbank where the halshaken were nested. There was no time to stop them--all she could do was dive for cover as they hit. This close, the ground shook as explosions rocked the air. She was showered with hot gravel and chunks of red-hot embers.

Brushing herself off as she staggered to her feet, she looked across the river where this new attack had come from. This far away, the figures on the banks were tiny; but it looked like halshaken fighting hoarcs. From a little farther downstream, six more spears shot up and arced towards them. Noting they were aimed for the south end of the village, she ran as hard as she could as she yelled a warning.

Spying a blue-robed wizard getting to his feet, she ran over and pulled him upright then pointed to the spears, which were reaching the top of their arc. “Destroy them!”

Dazed, he looked up at the sky. Seeing the spears coming at them, he swallowed and cast a spell.

Odif got ready to cast her fire again. In the sky, an eagle dove to grip a spear in its talons. As it flew towards the far bank, she saw the winged man she knew as Shilo dive down to grab another. The wizard beside her cast his magic, a pale white line that shot up to evaporate another spear. Casting her fire, she destroyed a fourth. It burned, but kept coming.

The two remaining spears plunged earthward. Not having time to cast again, she grabbed the wizard by his shoulders, kicked his feet from under him and pulled him to the ground.

She waited, but there was no explosion. Looking up, she saw one had hit not twenty feet away. It was a plain spear--she sensed no magic in it at all.

“What in the abyss was that?” the wizard choked.

“They were fakes,” she breathed. “We wasted our energy on fakes.”

The tactic was obvious--they wouldn't know if the spears were magic or not until they got very close. If they took time to check then the spears would hit.

Tayan had told her about such weapons having been used when King Alderlan's caravan was attacked. Mixing these new explosive spears with plain ones would make them waste their energy. They had to go destroy the source of these weapons.

“No!” the wizard spat. “Why did you knock me down?”

She explained quickly as she hauled him back to his feet. “Some of those spears explode on impact,” she said, pointing to the burning riverbank. “They are mixing the magic spears with plain ones.”

Seeing another volley rise skyward, she pointed to them. “Here comes more!”

As the spears arced over the river, more eagles came to snap them out of the air. One she recognized as Liefelm. He caught one and forced it into the river. Many eagles carried their spears back and dropped them where they had come from. Not a single one exploded.

As this was going on, she could hear occasional explosions to the north.

“Come on,” she said, grabbing the wizard by the collar.

“I can walk!” he snapped, trying to pull free as she led him along.

“Don't walk, run!” she commanded.

Odif ran back to their group to find a sight that made her heart swell with pride. Standing in the center of a large ring of people facing away from him as he gave commands, Tayan now looked like the man she knew he was.

Seeing her approach with the wizard, he pointed at her.

“Odif! Take Scorpio and that wizard, go see how many halshaken you can get up here.”

She nodded briskly and pulled the wizard in the right direction. “This way.”

The flustered wizard glared at her. “My name is Entaurus! I do not appreciate being dragged around!”

“Then move your ass!”

Seeing Scorpio beside her, she took off.

The spears stopped coming as Odif raced to the river. Skidding down the bank, she inspected four of the large alligator-like bodies before she found a live one. Talking to the halshaken in his own language, she quickly explained that she was going to heal him the best she could. He lay quiet, with only a twitch of his long, thick tail as she worked her healing energy. Once she was done, she told him to stay with Scorpio.

Going along the bank, she found five more who were not dead. In the river, the appearance of an occasional snout told her that the ones capable were crossing the river for a counterattack.

Right after she got the fifth one to his feet, shouts came from the north end of the village. A familiar face appeared at the top of the bank and looked down at her. It was Pynlee, Glier's wife. Her dark hair was in a frazzle, the chain mail holding in her extra-large bosom was caked with dirt. Waving her short sword, she yelled, "Hoarcs and pilgyns are attacking--Zodiac says get everyone you can to the north end!"

"Right!" Odif turned to Scorpio. "Go tell Tayan. I'm going to take this group up to the fight."

Scorpio hesitated as if about to argue. He wanted to go with her, but after a moment he ran off as she prodded him.

"Excuse me," Entaurus said, "but exactly who is in charge?"

"Of you, I am--now move," Odif told him then explained the situation to the halshaken as they jogged along. Creatures of water that they were, their legs tired quickly from running on land, so she told them to swim just offshore until she drew the enemy to them. Somewhere she had lost her sword. She wasn't too concerned by this--it was mostly a symbol and only good for close combat. She could do more damage with her staff.

She ran up the bank to clear a dock and found the battle right before her. Not fifty feet ahead, hoarcs and pilgyns fought mixed groups of warriors and druids. Near the water, it was mostly halshaken who tangled with the evil creations. The ringing of steel and the crackling of magic filled the air as the battle raged. The halshaken she'd saved came up out of the water to join the fight.

What Lord Zodiac had called together was the cream of Longforest power. Although the hoarcs and pilgyns outnumbered them, the evil creations were falling by the hundreds to the best warriors, druids and halshaken. Odif charged in with a wild battle scream, her staff spinning to crush two hoarc skulls. Entaurus stayed behind her, turning hoarcs into gray dust as he shot off his white bolts of pure energy.

Soon, Tayan and the band he had gathered were around her. Scorpio fought to her side. Slowly, the Company formed their line then pushed through the oncoming hoard, killing creatures almost as quickly as they met them.

When the creatures were whittled down to those being finished off or running away, Zodiac sent a messenger to Tayan.

Tayan thrust his sword in the air.

"Break off!" he cried.

One of the halshaken jumped onto the back of a wounded pilgyn as another snapped its jaws onto a knee and slapped its tail into the creature's other leg, making it fall. The pilgyn died with a squeaking scream as more halshaken joined in to tear it into chunks.

"Break off!" Tayan yelled again. "Odif, tell them to break off!"

Odif got their attention by smacking them lightly with her staff. Nine halshaken were supposed to join the "land people" and vowed to fight with her; the others insisted on going across the river to help their tribe

kill hoarcs on that side. As they split, she explained this to Tayan.

“We're going into the woods and circle around to the west!” Tayan announced. Looking at his group, he pointed to Odif and a dark-haired elf.

“Odif, Zit, you two will stay front and center.” Pointing to the human wizard and a blond elf wizard, he said, “Entaurus, Gloredaniel, stay in the middle. Amber, stay towards the back and keep your eyes open. Everyone else, make a battle line. Odif, tell the halshaken to keep Amber between them-she is our only priestess right now.” A quick glance at Odif, and he added, “Amber will reserve her energy for healing. Let's move!”

They got in position and moved towards the trees. On the way, they passed dead pilgyns, piles of hoarc dust and far too many of Zodiac's fallen warriors. A tear came to Odif's eye as she saw a burnt, twisted body she recognized. Most of his flesh had been torn or burnt off, but she knew it was Glenn. As she passed his body, she paid him tribute by thinking of the times she had gone through ceremonies with him. No more would she see his handsome face or hear his cackling laugh.

“Goodbye, friend,” she whispered.

It wasn't only Glenn's body that darkened her mood. Being sensitive to all living things around her, she felt more death than just the people lying about. She felt the pain of animals who had gotten caught in the blasts, as well as the silent agony of trees that were torn apart. This new weapon didn't just kill combatants. It wiped out everything caught in the blast.

They hadn't gotten fifty steps into the forest when the surge of magic caught her attention. She looked back to see the cause.

Beside her, Zit's jaw dropped as he looked up.

The sky was full of dragons. They were flying along in rows, claws full of what looked like sticks. Odif had a bad feeling she knew their intent. As she watched, the dragons began dropping their loads onto where the rest of the Company was cleaning up the remaining hoarcs.

“Spears!” Tayan yelled.

She moved to go warn Zodiac, and someone tackled her. Tayan screamed for everyone to get down. A shield was dropped over her head as the ground began to rumble with a staccato of heavy explosions. The thundering booms continued to shake the air as tons of rock and debris rained down. Although she couldn't hear the screams, she felt them, as well as the terror from all around her. She felt the trees splinter and burn as they were blasted apart. From far off, she felt halshaken and fish squeezed to death by hammer-like shocks running through the water. Her long whine of agony was lost amid the shockwaves that vibrated the air back and forth.

It seemed forever before she was pulled to her feet. In front of her, Scorpio was asking her in a loud voice if she was all right. Dazed, she nodded weakly. She didn't feel any pains in her body; the pain was all around her. He began to pull her deeper into the woods. She turned to look for Tayan and stumbled. On a second try, she saw him leading Amber and most of the band back towards the pits of blackened earth that used to be a village. She wanted to tell him not to go that way, that way was death. She couldn't bear the thought of her Tayan dying in such a horrid manner. She wanted to pull away from Scorpio and go back to help him.

She didn't have the strength to try.

Chapter 2

The black knight known as Lash walked along the line of elven males kneeling with their hands tied behind their backs. Their expressions ranged from defeat for the older ones to open contempt in the strong youths. Behind them stood tall, scale-covered lizards that bore swords and shields. A few of the hoarcs twitched their tails eagerly, waiting for word to kill one of the tasty little elves. Across the street, bound and on their knees, were the elven women, also with hoarc guards. All who were too young to be of any real use were corralled in one of the huts.

Taking this village had been simple. They came in before dawn under the silence spell the wizards had put on Lash's troops. They entered the huts unnoticed and captured every elf alive. The only sounds were the pleas for mercy from the women and the terrified cries of the children.

Reaching the end of the line of prisoners, Lash turned on a heel and started back down. There were sixty-eight males, enough to serve his purposes. In the elven tongue, he announced, "You are now my servants, you will do as I command."

One blue-eyed youth glared up at him. "I'll die first!"

Lash grinned evilly at him. "No, they will." he said, pointing to the women. "When one of you displeases me, one of your females gets whipped. If you disobey outright, one dies. When the women are all dead, I'll start on the children."

One of the older elves, with more gray than brown in his short hair, had tears in his eyes. "Leave us alone, we have done nothing to you!"

"Silence!" Lash barked. "All of you will do as you are told! Open your mouths again, and I will begin whipping your women!" Stepping out to survey the whole line, he said, "You better listen closely. Each of you will get a uniform and a sword. There is a battle to fight. Once this is done, you will all be freed. Any treachery will be met with a woman's death." He gestured at the ravens that lined the edge of the roof across the street. "They will see and report to me if any of you fails to give battle or is foolish enough to turn on those at your backs. I will not hesitate to behead every woman and child in this village." Pausing for a moment to let it sink in, he added, "All of you fight bravely, and none of them will be harmed."

"We cannot fight other elves!" a plump male stated.

Turning to a hoarc, Lash said, "Bring me one of the women." To the plump elf, he said, "You will be fighting halskaken and humans, neither of which you love. For your tongue, this one gets five."

A look of shock crossed the elf's face. "No, please!" he whined.

"Six!" Lash snapped, "You want her to have more?"

The frightened elf had his mouth opened to plead. It was all he could do to stay quiet.

Lash took his bullwhip and unrolled it as the hoarc dragged a young female by her pale hair. Her eyes were shut tight as she cried, twisting in vain to free herself. The hoarc pulled up on her wrists, forcing her arms vertical, and made her kneel with her forehead touching the ground.

This was something the black knight had learned to like because of his master, Hans. Torturing a pretty creature like this was one of life's few great pleasures. He could have her dress off without ever touching her skin, gentle snaps would tear it from her and barely leave a red mark.

That was not what he had planned. Picking his target, he pulled back and brought the whip forward. Jerking back at the right instant, he landed the tip in the middle of her right buttock with aloud crack. Bits of cloth and flesh flew as she tried to jerk upright, howling in pain. The second snap landed on the side of her left thigh. She managed to kick herself prone, flopping and screaming. The third he placed mid-back, careful not to hit her spine. He waved for the hoarc to let her go.

The next two he did in quick succession. The fourth one, also to her back, made her arch against the pain, her piercing scream turned into a pitiful moan. He laid the fifth one on her lower back then waited for her to turn over as he knew she would. She did, and as soon as her belly and chest was thrust up in an attempt to protect her stinging back, he let the last one go, carefully guiding the whip to her chest. The small hump of her right breast exploded into a red spray. The woman jerked half upright, face wide with shock, in too much agony to even make a sound. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she fell limp. He allowed himself to enjoy the sight of her unmoving, bleeding body for a moment as wailing cries of horror came from the other women. The sounds of elves vomiting came from both sides of the street.

Waving for the hoarc to drag her back, he returned his attention to the males. The ones who were not emptying their stomachs met him with solid stares of pure hatred. Catching the eyes of the now white-faced plumpelf, he smiled. "Now you have seen what a whipping means. Burn this into your memories, do not forget it!" Hefting his whip, he announced, "This is my weapon of punishment, so I'll let you decide how horrid it will be if I have to take heads."

Strolling along the line, he ordered them to their feet and had the hoarcs lead them out of the village. He watched them go, quite pleased with himself.

Lantharum, one of his wizards, came up beside him. The man's black robes bore silver symbols over the chest and down both sleeves. Quietly, he said, "Sir Lash, the ravens have reported druids and halshaken are coming, only a few miles due south. Tayan Montara is with them."

Lash frowned--word from the Master herself was that no harm was to come to that one. Dire consequences far worse than death were promised to whomever raised a sword to him. "Our Master said not to harm him, but she did not say we could not bind him. Hold him if you can. If elves get him, fine."

"Master Hans has reported Elradian troops are also on their way in force." Lantharum grinned, "It will be quite a show."

Lash knew Calain had led humans on a killing spree into Elrad then retreated to Newburg. Now, the remnants of Longforest power were headed towards the town. With his elves in Elradian uniforms attacking the druids and the real elven army on their way hunting for humans, blood was going to run in rivers. He wished he could sit on a rooftop and watch the carnage.

"Yes, indeed, it would be fun to watch." He grinned then with a shake of his head, he said, "No time--we have work to do. No matter the outcome of the battle, make sure all of our elven friends die then meet us two days north."

Nodding absently, Lantharum glanced over at the women and licked his lips. "There are more than enough slaves here. May I have a couple?"

"Not until Hans gets his pick. You'll get to look over what isn't taken when we meet. First, go kill some druids," Lash told him sternly.

The wizard scowled. "Save at least one good one for me. I tire of old women and mangled wenches. I serve you well, and I deserve a decent female or two for my experiments!"

"You do good work for our Master," Lash corrected. "I will save a pretty one, unmarked." He looked beyond him to the procession of hoarcs following the elves. "Your troops are leaving, perhaps you should be with them."

Lantharum held back a comment and bowed. "For the glory of our Master," he said formally. With a wave of his hand, he sent the ravens to wing then turned and walked off.

Lash waited until they had gone then turned to the women. Their crying had subsided; those near the unconscious one knelt with their heads turned away.

"Kalinara needs attention. May I be allowed to save her life?"

The woman who spoke knelt with as much dignity as one could. Her face was a mask as she voiced her request. Lash sensed she held some kind of power here in this flyspeck of a farming village. He did like the golden color of her hair and the fire in her blue eyes. Her sacklike peasant's clothes could be changed for more suitable translucent silk if her body held the same fine quality as her face did. This one he would keep for himself.

"You can heal her?" he asked lightly.

"I can tend to her with salve and bandages--she is bleeding to death."

Her voice held no hatred, just cold fact. Lash waved a hand at the hoarc near her.

"You, get this one up and collect what she needs. Do not unbind her until after you return." To the woman, he said, "Any treachery, and a child dies."

"I am not going to try to escape," she assured him. The hoarc behind her jerked her to her feet by her wrists. Lash was amazed at how she could look so graceful getting up in such a manner. Breaking her was going to be fun.

He ordered for the women to be tied to each other by their necks and hobbled. By the time this was done, the golden-haired one returned with the hoarc carrying the basket of items she'd had him collect. Lash had his other wizard inspect the basket for anything magical or any weapons. Satisfied there was nothing but cloths and jars of ointment, he had the woman unbound to attend the one on the ground.

"Get ready to move out!" he barked. "Children in the wagons, slaves in front. Barkil, you and your hoarcs take the lead."

Watching over the assembly, he had his horse brought to him. There was a commotion as the hoarcs tried to get his now semi-conscious victim to her feet. The woman who had wrapped her wounds was trying to persuade them to let her in the wagon with the children.

Lash mounted and rode over to them.

"Put the wounded one out of her misery. This one goes in the slave line." He grinned.

The woman's eyes widened.

"Please let her live--Kalinara has done nothing. She will make a good slave," she pleaded.

"She's deformed." he told her with a smirk then nodded to the hoarc holding a sword to Kalinara's throat.

"Fresh meat!" the hoarc hissed and slashed her deep.

The woman who had just done her best to bandage her niece now watched her die like an animal. A hoarc flung her body over his shoulder and started off. A single tear ran down her face as she looked up at Lash.

"I am Thalansala. Jenosalinthia is my great-niece. Her husband is Eric Redman. Does this mean anything to you?"

"Should it?" Lash laughed, wondering if she was trying to be ransomed.

Her body was quaking in anger, but her voice remained even. "Sooner or later, the Red Man will find out what you've done here."

Lash leaned forward in his saddle. "And this is suppose to scare me?" he asked, never losing his grin.

He then noticed the hoarc that had been binding her ankles start to back off, casting a worried look at the elf. The other hoarcs also put a few steps between themselves and her.

The woman met Lash's gaze defiantly. "You now know who will kill you."

He gritted his teeth. One mention of a myth, and the hoarcs suddenly turned cowards.

"Let him come, I will destroy him. I am going to take great pleasure in flaying you, slave!" he spat. Glaring at the hoarcs, he growled, "Put her in line--move!"

Making sure the hoarcs obeyed, he watched until the woman was tied to the last in line. With everyone in place, he got the column started north.

* * *

Through the eyes of the ravens, Lantharum watched the path of the druids and halshaken. Not wanting to fight druids in the woods where their power was greatest, he positioned his forces behind a rock wall with an open field before them. The elves were obedient, kneeling tight against the wall with the hoarcs. He cast a spell to obscure them and waited.

The wait wasn't long. On the far side of the field, four groups appeared. They walked cautiously in a line, and Lantharum noted that, behind the armed humans and halshaken, robed figures accompanied each group. He knew at least a few, if not all, were wizards. He made the decision then not to send the hoarcs out. They would not survive, and there was little he could do without endangering himself.

Bending low, he dispelled his magic and said just loud enough for the elves to hear, "They are coming. On my command, the elves attack. Hoarcs, shoot arrows until the elves close on them. Remember, elves, the lives of your families depend on how well you fight."

One elf nodded grimly. "We know we will die. You hurt our families, and every one of us will return to haunt you."

"Noted, elf," Lantharum said. He didn't fear ghosts or flimsy threats from a doomed elf. He did need their cooperation, so he managed to look sincere. Closing his eyes to look through those of the raven perched in the tree off to the side of the field, he saw the enemy had come halfway across.

"Attack!" he hissed.

"For our kin!" one of the elves yelled and jumped over the wall. The others poured after him, screaming their fear more than any real battle cry.

The raven watched the people in the middle of the field pause in confusion. They looked at each other as elves raced at them, waving swords. The confusion ended as arrows started raining down around them.

Few arrows hit. Shields came up, and wizards raised their arms to deflect the shafts to land harmlessly behind them. A few of the arrows turned in mid-air to go sailing back, nearly making it to the wall they were shot from. There was one last volley as the elves met them; a few elves fell as arrows struck their backs.

The elves didn't fare well at all. Being farmers, they were unaccustomed to battle. Though they outnumbered their foes, they fell like wheat before the scythe. The few who only defended themselves lasted a bit longer than the first swing of a sword. Even a scantily clad woman tore into them, beating and kicking them with her spinning staff and lightning-fast feet. The wizards watched carefully for any other attacks as the elves were slaughtered without any use of magic. This group was very organized.

Letting the ravens take flight, Lantharum opened a Gate to the main camp, which sat at their rendezvous miles north of the village. Hustling the hoarcs through the shimmering oval in the air, he followed them and shut the magical portal.

He went down the row of tents to that of Hans, guarded by an elven female clad in thin white silk that covered her without hiding her shape beneath. Her eyes were fixed forward as she held a spear with both hands. She had no mind--her name, her very self had been burned out of her head. The only thing she knew were the commands given her.

Aware of this, Lantharum didn't attempt to enter the tent. Standing out of the zombie's reach, he called, "Master Hans, Lantharum here. I have come with news."

"Guard, allow him to enter."

There was no response from the woman, but Lantharum knew it was now safe to go in. As he passed her, he reached up to fondle her. Her flesh was warm and supple; the body was still alive. She had to be a fresh one; usually they became cold and stiff after a week. The ones that were a few weeks old deteriorated badly.

Pulling the tent flap aside, Lantharum found Hans lounging in his armchair. His light hair and handsome features made the wizard wonder why he had to remove women's minds to have his way with them. Another woman, this one human with thick dark hair, knelt beside him, holding the tray with his lunch on it. She wore the same transparent silk and had a much more rounded figure than the elf outside. The blank stare was the same.

Hans sat up, taking his feet from the footstool in front of him. Motioning to it, he said, "Lantharum, have a seat and tell me your news."

Obeying, the wizard took a long look at the curvy brunette before he shifted his attention to his master.

"Sir Lash has captured more elven slaves. I used the males to attack the oncoming druids. No hoares were seen, nor was I. I'm sorry to say none of the druids were killed--the elves were rather poor fighters."

Nodding briefly, Hans took a sip from his cup and put it back on the tray. "Is that all?"

"Tayan Montara was with them. I dared not cast magic."

Hans took on a thoughtful look. "Our Master said we could not touch him. The elves can, however. A troop of elves entered Newburg today--if he gets killed in the fighting then we are blameless."

"Should I assist in convincing the elves that humans are out to destroy them?" Lantharum asked.

"Our Master is taking care of that. The elven king has been convinced that all humans are against him. The governor in the province also believes firmly that all humans are their enemies. While they fight, our job is to get our forces deep into Elrad unseen and wait for our Master to give us orders. Lash is on his way?"

"Yes, with slaves and their children."

Looking at the slave, Hans told her, "Eat the food on that tray, drink from the cup."

The slave did as she was told, mechanically stuffing the food into her mouth.

"They last longer if you feed them," Hans noted. "We'll leave as soon as Lash arrives and we process his slaves. Go to Gast's camp outside Newburg, tell him to pull back and go north. Our friends at the river forks have done their work and will be joining us in the mountain caves until we are assembled. There we wait for the word to march on to Elrad."

Rising, Lantharum bowed. "Yes, master. Shall I return here?"

Hans rubbed his chin in thought. "No, return to Lash, tell him to collect all the slaves he can on his way

here. We'll be needing them."

"For what?" Lantharum asked. Besides the two he had here, the wizard knew Hans had a dozen more that hadn't started looking bad yet.

Hans broke into a grin. Reaching over, he ran a hand over the brunette. "I have plans for them besides pleasure. You'll find out when the time comes."

* * *

Tayan stood amid the broken bodies, his sword clenched with white knuckles. The elf he looked down on was no soldier. First of all, the boy was too young. The calloused palms of the dead hands told him the boy was a farmer. The other bodies looked the same. Some were older, and a few were very old, much too old to be engaged in combat unless this was a last resort. The uniforms they wore were tattered. He walked through them searching for any signs of life, praying that one still lived to tell him why they had attacked. He had no such luck.

Being hot for hoarc blood after the rout at the river, he had believed too quickly that these elves were hoarc imitations when Mother Frieda and Sister Amber said they sensed evil in front of them. He slashed away freely, still seeing the smoldering bodies they had left behind. Now, as he gazed at the broken body of a plump elf, bile crept into his throat. They had heroically defeated a pack of farmers.

Scorpio returned to the middle of the field. Walking up to Trelem, he told the druid, "There is no sign of the archers, they must have fled."

"There were no tracks leaving, they had to have left by magical means," Odif added.

Joining them, Amber offered, "Once we killed the elves, I no longer sensed evil."

"Those elves were not evil," Odif snapped. "They left us no choice but to kill them." Waving her staff at the bodies, she said, "They looked more frightened than fierce, like they were desperate."

Scorpio snorted. "If this is Elrad's army, they *are* desperate."

"The question is, why did they attack us?" Trelem asked. "We have no quarrel with elves. We've lived in peace for quite some time."

"Maybe they thought the halshaken were hoarcs," Entaurus suggested.

Tayan shook his head sadly. "Not likely."

Even farmers could tell a halshaken from a hoarc. He was still a High Lord of Elrad. He had killed his own people. Gripping his sword tightly, he choked, "This shouldn't have happened."

Hearing *hoarc* and *halshaken* used in the same sentence, the halshaken named Donatelo tapped Odif on the arm and asked for an explanation. As Odif explained it to him, Trelem called everyone together. They were all upset about the battle--Gloredaniel was in tears and Tayan looked like he was going to cry at

any moment. Scorpio felt a bit jealous when Odif hugged him, but understood they were old friends. Zit just stared blankly at the bodies scattered about.

With everyone gathered together, Tayan announced, "Gather wood for a pyre. These elves will be treated with respect. If any other elves attack us, we try to stop them first and, if possible, render them unconscious. We will do everything we can to keep from killing them."

"And if we can't stop them?" Entaurus asked.

"If there is no other way then we kill," Trelem stated. Turning to Shilo, he asked, "Have you seen a village close by in your flights?"

Shilo bobbed his head. "Yup, not too far ahead. Want me to go check it?"

Tayan spoke up. "Not by yourself. Odif, Zit, go with him. Take no chances, see what you can find out and return to us. We'll be walking north once we're done here."

Nudging Odif with an elbow, Shilo asked, "Hey, you going to fly with me?"

Looking at him quizzically, she said, "I won't be able to help you in bird form."

"Then just make yourself a pair of wings like mine," he said, flapping his briefly.

Odif was about to say she couldn't do that, she could only assume the shape of animals found in nature. She then realized that Shilo's people all had wings. She had never thought of taking on the form of another people, but it could be done. With a human shape, she could cast her spells from the air or fight if need be.

"I'll need to study you first. Remove your armor and tunic."

"Ohh, this sounds fun!" he beamed and stripped to his waist. He twitched and asked her to scratch him in a particular spot as Odif concentrated in his musculature. She rubbed his barrel-like chest, asking him to flex his wing so she could tell which sets of muscles were used in flight. She found his sides were heavily endowed to provide thrust. On his back were two extra sets, as well as additional pectoral muscles at mid-ribs. Besides that, his shoulder blades were much longer, the bones providing pivot joints. The wings themselves were thick and had two elbow joints, but other than that they were essentially bird's wings.

Once she had his physique memorized, she handed her staff to Amber and her shirt to Scorpio. Scorpio tried to stand in front of her to give her a bit of the modesty she seemed to lack as she closed her eyes and began the transformation. As he watched, she grew a bit shorter and wider, and two white oblong shapes sprouted from her back. Ripples of muscle appeared below her breasts as the oblong shapes blossomed into a beautiful set of white-feathered wings. Opening her eyes, she flapped her new acquisitions a couple times, curving them around her body to view them.

"All right, now you look normal!" Shilo grinned.

"Here goes," she announced nervously, and motioned everyone back. Pumping her wings in earnest, she sent small blasts of wind down and away as she lifted off her feet. Her face screwed up in concentration, she moved forward, hanging a few feet off the ground then slowly started to move away and climb skyward. Shilo took off much more gracefully with a fraction of the effort.

Watching them, Zit cleared his throat. "I think I'll run." He melted into the shape of a cougar and sprinted away.

* * *

At first, flying was hard work. When Odif was in bird form, flying seemed as natural as walking. Flying like this, she had to concentrate on every movement of her wings. Shilo stayed just above her, coaching her on when to pump her wings and when to set them to glide. He gave her brief instructions on how to turn and land as a collection of log huts appeared below them.

"Me first," he told her. Before she could say it would be safer together, he turned over on his back and dropped straight down.

Sure she would end up falling if she tried that, Odif opted to tuck her wings in and dive after him. She spread them again as the treetops came closer and found that her downward speed was a bit more than she had planned on. Below her, Shilo shot down the street not more than a few feet off the ground. At the end of the street, he pulled up sharply to miss a long hut that looked like a meeting hall.

Odif was falling fast. Her wings tried to pin themselves against her back; straining muscles, she cupped them, letting the outer portions grip the air. She was becoming horizontal, but not fast enough as she passed over the last trees and into the village.

Her impulse was to grab her wings and use her arms to help pull them out flat. At the moment, she had them out in front of her for balance; and she knew bending back would send her into a spin, and she'd hit the ground for sure. As she dropped below the rooftops, the street came up to meet her. With a hard pull on aching muscles, she grunted in effort and caught more air in wings that were trying to tear themselves off her back.

She leveled out a scant knee-level distance from the rough gravel racing by underneath that would rip her skin to shreds if she hit it at this speed. Blasting out a breath of relief that she wasn't going to be ground into paste, she looked up and saw the meeting hut racing at her.

Odif's heart was in her throat; she had no idea how to save herself! To move her wings at all this close to the ground would send her in a wild tumble, but if she didn't do something she was going to hit the log wall at full tilt. Either way was death. A cry escaped her as she worked to angle her wings to gain some altitude. A quick idea flashed through her mind to slap her hands on the ground to help her get higher. The ground was just far enough below her, however, that she knew she would not make contact unless she dropped another foot, erasing the small gain she had just made. As the imposing wall raced at her, she kept trying to climb as she braced herself for the impact.

Suddenly, arms wrapped around her just below her shoulders.

"Up!" Shilo yelled as he hauled her vertical. All Odif could do was keep her wings set as they closed the last few yards to the wall. Climbing quickly with Shilo's help, she bent her knees back as the edge of the roof passed below her.

As they banked together, she realized she was clinging tightly to the arms around her.

"Can you land without splattering yourself?" he chuckled.

Her breath was coming back to her. "Yes," she said weakly.

She caught the air as he let go. She flew slower as she descended again into the street, this time pulling herself vertical to stumble into a jog as she landed. Her heart was racing from exertion and fear. Her legs were rubbery but held her up. She had never been so glad to be standing on her own two feet.

Landing beside her, Shilo waved a finger at her in a "no-no" gesture.

"You should practice a while before trying that. You could get yourself killed."

"I didn't mean to do it," she said as she looked around. "Did we scare everyone inside?"

"I didn't see anyone before you tried to ram that building," he told her. "You look in the ones on the left, I'll get the right. If you sense anyone just holler, don't go in."

Starting their search, they went down the street, looking into every hut. By the time they reached the end, Zit had arrived. He stayed in cat form, sniffing for evidence as he went along. The only thing they found was a large red stain in the road where blood had been spilled. Noting this, they searched inside every hut for clues as to where the villagers had gone. Odif found traces of magic, but very faint, nothing powerful enough to make the entire population flee in panic or force them to send their men to attack. Zit changed into elven form so he could tell them what he had found.

Standing in the deserted street together, the trio attempted to puzzle out the mystery.

"It happened early this morning, whatever it was," Zit told them.

"How do you know that?" Shilo asked.

"The bedding in almost every hut was on the floor," Odif explained.

"That's abnormal?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"For most people, yes."

Zit nodded down the street. "They left in a panic. Whoever was hurt in the street was taken with them."

Odif agreed. "Yes, we saw no pyres, and there is no body."

"Maybe they were still alive," Shilo said with a shrug.

Odif shook her head sadly. "There is enough blood there for two elves. Whoever it was, was bleeding very badly. If they were alive this morning, they aren't now."

Zit's eyes brightened. "Yes! They took him with them. With that pool, there has to be a blood trail. They left in a hurry, so I doubt they stopped to bind the wound until they were clear of the village. If we cannot find them then at least we will know which way they went."

Odif knew what he was thinking. "A wolf has the best nose and will not attract attention. I'll fly over you with Shilo and--"

"Whoa, whoa!" Shilo interrupted, shaking his hands at her. Pointing at Zit, he said, "You follow the trail," then turned his finger to Odif. "You go back and tell the others--and try not to run into anything. Those people are probably scared enough without you dropping out of the sky on them! I'll fly on ahead and let you know if I find anything. Me and Zit will be back before nightfall, whatever we find."

Odif knew he was right, but the way he said it irritated her. She watched as Zit took on the form of a gray wolf then trotted down the street with his nose to the ground. She was about to take off when Shilo put a hand gently on her shoulder.

"Hey, be careful. You look real cute like that, so don't go banging yourself up," he said with a grin.

Behind his attempt at humor, she saw concern in his eyes. "I will. Keep yourself and Zit out of trouble."

"I try," he said with a gleam in his eye. He then jumped into the air and was off with barely a flap of his wings.

Odif did a little better at this takeoff. Running down the street, she began to pump her wings. More used to the new muscles, she lifted off with much less effort than the first time. Climbing just above the treetops, she headed back towards the others.

* * *

Zit padded along through the overgrown fields, following the faint vapors wafting up from the ground. He had left the road; and even though the blood trail had ended, he still smelled elves. He had also picked up the scent of hoarcs. The blood trail had gone off the road, as did that of the hoarcs.

Whenever he shifted into an animal, his intelligence also made the shift. Being in canine form, he was not able to reason what this information meant, he just kept following the trail. He saw a large winged shape pass overhead. He knew the shape of his friend. His friend was beckoning him to follow faster.

Breaking into a loping run, Zit chased after him, still aware of the scents he was following. His friend flew low and landed up ahead. Zit ran to him then sat by him, licking his nose to help cool himself a bit. The wolf would not understand words, but the elf could. Thinking of the elf, Zit changed.

Once he had completed the transformation, he got up from all fours and told Shilo, "I smelled hoarcs. Either they have the elves or were chasing them."

"They got em." Shilo grimaced. "The women are roped together, and there is a wagon loaded with children towards the rear. One black knight, a wizard and around a hundred hoarcs. I don't think we can free them by ourselves."

"Maybe we can slow them down until we get the others here," Zit suggested.

Scratching his head, Shilo frowned at him. "This is getting weirder all the time. If hoarcs were chasing

them, why did the men attack us?"

Zit's face turned grim. He recognized these tactics. "The same thing was done near the Great Lake during the War of Tears. They probably came in before dawn and dragged them out of bed. They forced the men to attack us by threatening to kill their families. The bloodstains we found are most likely from an unlucky woman who was used to show they meant business. It is a cruel but very effective way to get people to fight for you."

"And we are to think Elrad is responsible," Shilo concluded. "What will they do with the women and children now?"

"Slavery. That is, unless we charge in there. Then they'll start killing innocents hoping we will either back off or spend our energy trying to save those we can. Meanwhile, the leaders will disappear."

Shilo's fists clenched. When it came to fighting, he had always been one to jump right in and start whipping on someone. This was not combat, it was lowdown and cowardly, hiding behind defenseless people. "And if we go for the leaders then all those elves will die."

Zit nodded. "Did they see you?"

"Nope. So, how do we kill that slime?"

"We don't, not yet. Go tell Trelem, I'll shadow them. We have to get those women and children away from them somehow. Once they settle in for the night, I'll come find you. Set camp near an oak tree." Zit knelt down and shifted back into wolf form.

"Good luck, buddy." Shilo bent down and scratched behind his ear.

* * *

The sun was dipping below the horizon when Trelem led the group into the elven village to get ready for the coming battle. The huts allowed the wizards to prepare spells for later use. The large oak at the end of the street was needed for the druid rituals and to prepare acorns, bark and leaves for the fight. Mother Freida, Sister Amber and the two knights knelt together, praying for the safe return of the captives and for victory over the forces of evil. The swords and shields of the slain elves the halshaken now had and were sharpening their blades.

Zit returned after dark, stepping out of the oak tree to greet Odif, who still bore her wings. They all went to the meeting hall to discuss what to do.

Jo-Jo the wizard cast a protection spell around the large room to ensure no prying eyes or ears could know their plans. Clearing away the tables and chairs, they gathered around Zit in the middle of the room as he made a simple sketch of the hoarc camp on the dirt floor. He explained the layout as he drew.

"In the center--here--are the women, they're still tied together. In a triangle around them are three fires, hoarcs around each. Just in front about twenty feet away is the knight and at least one wizard in a tent, with hoarc guards. In the back are the children--the wagon looks to be covered with a wooden cage. I

saw ten hoarcs around them. The perimeter has four sets of three guards, and the nearest oaks are here, fifty feet to the left, and here, just behind the children, thirty feet away." Zit sat back and looked up at Trelem. "Any direct attack we can come up with will not stop them from killing the women and children if they choose to."

The halshaken shaman gave a snap of his long jaws to indicate he had something to say.

"We must not let the presence of innocents stop us from destroying what we must," he hissed.

"Agreed," Scorpio told him, "but we have to save all of them we possibly can."

"What are the women wearing?" Gloredaniel asked.

"Peasant clothes--dresses, blouses and skirts, nothing unusual." Zit told her.

Nodding, she said, "What if Jo-Jo teleports in among the women and protects them while I do the same with the children. Entaurus and Thlad will still be able to fight their wizards. If we all rush in, the confusion will give us the upper hand."

"How are we all going to get there?" Glier asked. "Maybe four wizards and two druids can show up by popping in. The rest of us have to walk it."

"I can fly in with Odif," Shilo offered, "That's two more."

"Hoarcs also see well at night, better than most of us," Tayan pointed out. "We go in there tonight, and we will not have surprise on our side."

"In the daytime with hoarc swords at the women's throats, we have no chance at all," Scorpio argued. "Halshaken are cold-blooded, the hoarcs will not see them coming."

Odif shook her head. "No, Tayan is right. We have to go in the daytime. Look at setup of their camp--they're expecting trouble. Their placement will allow them to fight us and kill the captives--that is, if we could get enough people there to do any good."

"We are not giving up on those people!" Scorpio said firmly. "There has to be a way to get enough of us in there to at least escape with the elves. We can go back and kill the hoarcs later."

"Zitalenarius, which way are they heading?" Trelem asked.

Zit was pleased that someone could pronounce his name. "They're following a streambed, heading for the river. By how fast they are traveling, I'd say they make it before noon tomorrow. If we can catch them crossing, maybe we can divide them up."

"We can wait on the river bottom and drag them under," the shaman suggested.

"That will make a few hoarcs disappear." Shilo snorted. "What about all the others?"

"No, not the hoarcs...the women!" Tayan said thoughtfully. Looking around at the others, he said, "I think I have an idea that will work. Jo-Jo, Gloredaniel, Entaurus, Zit, Odif, Shilo and Thlad, you can get yourselves to the river. Can any of you take someone else with you?"

Jo-Jo nodded. "I can carry one other person with me."

"So can I," Thlad added.

"I'll fly someone," Shilo offered.

Raising his arms up, Trelem stopped them. "I can transport everyone with Odif's help. Tayan, tell us what it is you have in mind."

"It will be risky, but I think we can get the elves away from them," Tayan told them. "We'll have to go tonight, when the ravens won't be watching. A large part of our success will depend upon the halshaken here. The timing will have to be perfect. Here's my plan..."

* * *

The first hoarcs appeared on the riverbank where the gravel of the dry creek bed spread out into a fan. They carefully scanned the far bank only abowshot away. Seeing nothing moving, a few waded through the chest-high water to the other side. Satisfied it was safe, they motioned for the others and kept going. Lash came behind on his horse, followed by a line of hoarcs. As the women were pulled into the water, none of the hoarcs noticed the swirls upstream. The women stumbled along tied together. One woman slipped, causing the ropes to jerk on her neighbors. The hoarc next to the lead woman grabbed her arms to keep the line going.

"Please untie us, we're all going to drown!" a young elfmaid in the middle of the line cried.

"Shut up and move!" the lead hoarc hissed. He staggered, his face opened in shock. As he opened his mouth to scream, he was dragged under.

The lead woman stopped, her eyes wide as she saw the shapes below rolling away. Another long shape was speeding towards her. She tried to back away as it grabbed her leg and pulled her off her feet. The rope around her neck went taut as she went under.

The women screamed as, one by one, they were jerked off their feet to disappear into the water. Some tried to run upstream, some back, and some tried to brace themselves. The effect of their struggles only made the line disappear faster. By the time one of the hoarcs grabbed the rope to cut it loose half the women were gone.

A thick tail shot up out of the water behind the hoarc, slapping him prone. The last that was seen of him was one clawed hand briefly grasping at the air. Another hoarc disappeared as the rest of the screaming women were pulled under by their necks.

Shouting and flailing at the water, the remaining hoarcs hurried for the nearest bank. The ones hurrying back to the small gravel beach met the ones who had been around the children's wagon. Raising their bows, they watched the water for any other signs of movement. Across the river, Lash had ridden back to start spreading hoarcs out along the bank.

The mud beside the gravel beach erupted as Odif, a halshaken and two short, dark humans, Theo and

Hutch, rose up and threw handfuls of acorns at the hoarcs. The small nuts rained down, each exploding with a flash of fire and a sharp bang. The series of small explosions tore into the hoarcs, turning them into dust.

As large holes opened in the mass of hoarcs, halshaken shot out of the water near the other bank. Holding a spear thrower in each hand, they dropped hoarcs that had been getting ready to shoot at Odif's group. Near the wagon, the knight Coran on the right and Glier on the left led bands to engage the hoarcs that had not gone to the riverbank.

Enraged at being ambushed, Lash drew his sword and pointed at the wagon as he screamed, "Kill the children!"

His wizard raised his hands to cast a spell. Behind him, Shilo dove out of the sky with an iron trident and speared him. As the wizard fell, Shilo flew low, stiffening his arms to knock two of the hoarcs headlong into the halshaken waiting below. The wizard was still twitching on the ground as the winged man raced across the river to help those on the gravel finish killing the hoarcs that were still standing.

Lash watched as druids, wizards and armored humans came out of nowhere to join in slaughtering his hoarcs. On his side of the river, hoarcs met halshaken fighting their way up the bank. Bright flashes of light told him another wizard was on this side. His wizard was dead, and he could see an elven female standing in the wagon casting fire and lightning at any hoarc who dared approach the children. A quick glance downriver showed halshaken were helping a red-haired man pull the choking women from the water. Two more robed figures were with them. Looking closer, he recognized the red-haired half-elf, Tayan Montara.

Lash quickly assessed his position as hopeless. He had lost his captives, one wizard was dead and Lantharum had probably made the camp by now. Even though the druids' force looked smaller, they had plenty of magic. If he had a thousand hoarcs, he didn't think he could get to the elves, let alone win this battle. Halshaken were crude but cunning, and he had no idea how many more lay on the river bottom waiting to come up and join the fight. On top of all that, he dared not risk killing Tayan by accident.

"Retreat!" he snapped and turned his horse away from the river. Only a quarter of his hoarcs joined him as he led them away. The rest died in a chaotic battle on the banks of the river.

* * *

Most of their energy was spent on clearing the hoarcs from the children's side of the river. Once those were dead, Shilo flew over to the other side to help the halshaken as others made their best speed through the water. Gloredaniel stayed on the wagon trying to calm the children, who were screaming for their mothers. As more of the company crossed the river and lashed into the hoarcs, the ones still able broke and ran. Trelem called a halt to the few halshaken who went after them then started tending to the wounded with Odif and Zit.

Once back on the other side of the river, the soaked elven women hugged and comforted their children. Amber was pleased they had all made it through alive. Two of the women had drowned by the time the halshaken named Ulnargash towed them away. Through prayer and blowing the breath of life back into them, she and Mother Frieda had brought them around, sputtering and choking. They healed the rope

burns and cuts the women suffered. She then stayed near Tayan as he kept watch with Gloredaniel, just in case any hoarcs were still alive and tried one last time to attack. The past few days had been hard, but now they could finally claim a small victory.

"Excuse me," one elf said as she came up to Tayan. "I am Thalansala, Salinthia's sister. Are you Eric?" she asked with a nervous smile.

Tayan stiffened and glared back at her. "No."

"I didn't mean to offend you, it's just that the way he was described to me..."

"I am not Eric," Tayan stated. He turned to Amber. "I'm going back a ways, make sure there aren't any more hoarcs around," he told her then strode quickly away.

Surprised by his rudeness, Amber tried to speak to him as he passed. He ignored her, eyes fixed straight ahead. He had not been in one of his bad moods until this elf women had talked to him. She asked, "Who's Eric?"

"I didn't mean to anger your friend." Thalansala apologized. "He just fits the description my sister gave to me of Eric. Eric is the husband of my great-niece, Jenesalinthia. I was asked to watch for him."

The name struck a chord with Amber. She'd heard it before but wasn't sure where. "Your great-niece? Where does she live?"

"In Tolina with her mother and my sister. Do you know her?"

Amber shook her head. "No, I just remember hearing her name."

Thalansala gave a sad sigh. "Well, Salinthia said he was human. Your friend is half-human, isn't he?"

Amber nodded, not ever having heard it put quite that way. As she thought about it, though, when she thought of Tayan as half-elf she did so knowing he was also half-human. From an elf's perspective, he *would* be considered half-human.

She was sure she would know if she had seen a fully human version of Tayan. Thoughts of what Tayan might look like all human, or all elf, led her to think about the painting he had in his magic bag. He had found it by accident, and became very upset when Odif prodded him about the people in it. Tayan had given Amber the bag after he found the portrait in it. Despite the fact it was very valuable, he wanted nothing more to do with it.

Touching the bag, which was now under her robes, she asked, "You said your niece was Jena...?"

"Jenesalinthia." Thalansala repeated.

"And her mother, is her name Sory...Sorenthia?" Amber asked, trying to remember.

"Saurenthansia."

"Right, Saurenthaisia!" Amber cried. "Tayan has a portrait of them."

Thalansala's eyes widened. "Tayan?" she asked, pointing her finger to where he had gone, "That was

Tayan Montara, of the court of Elrad?"

Amber nodded. "His wife was Princess Lucinthia--she has passed on."

"I know, Salinthia told me." Deep in thought for a moment, she said, "Now it makes sense. You said Eric wasn't with him?"

"Why would he be?" Amber asked. Tayan had been upset the woman had mistaken him for this Eric. Was Eric a brother, perhaps? The glare he gave the woman held the same deep anger he showed when she had asked about his parents. Apparently, the elves in the painting were connected to him and this Eric in some way.

"Excuse me," she told the woman politely and started after Tayan. Maybe if she brought it up the right way she could get to the bottom of what was troubling him.

A jerk on her arm turned her around to face Odif, eyes hard as she said, "Leave it alone."

Trying to keep some of her courage facing the druid's cold stare, she asked, "What do you know about this Eric?"

"Not enough. Until I do, leave it alone."

As she gazed into Odif's eyes, something occurred to Amber she had never thought of before. "You love him, don't you?"

With an audible swallow, Odif gave an involuntary glance his way. "Let's just say I need to watch out for him."

Amber was dumfounded. Odif had Scorpio wrapped around her finger but that wasn't enough for this harlot.

"And just how many men do you have to watch out for?" she asked with a touch of sarcasm.

Odif's eyes quivered in their sockets as she took a half-step towards the priestess, who gripped the talisman of her Goddess as she moved an equal distance back; she gasped as Odif slapped a hand around her neck. Odif's voice was a low growl.

"I will tell you exactly what I told Lucinthia. Cause him pain, and I will rip your throat out. I will not warn you again--leave the subject of Eric to me."

Anger mixed into her fear, Amber forced her voice to sound as normal as possible with a constricted throat.

"Let me go." she squeaked defiantly.

Studying her, Odif tipped her head to one side. "One day you will do him justice, when you're strong enough."

With that, she let Amber go and walked away.

Until now, she had thought Odif was a friend. What she had just done wasn't friendly at all. Maybe

Father Tanner had been right--druids were, indeed, like wolves and could turn on the very hand that fed them.

Collecting herself, Amber looked around to see if anyone had noticed. Thankfully, they were all too busy with the women and children. Tonight, she would add a special prayer for Odif in her evening prayers. Even though she acted like an animal, the woman deserved to be saved.

The elven women were not understanding about their men's demise. Once they found out what had happened they were very cold to their rescuers. Zit got slapped in the face by a grieving young woman as she screamed at him that he had killed her baby's father. Trelem offered to escort them to Newburg, but they all insisted on going back to their village. Thalansala had to convince them it wasn't safe to return with hoarcs on the loose. Odif and Tayan tried to reinforce this, and the women acted like they weren't even there.

Burying the dead and healing the wounded took the rest of the day. Scorpio helped Tayan drag halshaken bodies to the line of graves in the riverbank. Of the twenty-four halshaken that had come with them, only nine were left. Being on the one bank by themselves, they had taken the brunt of the hoarc's attack. Considering how many hoarcs there had been, Scorpio was surprised they all weren't dead.

Tayan wasn't thinking about the halshaken they were burying. His mind was on the elven women huddled together with their children. When they had entered the field prior to the elves' attack, both Amber and Frieda had sensed evil. When the battle began, he convinced himself quickly the attackers were hoarcs imitating elves, something they had done a couple years before in the Jude Forest. It was only after the farmers lay dead at their feet and did not turn into dust that he knew they were not hoarcs. Now, facing their women made him feel hollow.

Not far away a small boy clung to his mother's hand, her stricken face speaking of the horror they had gone through. These were Alderlan's subjects. As a member of the royal family, he was tasked to protect them, not slaughter their men. These were his people, and he had failed them miserably.

"We did what we had to," Scorpio told him, seeing the agony in his face. "Those elves bought the lives of their families with their own."

Tayan turned his gaze to the young warrior. "We should have run or tried to hold them back...anything but kill them."

"We didn't know what was happening!" Scorpio stressed. "Amber and Frieda said there was evil. We thought we were killing evil, not farmers!"

A memory flashed in Tayan's mind; his father, standing in a room full of elves to confess his crimes against them. He had been taught all elves were evil, he claimed, that's why he had done the things he did. At the time, Tayan could not understand how anyone could believe such nonsense. He knew the elven people were not evil; yet yesterday, when their priestesses warned of an evil presence, he had acted without question. He killed men who were guilty of nothing but trying to save their families. He had always thought he was different from his father. He had lived his life knowing he was better than the man who lived in the bottom of a mug, who beat and raped his mother, who had slain elves on sight. Now, he wasn't so sure.

"I can't fight elves, not anymore," he said quietly.

"Tayan, that was not your fault. They would have killed us!"

Nodding slightly, Tayan told him, "Maybe, but I will not raise a sword to another elf, even if it does kill me."

Putting his hands on his hips, Scorpio shook his head. "With any luck, it won't happen again."

Tayan sighed. "We're moving into Elrad, and those black knights are ahead of us as well as behind us. As long as they are alive, it will happen again."

"Maybe you should be the one to talk to those poor women. You, Zit and Gloredaniel are the only ones they trust, anyway." Scorpio shrugged, trying very hard to sound sympathetic.

Tayan glared at him. "They don't trust us. Right now they have no choice but to travel with us to Newburg. Every woman and child from that village hates us, and they have reason to. I will be very surprised if King Alderlan doesn't issue a warrant for my arrest."

"I'm sure he'll understand what happened when it's explained to him."

"By whom?" Tayan asked harshly. "Odif or Trelem? I'm sure he will forgive our slaughtering every man in one of our villages." Irritated at the young man, he stomped off before Scorpio could reply.

* * *

The three days to Newburg were tense ones. Besides dealing with the hatred from the elven women, Trelem also kept a constant long-range watch. Shilo flew on ahead, as did Odif, though this time she stayed in the form of an eagle. Zit padded along in leopard form, sniffing and watching for any sign hoarcs had passed. Any ravens they came across were killed, whether or not Amber and Frieda sensed anything from the birds. If magic didn't get them, Odif would chase them down and shred them with her eagle talons or Shilo would dispatch them with his sword.

They came upon another village empty of life. A search was performed to try and determine what had happened to the people, but not a trace of them was found. They made camp ringed around the women and children, letting only the wizards get a full night's sleep. Everyone else took long shifts standing guard, partially to help the elves feel safe but also because everyone knew that the enemy was still out there.

On their first day of travel, Liefelm arrived and told them that Zodiac was going to meet them in Newburg with the men he had recovered.

After a couple of days, Thalansala had convinced most of the women that the black knight had caused the loss of their men and homes. This didn't help Tayan's dark mood. If anything, the hurt deepened when some of the women came and apologized for screaming at him. He spent most of the night on sentry duty, promising Amber he would get some sleep before she curled up in her own bed late at night and swearing to Odif he had been asleep most of the night when she got up before dawn.

On the last night before they reached Newburg, as the guard was being set, he found a good perch on a tall outcropping of rock that let him scan the thick brush for a good fifty yards. He'd no more that settled down when Amber found him.

She approached holding an armload of freshly picked vines that still bore tiny red flowers. Smiling as she stepped up to him, she draped them over his shoulders.

"There," she said sweetly, "a colorful cape to help brighten your mood."

Tayan shifted on his seat on the rock. He was in no mood for foolishness, but let her put the vines over him to amuse her.

"Thanks," he said, trying to smile. As Amber stepped back to admire him, he heard a voice from behind.

"Letacio prigiona!"

The words were low but firm. The vines closed tightly around him, binding his arms to his sides. He had been tricked! He tried to stand to confront Odif, but the vines encircled his legs, toppling him over to lie helpless on the ground. Glaring up at her, he growled, "Get this stuff off me!"

Odif squatted down beside him with a brief glance at Amber. "These vines will stay fresh until late tomorrow. That means you will get up only when I release you." Shifting to bring her staff around and lay it against the side of his head, she glared back at him. "You can listen to the song Amber has to lull you to sleep, or I can bash you over the head. Either way, Lord Tayan Montara, you are getting some rest."

Tayan knew there was no getting loose by himself. He also knew Odif didn't make idle threats. If he tried to send Amber away he'd be waking up with a huge headache in the morning. He didn't feel like sleeping--whenever he shut his eyes he saw frightened faces in tattered uniforms coming at him. Dropping his head to the ground, he sighed.

"I can't get them out of my mind, Odif. I--"

"I will take care of that," Amber said as she came around to stand by Odif. "I do not want you to be hurt, but I stand with Odif. You will sleep tonight." With a small grin, she added, "I can sing pretty well--it will be much more pleasant than a staff over your head."

Tayan had no choice but to nod in resignation. Odif got up to go get him a blanket as Amber settled down near him. The song she started was a simple childhood melody about a boy finding pixies in the woods behind his house. He didn't think it was going to work, but as he listened to her soft voice he began to feel very tired. The image of the boy dancing with the colorful dots of light came to him, and he found it hard to keep his eyes open.

By the time Odif returned with the blanket, he was asleep.

Chapter 3

Newburg had been built by human traders as a post for goods flowing to and from Elrad. As with all towns, it grew in size as time went on. Farms sprang up, shops, and smiths to repair wagons passing

through. Elves settled in, and so did bits of culture. Where once had been a few boarding houses and stables was now a community that had an architecture of its own.

Although it was within the kingdom of Elrad, Newburg's population was mostly human. It was also the only place where one could find a delightful blend of elven and human influence in everything from clothing to music.

Outside Newburg, Odif discovered a troop of hoarcs watching the town. Coming up behind them, she dispatched them quickly. The presence of the creatures told Tayan that the army of evil was already here. His plan of just leading the line of fugitives in might get them filled with arrows.

He was in the center of a trio that walked to the stone bridge that crossed the river into town. On his left, Odif scrutinized the pair of elven guards on the apex of the arch of the bridge as one slapped the other's shoulder, sending him running back the other way. To his right, Trelem scanned the river's surface, noting the position of the halshaken who waited under the bridge. Not knowing what to expect, they planned to have Tayan go in with an escort before the rest led the women and children in.

Tayan had a clear head, thanks to the sleep Odif and Amber had forced on him. He almost hugged Odif when he thanked her. He held back, knowing if he started becoming too friendly with her again it would lead to nothing but trouble.

As they approached, a troop of elven soldiers marched up over the top of the bridge towards them.

"Got your insects ready?" Tayan asked Odif quietly.

"On my side of the bridge and under it," she replied without looking at him.

"I am ready to set fire to their bows the second they nock arrows. The halshaken will help cover our escape, if it comes to that," Trelem told him.

By the time they got to the foot of the bridge, the troop of soldiers had lined up across the width. Forming into ranks, they marched forward.

Tayan eyed Odif and Trelem. "Remember, no matter what, no killing."

"I'll try." Odif sighed. "If it's me or them..." She let her words fall off, knowing he got the idea.

"It won't be," he assured her.

The elf sergeant halted his troops a respectful distance away. Pointing his sword at their feet, he commanded, "Place your weapons on the ground and step back."

"I don't think so," Odif snorted.

The elf scowled at her. "Give your weapons up, or they will be taken from you!"

Tayan took a step towards him. "I am Lord Tayan Montara. I need to speak with whomever is in charge."

The elf gaped at him. "Lord Montara? What are you doing with humans?"

This was the last place Tayan expected to hear a comment like that. One of the reasons he liked Newburg was because he never felt out of place coming here. The town sported the largest population of racially mixed people in the land. Looking at the elf's uniform, he noted it was regular army.

"These people are with me. We have refugees from surrounding villages that need shelter. We have found hoarcs in the area, and I need to talk to your superiors immediately."

The elf flushed. "Yes, of course, M'lord."

He sent one of his soldiers to go find his commander then made his troops reform to the sides. Tayan raised his arm in the air and signalled for Scorpio to start the flow of villagers. As the women and children walked up the road, the elf sergeant bowed to Tayan.

"I am terribly sorry, M'lord. We've been having difficulties. Hoarcs are around the town; and with the proclamation, things have been very tense," he explained. Glancing at Odif and Trelem, he asked, "M'lord, are these...druids?"

"This is Trelem, First Druid of Longforest, and this is Odif, a Second Druid of Longforest and the senior druid in Lord Zodiac's Company."

The elf looked at them again; his face showed he was very glad he hadn't tried to forcibly take their weapons away.

"Are there any more, M'lord?" he asked weakly.

"A few, as well as human and elven wizards and priests."

The elf swallowed. "I will see you to Commander Eldarin, M'Lord. This may cause difficulties."

"I take it you don't like us," Odif observed.

"It is the proclamation, M'lady," the elf told her. "Commander Eldarin will explain."

Tayan stepped aside as the first women passed by.

"Sergeant, there are halshaken in the river below us. They are our allies and are to be left alone."

A few elves looked over the bridge rail to verify what he said. Seeing the long shapes in the water below, they backed away from the edge.

"What is going on?" the sergeant asked then added, "M'lord?"

"A war, and it's heading this way," Tayan told him. He started walking, and motioned for Odif and Trelem to follow.

"I fear it is here already," the elf said and gestured at the fields beyond. "We have brought in everyone in the surrounding area and have already had skirmishes with hoarcs and humans."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Human raids, for the past month. Only in the last few days have we spotted hoarcs near the town."

Shifting his eyes again to Trelem and Odif, the sergeant said, "I recommend you leave your escort here, M'lord. Many soldiers are eager for human blood."

Humans raiding in Elrad, elves made to dress up in uniform and attack druids--Tayan saw what evil was trying to do.

"I understand." Turning to Trelem, he said, "Bring up the village women then set camp on the other side of the river, out of town. Spread everyone out, not too close to the banks, and be prepared for anything. I'll return shortly."

Tayan led the women and children into town. He noted that almost every dwelling had some sort of conveyance in front of it, from large wagons to hand-drawn carts. Each one was being loaded as people stood nearby selling what they couldn't carry. A human woman was hugged by an elf, who gave her an armload of bread worth a fraction of the finely carved table he bought. On the other side of the street, a sad-looking human man had his tools laid out, and a pair of elven soldiers looked them over.

On a shed near the man selling his tools, Tayan noted a parchment had been tacked up. It was an official proclamation from the Duke in this province, complete with his seal. Written in both Elradian and Western, it read :

Proclamation to all in the Province of Elsanor

On this 27th day of Rantum, in Odin's year 3367, I, Shalaran Quinlan, Duke of Elsanor, hereby make the following proclamation: In response to the lawless acts that have recently plagued our land, I declare that no person of non-elven heritage shall be allowed to bear weapons of any kind. To keep the peace in our lovely land, I also decree that all persons of non-elven heritage shall be displaced east of the Mason River by no later than the next full moon. I call on all local authorities and military commanders to help make this transition as smooth and peaceful as possible. All displaced persons shall be granted amounts of land equal to those they currently hold once they reach their new homes. All travelers will be provided an armed escort to ensure they reach their destinations safely.

Shalaran Quinlan, Duke of Elsanor

The duke was responding to the raids by removing all humans from his province. Innocent people were being driven from their homes. He tore the proclamation down.

"M'Lord?" the elf said nervously.

"Just get me to your commander," Tayan grated.

He met Commander Eldarin just outside his quarters, which was a large stone-and-brick house with a low wall skirting the front lawn and a slate path going to the door. By the trampled flowers along the edge of the path, Tayan didn't think these had been his quarters for long. Near the barn, he saw a blue dragon

with a silver stripe running down its side, the colors of Elsanor.

“Greetings, M’Lord. Our regiment just moved in a few days ago,” Eldarin explained as Tayan studied the crushed flowerbeds. “The Mayor was gracious enough to offer me his home before he left with the advance party.”

“Advance party?” Tayan asked as he stopped at the doorway.

“Yes, M’Lord, he has gone ahead to scout out the best place to start their new town.”

The proclamation had sent innocent people right into the war zone. Tayan cleared his throat.

“Commander Eldarin, send your fastest messenger--and not the dragon. See if they can catch up and bring them back.”

Eldarin gave him a confused look. “M’Lord, they will need to find a suitable place to start a new town.”

“You have sent those people into the middle of a battle,” Tayan stated. “Recall them, now.”

“Battle?”

Tayan nodded. “Remember those hoarcs around your town? Thousands are fighting Zodiac’s army to the east, and the fight is headed this way. Right after you send out the messengers, I will need parchments and quills.”

“I can have a scribe sent to you, M’Lord,” Eldarin offered.

Tayan looked past him to see a large group of townspeople had followed them. “I have another duty for your scribes. As of this moment, In the name of King Alderlan, I am prohibiting any movement east of this town. Duke Quinlan’s proclamation hereby is suspended until further notice. Write that and put up it all over town.”

“But--”

Tayan held up a hand to quiet him. “Commander, I will be sending messages to Duke Quinlan and to King Alderlan. I want your dragon to deliver them as quickly as possible.”

Eldarin’s face flushed. “Of course, M’Lord. I will have someone take you to the study so you can compose your messages. I’ll send my dragon handler in to collect them.”

“And, Commander,” Tayan said as he turned around, “Lord Zodiac is our ally. Inform your troops not to fire on any druids or halshaken.”

Eldarin eyed him suspiciously. “Halshaken are coming, also?”

“They are in the river by the town right now. We have a truce until we destroy the hoarcs--do not fire on them.”

Eldarin’s voice lacked volume as he said, “Yes, M’Lord.”

He turned away to fulfill Lord Montara’s wishes. He clearly didn’t like having a half-human telling him

what to do, but only two people in the whole kingdom could overrule Tayan. How King Alderlan ever let a mongrel into such a high position, he would never know. No elf would ever lead such a mixed band of creatures into Elrad, especially during a time like this. Sometimes, it seemed his king was not as wise as everyone thought.

The study Tayan was led to belonged to the mayor, or had. The sturdy oak desk with finely detailed scrolling on the sides and down the legs had been made in Newburg. The pens by the inkpot were another example of simple construction with the touch of elegance that Newburg was known for. The thick quills were stained red, with silver threads wound down the length of the shafts to form a diamond pattern, a simple tool made to look like it belonged in a king's court. He settled down in the leather chair and went to work to save these people.

Tayan wrote first to King Alderlan, explaining in detail what they had found so far then his actions and an apology for acting without royal consent. He hoped that Alderlan would see the wisdom in what he was doing. To Duke Quinlan he first apologized for his swift action then assured him that it was for the safety of King Alderlan's subjects. He finished by explaining he was sending a letter to the king, and urged the duke to wait until King Alderlan made a final decision before attempting to enforce relocation.

Satisfied his letters were properly formal, he sealed them with wax and used his wedding ring to make his imprint, which bore the Elradian seal.

An elven soldier who bore no weapons came in and stood by the doorway.

"You wanted to see me, M'Lord?" he asked with a bow.

"Who are you?"

"Devernon, Commander Eldarin's dragon handler, M'Lord," he said with another bow.

Tayan waved him over to the desk. "I have a vital mission for you, Devernon." Holding the scrolls up, he shook each as he said, "This one is for Duke Quinlan. This one is for King Alderlan. You will deliver them. Do not hand them off to an advisor or guard, but put them in the duke's and king's hands yourself. Fly to Elsanor city first then to Elrad and wait there for King Alderlan's reply."

Devernon paled. "M'Lord...this is a great honor." He knew of Lord Tayan Montara--stories of him abounded. To not only see but serve the savior of Elrad and the Jude Forrest elves was a dream come true. "I shall not fail."

"Good." Tayan smiled. "Make best speed, but do not take any foolish risks."

"Yes, M'Lord." he said, bowing again. He gingerly took the scrolls then walked off briskly to perform his mission.

Commander Eldarin returned and stood at attention across the desk from Tayan.

"M'Lord, I have sent out scouts to find the mayor's party, and the notices you requested are being posted. The soldiers are still watching your...escorts. Have you decided how to handle this situation?"

Tayan gave a sigh. "Sit down, commander."

Eldarin did so, taking a stiff pose.

Leaning towards him, Tayan explained. "I have instructed Druid Trelem to camp where he is for a reason. In Longforest, elves have attacked druids, lest they see their families killed. I strongly feel that the humans raiding here were under similar duress. I believe that whoever is leading the hoarcs wants war between Elrad and Longforest. For the moment, I want them to think they have succeeded. Line some of your men along the edge of town. If we're lucky, the enemy will think we're going to fight, and that will buy us time to get the people out."

"Your wisdom is well known, M'Lord," Eldarin said formally, "but I do not know if facing druid troops is a...sound idea."

"We will make it a sound idea," Tayan said sternly. "We are facing black knights who have their own wizards. I am going to need the druids to counter their magic." Getting up, he motioned Eldarin to his feet. "While Trelem is getting the Company settled, you and I are going to tour the town. The notices I had put up are sure to raise questions. The people need to see us working together."

"I'm sure most of the population will be quite happy to hear about your notice," Eldarin said with a touch of anger. "After all, this town is over half-human."

"And every one is a subject of King Alderlan," Tayan reminded him.

The moment Tayan stepped out of the house, townspeople gathered around him, thanking him for his intervention. Beside him, Commander Eldarin stood tight-lipped as the crowds cheered. In front of Eldarin's quarters, and three more times before he got to the center of town, Tayan stood atop a stone wall, or anything else he could find, to give a speech that the situation was still grave and that they had to work together. The crowds watched him intently, but he wasn't sure if what he was telling them was sinking in. He got the impression their only concern was the fact they didn't have to leave their homes.

By the time he got to the edge of town where Trelem had set the Company up in a barn, most of the people following him had wandered off to tell their neighbors the good news. Zit and Gloredaniel stood by the gate to the barnyard waiting for him. A pack of elven soldiers stood across the street, eyeing the barn as if the fires of hell were about to break out and ravish the town.

Tayan inspected Zit. "I thought you were going to find Lord Zodiac."

"I did," Zit replied then jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "He's bringing in more villagers--I figure the first ones will be arriving in another couple hours."

Tayan planted his hands on his hips. "How did they get here so fast? Last I knew our main force was going head-to-head with a hoarc army."

"That hoarc army split the moment Zodiac was on the move. After we got bombed by those dragons, the only ones he fought were some bands that got left behind. From what he told me, the wizards have been doing most of the work. They got attacked by elven farmers three times, just like we did. Fortunately, they were able to keep from killing most of them." He let out a heavy sigh. "Unfortunately, they haven't found most of the women or children."

"Damn," Tayan breathed. "And the hoarc army?"

"Vanished," Zit said tightly. "They've gone to ground--Duncan thinks they went north. Most of the druids we have left are out searching, but we've found no trace of them. The halshaken are going to

regroup on the other end of town then continue upriver to intercept them if they try to cross.”

Tayan stared at the ground as he mused, “If Zodiac caught the farmers without killing them then I don’t think their women are still alive.”

“This is monstrous!” Eldarin choked. “We have to move out now and find those poor women.”

Tayan whirled on him. Shooting his arm out to point at the town, he asked, “And what if those hoarcs are headed here? Do you want to leave this town undefended? Until we know more, we set a guard and stay put.”

Eldarin gaped at him. “You are not going to let these hoarcs get away with this, are you?”

Tayan clenched his jaw. “No. What we are going to do is get all the townspeople out of harm’s way. Once they are evacuated, we will deal with the hoarcs. Zit, go tell Trelem I want to see him. Zodiac, too, the second he steps foot in town.”

“You got it.” Zit nodded and headed into the barn.

Tayan shifted his gaze to the soldiers who were watching him. “Commander, inform your men. Ensure that everyone will cooperate with the druids.”

Nervously, Commander Eldarin asked, “M’Lord, how large is Lord Zodiac’s army?”

Misreading the reason for his question, Tayan said, “Not large enough, I think. Including the ones I have here, and the halshaken, not more than four hundred.”

“Dear Odin,” Eldarin breathed. His own troops only numbered a thousand. How was he to deal with hoarcs with so many druid mongrels and lizards about? “I must get word to our Duke.”

“I already have, Commander,” Tayan assured him.

Devernon strode along at a quick pace as he headed through the palace, Tayan's letter to the duke held tight in his hand. The guards had tried to stop him, but upon seeing the seal on the scroll they let him pass on his mission. In the long hall arched with white marble and lined with intricately stitched tapestries depicting the brave acts of past rulers, he noted one of the duke's advisors, an old, hunched-over elf named Galanthal, shuffling towards him.

The old elf regarded him as he strode up and stopped in front of him.

"I must see the duke, I have a message from Lord Tayan," Devernon announced proudly.

Hearing that name triggered Galanthal's memory--the sight of the Red Man staring malevolently at them in his tattered, blood-soaked rags just before he leapt down and began the slaughtering. The Red Man had killed his black knight and two hundred hoarcs that day. He didn't know what Tayan had to do with the Red Man, but it was rumored wherever Tayan went, the Red Man was not far behind. He had no desire to face that human-shaped monster again. The Master had given strict orders not to harm Tayan.

Galanthal was sure this was to keep them from provoking the Red Man's wrath.

"Advisor, are you ill?" Devernon asked, seeing the paleness of the ancient face.

Galanthal shook his head, thinking quickly. "No...it's just to hear we have a message from Lord Tayan himself. I shall take it to the duke immediately." He extended his hand.

Devernon pulled the scroll back from his reach. "Lord Tayan told me to lay it in his hands myself. I have another for the king, also to give to him personally." Seeing Galanthal's questioning look, he added, "I'm sorry, but that is what I am ordered to do."

Curling his fingers, Galanthal retracted his hand and gripped the crystal pendant under his robe. "Where is Lord Tayan now?"

"Newburg. I flew here on the commander's dragon. I am to return any replies with equal speed."

Galanthal pretended to shift his robe as he gripped the crystal. Lura had to help him with this! Until she came, he would have to stall the boy.

"The duke cannot be disturbed right now, a sensitive matter of state," he explained. "If you must deliver the message yourself, I will take you in to see him as soon as he is available."

Devernon didn't like waiting, but if he was to deliver the message himself, it appeared he would have to. Begrudgingly, he nodded and let Galanthal lead him down a side hall.

Galanthal managed a benevolent smile as they walked along. "Can you tell me what the message is about, so I may counsel the duke if he asks?"

Devernon didn't see any harm in talking about it. After all, Galanthal was one of the duke's closest advisors.

"I cannot say for sure, but I believe it has to do with the proclamation for all non-elves to leave our province. Lord Tayan arrived with druids from Longforest and, by what I heard, halshaken are in the river near town."

Galanthal's fake smile turned genuine. "I see. There was no fighting, I hope," he said, wishing just the opposite.

Devernon shook his head. "No, Commander Eldarin is working with Lord Tayan."

"Did you hear why he has brought druids to Newburg?"

"I don't know. An alert was called then I was brought in to Lord Tayan to deliver his messages. That's all I know for sure."

Galanthal spoke his worse fear. "Was there a large, red-haired man with Lord Tayan when you saw him?"

"Not that I saw."

Coming to the door of his private chambers, Galanthal motioned for the messenger to go in ahead.

Inside his private sitting room, an elfmaid with dark-gray hair stood beside a low table ringed by colorful overstuffed chairs. Although her hair made her look older, Devernon was quite taken by her. Her pale-green eyes shone as bright as the smile on her flawless face. The gold dress she wore hugged her lithe shape, the deeply plunging V of the neckline touched the top of her trim stomach, but did not reveal anything but the slightest hint of her small breasts. Devernon could not keep his jaw from dropping as he gazed at her. He had never seen her before in his life, but he instantly knew how wonderful she would feel in his arms.

The vision spoke to him. "My name is Lura. Please, come sit and have some tea."

Devernon went forward, unable to breath, let alone answer her. He let her take his hand and sit him down then held the cup as she poured for him. She asked him a question, but he didn't have the presence of mind to understand what she had asked. All he could think of was her beauty and the sweet scent that came to his nose as she bent near. There was not a lovelier creature in all of creation!

Sitting on the arm of his chair, Lura coaxed him to drink. He gulped half the cup down without even tasting it. Devernon had always been a decent man, but at the moment he could think of nothing more than how warm she would be lying next to him. He didn't even notice as she slipped the message out of his hand to lay it on the table.

Becoming drowsy, he drifted off into a dream where Lura was taking him by the hand to a room walled by sheer silk drapes and where pink satin pillows covered the floor...

Lura stayed with him until she was sure he was asleep then got up and faced Galanthal. Her brow was furrowed as she told him crossly, "You only need grip the crystal once to get my attention. To keep squeezing it is like screaming at me!"

Galanthal sat down, giving her a slight grin.

"My apologies. What are we going to do about him?" he asked, pointing to the sleeping elf.

In a fluid motion, Lura slid down into a chair beside him. Snatching up the scroll, she broke the seal and opened the message. She read it then tossed it back down.

"The question is, what are we going to do about *that* ."

Galanthal shrugged. "The Master said we cannot harm Tayan. Maybe we can convince the duke to execute him."

"You idiot!" she snapped. "We can in no way cause him harm! Our Master has promised a long, painful death to any who try. I heard something about another message, for the king?"

Bobbing his head Galanthal said, "Yes, he is to deliver both messages himself. We can keep him from seeing the duke, but what good will that do if the king knows what is going on?"

Shifting her gaze to the sleeping elf, Lura rubbed her chin in thought for a moment then smiled. "He shall see the duke and the king...in his dreams. Get me two scrolls for their replies."

"What are you going to do?" Galanthal frowned.

With an evil grin, she said, "Take him traveling, of course."

Devernon lay naked in the pillows with his Lura wrapped around him. Rubbing her smooth shoulder, he kissed the top of her head. Even though he was exhausted from making love, he wanted nothing more than to do it one more time.

With a soft moan of joy, Lura slid up to give him a long, deep kiss. She put her fingers to his mouth. He kissed each delicate one.

In her velvety voice, she purred, "My love, this is very nice, but you have a task that needs to be done."

He knew she was right. To leave her, though, was like trying to tear his own skin off. Clasp her hand tightly, he whispered, "Come with me to Elrad. It will only take an hour to give our Duke Lord Tayan's message then we both can fly to see the king."

Lura smiled brightly. "Yes, that would be grand." Jumping up, she took his hand and helped him to his feet. Lingering long enough for a tight embrace, they collected their clothes and got dressed.

To his luck, the duke was in the sitting room talking to Galanthal as they came out. He was dressed in his flowing court robes, looking every bit as imposing as he did when he sat in judgment at court. Surprised at seeing him there, Devernon stopped to collect himself. Lura put the message in his hand, whispering, "Announce yourself, darling."

Standing as straight as he could, Devernon walked over and handed the duke his message. "Highness, I bear a message from Lord Tayan Montara of the court of Elrad."

Giving him a cool gaze, the duke nodded slightly and took the scroll. As his eyes scanned the parchment, his face paled.

"This...cannot be!" Looking weakly at Devernon, he asked, "You say this is from Lord Tayan himself?"

Devernon wondered what could cause such a reaction. "Yes, Your Highness. He handed it to me himself, as well as a message for the king."

Shifting his eyes to look off at nothing, the duke mumbled, "Then he is serious."

"Your Highness?" Galanthal asked, leaning forward.

"We will discuss it at council," The Duke told him then to Devernon, "When you give King Aldrlan his message, ask him to send his advice with you when you return."

"Yes, Your Highness. Shall I wait for you to write it?"

The Duke waved a hand. "No time, rush that message to the king this instant! Time is our enemy now, let nothing delay you!"

"Yes, Your Highness," Devernon said with a quick bow. He turned to leave, glancing quickly at Lura. She was by his side, nearly pushing him out the door.

Hurrying down the hall, he wondered what was in Lord Tayan's letter that had troubled the duke so. He thought briefly about asking Lura what it might be...that would be foolish, though. How would she know what Lord Tayan had written?

The dragon was saddled and waiting as Devernon and Lura raced into the courtyard. Not breaking stride, he leapt into the saddle and grabbed the reins. Lura mounted right behind him, wrapping one arm around his middle as she pointed at the dragon's head.

Her voice was firm as she said, "Magic in the wings of light, make this dragon speed his flight!"

Suddenly, the wings of the dragon were haloed with a faint white glow. Giving a roar, the beast spread them and lifted off the ground without so much as a single flap. Devernon had all he could do to just hold on as they launched skyward. Lura clamped a tight hold on him. By the time they leveled off, they were soaring above the clouds with the duke's palace a speck in the distance.

Devernon watched the rounded tops of clouds just below them. The dragon's blue wings shone with the brightness of the clouds. The slight breeze blowing on him seemed wrong. He knew they were going very fast; the wind should be blasting him out of his saddle.

"Magic?" he asked.

Lura gave him a squeeze. "Yes, to help you on your way. We should be in Elrad before dinner."

True to her words, it wasn't long before he saw the towers of Elrad through a break in the clouds. Pulling on the reins, he coaxed the dragon down towards the city below. Elrad was everything he had dreamed it was. The sprawling city of white marble was laid out in a wheel, the side streets looking like spider webs. In the center was the castle with its tall towers crowned with gold. As they got closer, he could see tiny guards patrolling the walls. Beside the courtyard to one side of the main palace there was a large flat terrace. He had no more than thought about landing there when the dragon dove for that very spot.

They landed smoothly. The second his mount had all four feet on the ground, the glow on his wings faded. Devernon helped Lura down then, climbing down himself, faced a pair of startled guards.

"I bring a message for the King from Lord Tayan," he announced, holding the scroll up for them to see. The guards didn't question him, just led him into the palace and straight to the king. Lura stayed tight to his side as he was presented to King Alderlan, who shone with all the magnificent royalty he had expected to see. Once the king took the message, he ordered him out of the throne room to wait in the hall. Devernon stood by the doors, holding Lura's hand, until he was called back in.

As with the duke, the king seemed very upset. His gray-fringed eyebrows knitted with sorrow as he held out another scroll. "Take this to Duke Quinlan with all speed."

"Yes, Your Highness," he said with a bow then strode out to the dragon.

The flight back seemed even shorter. In no time he was walking in the halls of the duke's palace with Lura. To his surprise, they met the duke in the hall.

He didn't ask how they had gotten to Elrad and back so quickly. Looking down at the scroll Devernon held, he asked, "From the king?"

"Yes, Your Highness," he said, giving it to him.

The Duke quickly broke the seal. Reading it over, he gave a sigh. "Make your quarters in Galanthal's

rooms and await my orders."

Devernon watched as he moved off down the hall, his shoulders hunched over as if he were carrying a great weight.

Lura's hand on his shoulder got his attention.

"Come on, dear, you should rest for a while."

Wrapping an arm around her slim waist, he walked back with her to Galanthal's quarters. Sitting down in the same chair as when he first arrived, he gathered Lura onto his lap. She began softly rubbing his shoulders and neck as she kissed him. The soothing sensations made him feel drowsy...

Galanthal watched as Lura took her hand away from the elf's forehead and sat down to study the scrolls.

"He believes he went to Elrad?"

She nodded absently. "He will be bedding me again soon. We'll keep him in his dream world until I figure out what to do about Tayan."

Galanthal wasn't as calm about the matter as the wizard was.

"If we cannot touch him or make others do anything to him then we are as powerless as if we were in the dungeon!"

Lura snapped her head up to look at him. A grin creased her face as she said, "Dungeon...yes, that will do very nicely."

Looking at her cautiously, he asked, "For whom?"

Taking the quill from the inkpot, Lura spread out a blank scroll.

"I am going to fix our problem with Lord Tayan. We have work to do."

A short time later, she shook Devernon's shoulder, calling softly, "Honey, wake up."

Opening his eyes, he smiled and pulled her close, giving her a warm kiss. She returned the kiss just as passionately then showed him the scroll.

"Sweetheart, the duke wants you to take this to Commander Eldarin. He instructed me that it is to be delivered in private."

It took him a few seconds for what she said to sink in. "The commander? What about a reply to Lord Tayan?"

Lura put on her best serious face. "There are things happening that you should not know about yet. I'm sure your commander will explain, but I cannot."

Devernon swallowed nervously. "It's about Lord Tayan, isn't it?"

She nodded slightly. Giving his hand a gentle squeeze, she said, "Please don't ask me more, I'm sworn

to silence."

Devernon rose to his feet, feeling like he was involved with something that was way over his head. Looking at his lovely Lura, he had the feeling he would never see her again if he left her here.

"Will you come with me?" he said, so low he barely heard it himself.

She gathered him into a hug, which caused him to wrap his arms tightly around her.

"No. My place is here. I would ask you to stay, but I know you have a job to do."

"This isn't fair, I love you!" he breathed into her ear.

Looking up at him with tears in her eyes, she withdrew a chain with a tiny sparkling crystal on the end. "I know. Please take this with you, my love."

Devernon let her put it around his neck as he gently wiped the tear from her cheek. "I do not need that to remind me of you."

Holding his face in her hands, she told him, "I am a wizard, remember? If you need me, press the crystal to your chest and think of me. It will only work one time, so use it wisely." Looking softly into his eyes, she said, "Things will become dangerous soon. I want you to come back to me."

Feelings of love welled up in him for his gray-haired beauty. He wanted nothing more than to hold her forever. As she had said, however, he had a job to do. They would have a long time to enjoy each other once this was over. Kissing her hand, he pulled away with a "Farewell, my love," then strode out to do his duty.

Lura was very pleased with herself as she watched the messenger's dragon take wing eastward. The dolt had believed the whole thing. She had just sealed the elves' fate. Alderlan had already turned his back on the human kingdom, and this was going to ensure no help was forthcoming from Longforest. By the time her Master was ready to move into Elrad, foolish old Alderlan would find himself standing alone.

Turning away from the window, she rested her eyes on the hoarc imitating an elf.

"Galanthal, when they bring Tayan Montara, make sure he is given imprisonment in comfort. Since he is part of the royal family, this must be kept as quiet as possible."

Galanthal grinned evilly back. "As you wish."

Chapter 4

The dark sky drizzled rain as Zodiac led the line of refugees into town. Hair soaked and eyes vacant, the elves showed only a shadow of life as they walked down the muddy street. Tayan noted too many faces missing from the ranks of the Company. He had thought Zodiac had around four hundred troops left; a

quick scan told him there was only half that many accompanying the refugees.

Zodiac himself no longer had his noble bearing as he trudged towards Tayan.

"How many did you save?" he asked.

Tayan noted the elven women going by. Clothes tattered, they stared ahead with hollow eyes. Every one had a crude weapon gripped tightly in her hand. Most only had sticks or animal bones, a few had spears.

"You rescued some hostages?"

Zodiac snorted. "They rescued themselves. We found them on the way here. Not one has spoken; they're all in shock."

Tayan nodded, another small victory. Knowing what evil was doing, he wasn't surprised at their state. He knew whatever children these women had were dead by now. "What about the hoarcs?"

"Nothing, thankfully." Zodiac sighed. "If they'd jumped us, we'd lose most of the people we were trying to save."

Tayan motioned toward the river. "We killed some hoarcs near town. They're close but haven't attacked yet."

"Yet." Zodiac echoed. "Before they do, we have to get these people out of here. We didn't win back in Longforest--they let us go. Since then, they've made elves attack us."

Tayan explained what he had found so far then added, "Trelem and Odif can move people en masse through one of their tree gates. We need to get this entire town out of here before they do attack. Those damn spears will turn this town to rubble."

Odif came up and tapped Tayan on the shoulder. "There's something wrong with those women," she stated.

That was obvious, but he had the idea she wasn't talking about their state of mind. "What?"

Glancing back at the refugees, who were now walking down the street with a guard of elven soldiers, she said, "They don't feel right. It's like they have no mind at all. Their life force is so weak I can barely feel it." Stressing her point, she added, "Tayan, they shouldn't even be able to walk."

Captain Fabarian approached them with a large troop of soldiers. Motioning for his men to stay back, he walked over to Tayan and bowed briefly.

"Lord Tayan, the commander wishes to see you immediately."

Tayan didn't have time for this now. He trusted Odif's instincts--if she said there was something wrong then there was.

"Did the Commander say what this is about?"

Eyeing Zodiac, Fabarian said, "This is a matter for Elrad, not druids."

"We'll leave in a moment." Tayan returned his attention to Odif. "Right now, concentrate on evacuating the town. Help Zodiac; I have to go see what the Commander wants."

"What about those women?" Odif asked.

"I'll take care of it," he assured her.

As they moved away from Zodiac and Odif, Tayan asked the Captain, "So, what is it?"

The Captain moved closer so only he could hear.

"M'lord, it is a very serious matter. You have been charged with treason."

"Treason?" Tayan gasped in disbelief.

"What was that?" Odif demanded, starting towards them.

Fabarian gave Tayan a hard look. "We must do everything we can to keep the peace, but we will not allow your Lord Zodiac to free you."

He held up a hand. "Odif, you stay with Zodiac, I'll be back shortly. We're going to get someone to check those women over." To Fabarian, he said quietly, "I do not want to be freed. What I want is to face whoever has made this ridiculous charge."

"Then come with me...M'lord." he replied, saying the last part with more than a bit of sarcasm.

Tayan went, noting Odif was watching him closely. Thankfully, she did as he asked. On the way, he tried to get Fabarian to promise to send a couple of elven priests to look over the women Zodiac had brought in. Captain Fabarian, however, had only one thought in mind, and that was holding him prisoner.

It was not lost on Tayan that the commander's quarters was ringed with elves ready for battle, as if they were expecting druids to materialize out of the bushes. He was led to the second-floor study where Eldarin was sitting with the dragon handler who had delivered the messages. Eldarin dismissed the guards then had Tayan take a seat.

Once the three were alone, Tayan asked, "What is this about?"

Eldarin nodded towards the messenger. "He brought me the command. What did you write to our duke?"

"Nothing that would warrant a charge of treason," Tayan told him. "Devernon, did you give the duke himself my message as I ordered?"

The pale-faced elf nodded. "Yes, M'lord, handed it to him myself. He told me to give your message to the king with all speed, and I did. The king gave me a reply for the duke, which I rushed back to him. Advisor Galanthal gave me a message from the duke to bring to Commander Eldarin."

A spark of recognition connected to that name. Tayan had met him somewhere before.

"Galanthal? You are sure of his name."

"Yes, M'lord, quite sure."

Lifting a hand to rub his chin, Tayan tried to remember when he had met this Galanthal. He didn't think it was at court. The name brought up feelings of anger, as if he knew this man was not to be trusted.

"Commander, could you talk to the duke and verify this order?"

"Yes, M'lord, but I must hold you until I receive a reply."

Shaking a finger, Tayan said, "Not a messenger, someone who is close to the duke and whom you trust completely. There is something wrong here. I was expecting the king might give me a strong reprimand or even an order to go before him to explain myself. You know as well as I do that I have done nothing treasonous here. My concern lies with these people who were about to be sent into the battlefield."

With a shrug, Eldarin said, "You just described Devernion, M'lord. He is very loyal to me and has been to court. The duke knows him as well. If he says this came from the duke, I have no reason to think otherwise."

"Is it possible for me to speak with King Alderlan?" Tayan asked. If he could sit down with Alderlan, he was sure he could clear up this misunderstanding.

Eldarin took a halting breath. "Devernion, you are dismissed."

The elf bowed and all but ran from the room. As he shut the door behind him, Eldarin brought out a scroll and pushed it over to Tayan.

"Here is the order, M'lord. I was told to keep it from you; but under the circumstances, you have a right to see it. It is quite specific."

Commander Eldarin,

It is my sad duty to inform you that Lord Tayan of the court of Elrad has been charged with the horrid crime of treason. This saddens King Alderlan grievously, as he has always looked upon him as a brother. I have been tasked by His Highness to handle this matter as quietly as possible, since Lord Tayan is greatly respected throughout the kingdom. It is his wish that the memory of Lord Tayan's good deeds not be tarnished with the people. Lord Tayan is to be imprisoned within the confines of the south tower and treated with all the respect due a member of the royal family. Should he be found guilty of treason, King Alderlan has pardoned him from death. The punishment shall be life imprisonment.

Your duty, Commander, is to bring Lord Tayan to court to answer for this crime. I stress upon you that he is not to be harmed.

Shalaren Quinlan, Duke of Elsanor

Tayan felt like his heart had just fallen out of his chest. Tossing the scroll down on the desk, he flopped

back in his chair.

"It sounds like I've already been found guilty. King Alderlan will not even be present, will he?"

Eldarin leaned forward on his arms. "I don't know, M'lord. I am only concerned about getting you there without having a riot here. You have become a hero to these people, and I know how close you are to those who live in Longforest." Tapping the scroll, he added, "If this gets out, it will be like throwing alcohol on a fire. I would like nothing more than to ignore it, but I cannot."

Tayan knew he was right. Even if Zodiac didn't rally the people, Amber, Glier, Odif and any they could gather together would be headed straight for Elsanor to break him out. He feared a war could very well be started over this. A war because of him. No matter how unjust he thought the charge against him was, he could not live with knowing friends on both sides would be dying for him.

"Commander, I am going to ask you to trust me. On my word, I will return. I need to go inform Zodiac that this has been a ruse to get me somewhere that Alderlan needs me. It is the only way to keep the peace."

Eldarin gave him a long look then nodded. "I see your wisdom, M'lord. Return before dawn--you will ride to Elsanor in the morning."

No one tried to stop him as he walked back through the streets with Captain Fabarian at his side. He felt numb. Treason was the gravest charge that could be brought against anyone. In Elrad, it was the only crime that carried a death penalty. Even murder was only punishable by banishment, not that banishment was not serious. Someone wanted him dead, but Alderlan had already pardoned him. The proof must have been unquestionable for the king to give such an order.

As Tayan pondered, the memory of the broken bodies of the elven farmers came to him. He had attacked and killed his own people. Maybe he wasn't guilty of whatever it was he was charged with, but he was guilty of murder. To kill elves dressed in Elradian uniforms was treason.

Staring at the ground in front of him, he decided that if he was found guilty--and he was sure he would be--he would ask for the death penalty. At least then he would be with his beloved wife, and possibly she could find it in her soul to forgive him...for everything.

His thoughts were interrupted by a tremendous blast. Ahead of them, the Riverside Inn spit fire from the door and downstairs windows just before the front of the building blew out into the street. As people screamed, the building collapsed.

Those damn spears! Tayan's eyes went to the sky to search for where they were coming from. The sky was empty, but another blast ripped apart the inn on the other side of the street. Screams filled the air.

"Druid treachery!" Fabarian hissed as he drew his sword.

Tayan grabbed his sword arm. "It wasn't druids! Hoarcs use those weapons."

"I see no hoarcs!" Fabarian cried as he struggled to get free.

Then Tayan did commit an act of treason. He punched Fabarian in the face, knocking him out. No one noticed him as he ran towards the site of the destruction.

A pack of soldiers and townsmen were gathering in the street. Some pulled the wounded back while others lined up to form a bucket brigade to put out the burning remains of the inns. Unnoticed by them, one of the hollow-eyed women walked into the middle of the chaos and raised her spear high.

In a flash, he knew where the explosions had come from.

“Stop her!” he screamed at the top of his lungs as he charged the woman. He was too far away. Helplessly, he watched her slam the spear on the ground.

The blast cleared the street as it sent bodies in all directions. He flew back as the blast knocked him off his feet, ears ringing. The bright orange glow dominated his vision. Stumbling up, he shielded his face from the inferno that now engulfed the center of town. Dropping his eyes to avoid the horrid sight, he saw the body parts littering the ground. His stomach churned violently. Dropping to his knees, he vomited by someone’s scorched arm.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to block out this madness. “Dear Odin!” he cried. How were they going to stop this insanity?

He felt hands grab him and pull him to his feet. Odif dragged him down a side street, where he saw another ragged woman beating at an elven soldier, who was trying to keep her at bay as he cried for her to stop. Odif left him propped against a hitching post and ran up behind the woman to break her neck. As the body fell, she barked at the soldier, “They’re zombies, kill them!”

The soldier gaped at her blankly as she ran back and got Tayan moving down the street.

Tayan came to his senses as they were nearing the edge of town. The Company had formed a ring. In the center, Duncan, JoJo and Entaurus worked together to cast a spell that send a blinding white sphere rising up into the sky. The sphere streaked towards a flock of dragons heading towards them, their claws full of spears. A dragon flamed it and turned away. Unharmed by the dragons’ fire, the sphere turned with the creature and struck. The detonation vaporized that dragon and set off the spears two others beside it were holding. The giant fireballs knocked a few other dragons about, making them drop their loads. The rest of the dragons turned back as the spears blasted apart an empty field.

“The women were a diversion,” Tayan breathed as the ground shook from the concussions.

“Right, and we’re surrounded,” Odif told him. “It’s only going to get worse.”

Having just seen innocent people blown apart, he had a hard time trying to think what was worse than that. “We have to evacuate this town now.”

“No shit, and you’re in trouble,” Odif said drily. “Come on, we got a lot to do. Zodiac is in that barn right there.”

Zodiac sat on a bale of hay with Zit standing on one side of him and Amber on the other. Odif perched on a nearby bale, watching him intently. To the other side was a halshaken shaman sitting on his haunches. All wore serious faces.

Tayan knew Odif had told Zodiac about his being arrested. He did his best to sound convincing.

“Lord Zodiac, I am needed in Elrad. What happened outside was done to trick any spies that may have been watching. I’m sorry if Odif got you upset.”

Zodiac looked over at Odif. She gave him a very slight shake of her head. "Make yourself ready," he told her.

Tayan didn't like the sound of that. "Ready for what?"

Folding his arms over his chest, Zodiac ignored his question. "I have been thinking very much about all that's happened. We can't fight these things without more help. I believe your arrest was engineered to add to the confusion and make damn sure no help will come."

It made sense, and Tayan knew in his heart that Zodiac was right. He felt bad that he couldn't stay and help. If he tried, it would only add to the chaos. "I agree, except for that last part. I have to be in Elrad--I'm sorry I can't tell you why."

Zodiac went on like he hadn't heard him. "I am tired of beating back evil as it decides to appear. We have to go after the source. Duncan has found it, and it will take a combined effort to eliminate the threat. Tayan, you are known at every court. I need you to travel to Paladnia, Tolina and Zayton to gather arms."

"I am needed in Elrad," he insisted.

"Amber will go with you. Odif or Zit will find you when we are ready to move."

"You aren't listening," Tayan told him firmly. "I have to be in Elrad!"

From behind him, Odif said in a deep voice, "I'm ready--put him out."

Tayan turned to see himself standing there holding Odif's staff. It was like he was looking in a mirror. Before he could open his mouth to demand an explanation, flashes of light sparkled in his eyes. He fell to his backside then the world went black.

Zodiac turned to Amber. "He's all yours, take care of him."

Amber took out the magic bag and shook it open. Tucking his feet inside, she drew it over him as Odif helped by lifting him up. Although the bag looked too small to hold a whole person, they encased Tayan completely. The two-foot square still appeared empty after he was inside it.

Putting the bag into her robe, Amber looked closely at Odif. She had duplicated Tayan's looks perfectly--even her eye color was the same hazel hue as Tayan's.

Odif clapped a hand on her shoulder. "Take care of him, and remember to take him out once you are east of Capetown."

Amber nodded, amazed that even the voice sounded like him. "I will. May the gods be with you."

Odif/Tayan grinned. "And may nature guide you."

Satisfied Tayan was now safe for the time being, Odif left her staff and walked out to find Captain Fabarian waiting just outside their defense ring.

Seething in anger, the elf growled, "Lord Tayan, we must return to Commander Eldarin right now!"

Odif gestured for him to lead. "Of course."

In the wake of the mid-town explosions and the dragon attack, Commander Eldarin decided it was best to get Lord Tayan out of town as quickly as possible. He watched his dragon take to the late-afternoon sky with Devernon and Tayan aboard then went to deal with Lord Zodiac. On the way, a stunned soldier told him how one of the druids had murdered an elven woman who was half out of her mind. This didn't surprise him. Druids were known for bouts of malicious cruelty.

He was beginning to feel overwhelmed--first raiders then hoards and dragons, and now this. If he managed to hold this town together for another day, it would be a miracle.

Asking directions of townsmen as they fought the fires and cared for the wounded, Commander Eldarin found Zodiac beside a large oak behind one of the houses off the main street. Trelem and Barkum stood together; Zodiac and the mayor, who was still in his dirty traveling clothes, faced them.

The mayor looked at the tree and shook his head in wonder. "We can evacuate the whole town through this tree?"

Trelem nodded. "One at a time. The exit tree is in the courtyard of Castle Zodiac. Once you go through you can go to Elrad, Capetown, or stay there, if Lord Zodiac allows you."

"How long will it take?" the mayor asked.

Barkum shrugged. "We don't know, exactly. How soon can you get people here? For a town this size, at least half a day. I will keep the door open at this end."

They all turned as Commander Eldarin strode up to them with his escort of twenty soldiers. "What is going on here?"

Zodiac crossed his arms over his chest. "We're evacuating the town. Once that army gets here they are going to destroy this place."

Bowing to Eldarin, the mayor said with anger in his voice, "You wish us out of Elrad. You should be happy we are leaving."

Eldarin nodded. "I am pleased. Before you go, Lord Zodiac, I want the female druid who murdered a woman a short while ago. I believe you call her Odif."

"She's gone," Zodiac told him. "Left not an hour ago."

"You lie," Eldarin snapped.

Zodiac frowned at him. "Check for yourself. While you look for her, I'm going to help the mayor evacuate this town." Turning to the mayor, he said, "Women and children first, the men stay behind to keep up a defense until everyone else has gone through. When we're down to the defenders, we'll try to keep up the appearance of being ready."

Eldarin cleared his throat. "I am in command of this town, not you."

Trelem tipped his head to him. "And we will leave you to your own. Instead of fighting with us, I suggest you get ready for an attack."

"A real big one," Barkum added.

The mayor held up his hands. "Please! Commander, surely you can see Lord Zodiac is trying to save our people."

"I see he is running away," Fabarian spat.

Turning stiffly, Zodiac said to the mayor, "Spread the word as fast as you can. People are only to bring what they have on. There will be no time to pack."

Turning to Trelem, the mayor asked, "When do we start?"

"By the time you get people moving we'll be ready."

Eldarin motioned to the mayor as he told Fabarian, "Help the mayor collect his people. The sooner they are gone, the better."

"Yes, sir."

The mayor and Fabarian left as the druids got ready to make the door.

Scorpio came jogging up with one of the townsmen. "Are we ready yet?"

Zodiac nodded. "Scorpio, go through first and get things started to make shelters for all these people. Tell Kimmy to get messengers ready to ride and open the emergency storerooms. Have Valeri get every bed and cot made ready, even the ones in the dungeon."

Scorpio's first thought was *Why are you sending me away?* He knew, though, that someone had to get things ready, and he had no idea where Odif had gotten to. Swallowing his pride, he said, "All right. Don't try to be the last one out, okay?"

Zodiac gave him a slap on the back. "See you there."

By the time Trelem had disappeared into the tree, there was a large group of people standing nearby looking at him curiously. Barkum made some hand gestures on the tree, and the center of the trunk melted to show a courtyard with Trelem standing on the other side.

"Follow me, one at a time," Scorpio told them then led the way through.

On the other side, a pair of guardsmen watched as people began coming out of the tree. Scorpio sent one after Valeri and Kimmy and had the other start directing people to the main hall. He knew the whole town wasn't going to fit in the castle, but he had to start somewhere.

It wasn't long before two greenish-skinned women arrived to see where all the people were coming from. The taller one, Kimmy, had a fuller figure than Valeri, who wore her hair in long braids. Both had hair so black it looked bluish in the sunlight. Whether they were in everyday blouses and pants, as they were now, or dressed in flowing gowns with sparkling jewels, the color was always light gray. Scorpio

knew they had been slaves at one time, and it never failed to amaze him that gray was the only color they would wear. He thought that after a life of slavery they would never want to wear anything gray again.

They strode up to him with a wave and a smile. Kimmy said, "Welcome back. Please explain all these people."

That was Kimmy, always to the point.

"We are evacuating a town to the north. Zodiac wants you to get the messengers ready to ride, probably to Elrad, and open the emergency storerooms. Valeri, he wants you to get every bed and cot ready; we'll be bringing in a few thousand. I have no idea where you're going to put them all."

"If Lord Zodiac wishes it, we shall do it," Kimmy said, stressing "lord." Turning to the man behind her she sent him briskly after the messengers. Valeri strode away to the kitchens to inform the cooks.

"It is being done," Kimmy announced. "I want you to stay here and direct people as they come out. If anyone can cook or knows how to build, get them started on fire pits and shelters. Let me know when everyone is through."

"Yes, ma'am," Scorpio snorted.

Frowning, Kimmy raised a finger at him. "When Lord Zodiac is not here, he counts on me to make sure everything is done. You do your job; I will do mine."

If there was any woman who was a perfect match for Zodiac, it was Kimmy, Scorpio thought. At times she was a gold-plated bitch.

The flow of people into the courtyard started with a trickle of five then ten, and quickly increased to a long, endless stream. Scorpio had his hands full grouping families back together and sending guards and servants to find places for everyone. In two short hours, every room in the castle was filled, and the stream didn't slow. The guard barracks were filled, and a large group was sent to the nearby village to be taken in by families there. The courtyard became a tent city as even more arrived. Besides the cooks Kimmy wanted, he picked out anyone who could do carpentry to start on huts outside the walls. He was faced with problems he had never thought of, like where to dig latrines for so many and how to get everyone fed. Not only was the kitchen too small to serve such massive amounts of food but the garbage was going to be piled high unless they could work something out. Men started to come through, and he began directing them to various tasks of digging or building.

In Newburg, Fabarian strode to the east side, where a prisoner had been taken as he came towards town holding a white flag on a pole. Six elven soldiers and four townsmen surrounded the man in gray armor as he stood holding his flag.

Fabarian walked up to the stone-faced human. "You are surrendering?"

"I have come with a message," the man replied, not looking at him. "Sir Lash wishes to inform everyone in this town that we mean no harm to humans. Any human may leave in safety, but they must do so with haste. After we begin our attack, any human who does not fight us will be free to join us or go his own way. Sir Lash also wishes to speak with Lord Zodiac before we begin."

“You intend to kill every elf then, correct?” Fabarian sneered.

The man glanced briefly at him then snapped his eyes straight ahead. “Those who surrender will be taken unharmed. Those who resist will be dealt with harshly. May I give Lord Zodiac his message?”

“If he comes to your cell,” Fabarian grated. “Take the prisoner to the jail.”

One of the elves wearing sergeant's stripes said, “Captain, he carries a white flag.”

Fabarian glared at him. “They are going to attack us, and he has seen our defenses. Take him to jail!”

“I should know better than expect honor from an elf,” the man said flatly.

“Take him away!” Fabarian barked.

Reluctantly, his soldiers followed his order. The townsmen didn't protest, though they went back to their posts with downcast eyes.

Fabarian watched them go then thought about the request. Was this Lash going to try and coax Zodiac into surrendering? Fabarian had heard much about Zodiac, but he didn't trust him not to hand over the whole town.

Watching down a side street, he saw another group of women and children heading for the druid's gateway. Finding enemy forces were, indeed, massing all around the town, Commander Eldarin had coaxed Zodiac into taking the elven civilians with him as well. They would have to put up with humans, but at least they'd be alive.

He needed to stall for time to get them through safely. If this Lash thought he was talking to Zodiac then that would make him hold off. He needed a human he could trust to pose as Zodiac. The only one he could think of was the mayor. He didn't look much like Zodiac, but he doubted Lash would know the difference. Quickly, he set out to find the mayor.

The mayor wasn't thrilled with Fabarian's plan but saw the need to keep the enemy from attacking for as long as possible. He thought about bringing it up to Zodiac himself but decided that now was not the time to have an argument between the two. Dragging out his old mail and breastplate, he borrowed a sword and went to the bridge as Fabarian asked. He took two men with him, the one on the right holding the white flag.

Rehearsing the conversation he had planned, the mayor went to the middle of the bridge and stopped. It wasn't long before a man appeared from the side of the road and walked up to the bridge.

“Who are you?”

“I am Lord Zodiac, I wish to speak with your leader, Sir Lash.” he called back.

The man waved. “I'll get him, wait there.”

As he watched the man jog back up the road, the mayor again ran through his head how he was going to tell Sir Lash he needed time to get all the humans out. After all, there were wagons to fill, supplies to gather--surely he could hold off for a day while his fellow humans' safety was seen to. Lash had the town surrounded, what was one day?

The far-off snap of strings got his attention. From the edge of the fields by the woods, four long shafts rose high in the air. He watched them climb, wondering why they would be shooting into the field. The longer he watched, the more he realized they were going to clear the field--and they were headed for the bridge. Spreading his arms to push the men beside him he shouted, "Back, go back!"

They ran as the spears descended on them. The first one landed just outside the rail ahead of them, blasting a quarter of the bridge away and sending rock flying in a high-speed spray. The second landed where they had been standing, shattering the bridge to send the center third crumbling into the river. The third landed next to the guardhouse, blasting it and the barn beside it into burning splinters. The fourth landed in the river, sending up a dome of white water. The mayor was no longer alive to see the destruction, nor the other spears that were heading for the river edge of town.

Zodiac heard the blasts from where he was giving instructions to the large band of residents. They were the only ones left in this part of town. As he watched the fireballs rise, he saw other shafts coming down. They had no time to run.

"Get down, faces on the ground!" he yelled.

A few buildings down, the blacksmith's shop was torn apart by an explosion. Farther up the street a spear landed in front of the church, shredding the entranceway and setting fire to the building. Two more explosions sounded then there was the quiet crackling of burning.

Zodiac checked the sky for more spears. Not seeing any, he told the men, "Go back to Pine Street and set your defenses there."

On their way to the street he hoped was safe from the spear attack, he heard the rumble of explosions from other parts of the town. Fearing for the gateway, he ran to find it was still intact. The mass of people waiting to go through were screaming and crying. From what he could see, their escape route was safe for now.

Spears fell until shattered and burning buildings ringed the town. On the north side a long line of attackers edged towards the ruined structures, setting themselves to shoot their bows as others behind them bore the burden of carrying the large ballistas.

Fabarian tried to counterattack. Leading the largest force he could get together, five hundred townsmen interspersed with soldiers, he rushed the thin wall of bowmen, hoping to break through and destroy those damn spear-throwing machines. The open space was only eighty yards wide.

As soon as they were seen, the bowmen let loose with a volley that dropped the ones in front. Yelling as they ran, some returned fire, stopping just long enough to shoot before running on. The attackers held fast, firing into the oncoming hoard. The gap had closed to fifty yards when a few attackers stood to throw what looked like purplish glass globes into the massed townsmen.

The globes hit, blasting holes in the cluster of men. Bodies and pieces of bodies rained down amid the survivors. The screams of battle became screams of pain. Fabarian was ripped apart from behind. Those lucky enough to escape being blown up met another hail of arrows. Few made it to the line of bowmen. Those who did met bow on bow in close combat.

More attackers raced towards the battle with swords. The townsmen, who had managed to make a small hole in the line of attackers, held their ground in a desperate hope that their comrades would soon

be beside them. They never made it.

The few men in the back who had escaped death saw what was happening and fled. Wounded lay everywhere, crying for help. The small group that had broken through were cut down then each man crying for help was slaughtered. Three more spears were launched into the ruins where the remaining men had taken cover. The attackers then firmed up their own lines and got the ballistas ready for the word to begin the attack.

Zodiac got news of what had happened from one of the terrified survivors. He had expected Fabarian to be smarter than to rush out against those weapons. From what the blubbing man told him, Fabarian had used the entire northern defense to make his suicide attack. Any hope of actively keeping the enemy out was gone--as soon as they figured out there was no one left they would pour in from the north.

Zodiac decided to collapse the remaining defenses. He sent runners to every part of town with a simple message: get to the gateway as fast as you can.

To his surprise, he found JoJo on this side of the gateway. The wizard was watching the line of men move through, occasionally glancing up at the sky.

Walking up beside him, Zodiac asked, "What are you doing here? I thought you went through with Duncan."

JoJo shook his head. "Duncan and Entaurus are laying surprises for our guests. The druids have all left, except for Barkum here. Someone has to protect the gateway."

"Well, don't stay too long. I'm going to need you on the plains."

"I'll be fine. Why don't you go ahead and make sure no one is in my lab? I'll be real upset if my spell doesn't work," JoJo said firmly.

Zodiac glanced at the line at the gate. Men were now moving through, and another group was running up the street to take their turn. He estimated there were over a thousand men still waiting.

Somewhere in the town, Commander Eldarin was rallying what was left of his troops.

The sound of cawing got his attention. He looked up as JoJo sent a shaft of pale blue magic at the crow. Feathers flew as the magic hit and the bird fell.

"They know what we're up to," JoJo warned him.

"Damn!" he spat. "Keep the gate open as long as you can. When things turn bad, get out of here."

JoJo jerked his thumb at the gateway. "You go now. The Company needs a leader, and we've no time to haggle over a new one."

Zodiac shook his head. "In a few minutes." Turning to the line of men, he called out, "I need a few volunteers!"

JoJo's voice was stern. "Zodiac, you've done all you can--leave!"

"Just one minute!" he snapped back. Two townsmen, a human and a half-elf, came forward. Quickly he

told them, "Pass the word--whoever can't get to the gate should try to slip out of town any way you can. The best bet is the river or through a drainage ditch."

"Zodiac, now!" JoJo yelled.

Holding a finger up behind him, Zodiac told them, "If you can't get away, surrender. Don't get killed for no reason."

An explosion sounded above them. Ducking, they looked up to see the fireball rising, and other spears dropping down all over the town. JoJo shot his magic at another one close by, detonating it before it hit. Quickly turning his head to Zodiac, he barked, "Go before I make you go!"

Multiple explosions rocked the town. The ground rumbled as deafening blasts shook the air. The line for the gate became a mob, all trying to get through at once. Barkum's cries for them to get back went unheard. JoJo got two more spears before they could descend on them. A third struck down the street into the tail end of the line. The blast engulfed the line, pitching bodies about.

The mass of men trying to force their way through the gate stressed the magic holding it open. They screamed as it shrank, fusing parts of their bodies into solid wood. The spears had stopped falling, but in the distance Zodiac saw another wave rise into the air. The gate was failing; no more were going through.

Anger written on his face, JoJo strode up to Zodiac and grabbed him by the top edge of his armor. Holding a glass cube, he spoke a few strong words and the two of them disappeared. The ones who saw this cried for them to return. The gate now being useless, Barkum ran for another nearby tree to make his own escape. It was then a pair of spears came down, one just in front of him and the other directly on the tree.

Lash sat on his horse on a hill overlooking the destruction of Newburg. From his vantage point, he could see the smoke trails that led up to the growing black cloud overhead. The third set of spears hit, shattering more buildings. Over half the town was in flames now--whoever was left would not be putting up much resistance.

One of his lieutenants rode up beside him. "Sir Lash, Lantharum reports that the gate they were using to escape has been destroyed."

Lash nodded. "Very good. Does he know how many are left?"

"He calculates less than a few hundred who are capable of fighting."

"Stop the spear attack then send in the scouts. Any who resist become hoarc food."

"Yes, sir." The man kicked his horse and rode off.

Lash watched the town burn. He had killed Zodiac as Hans wanted, and the dead would make plentiful hoarc food. He just wished they had destroyed that damn gate sooner--all of the women had escaped. Some days, things just didn't go as planned.

Chapter 5

Dressed in her black silk robe, Lura materialized in the underground temple of her Master. The walls, floor and ceiling of the pentagram-shaped temple were made from a dull black rock that seemed to absorb the weak torchlight. Had any human eyes been present, all they would have seen of her were her face and hands as she walked towards the center, where the altar stood between two inside points of the star-shaped room.

The Master stood there, facing her. Her shape was that of a voluptuous human woman, but with large, bat-like wings and sharply pointed, hand-length horns on her forehead. Like Lura, she was clad in black

Lura took the bag from under her robe and pulled out two bloody hearts. Placing them side-by-side on the altar, she bowed and said, "Hail to thee, Master. I bring you the hearts of two of your enemies, the dragon handler Devernon and Commander Edarin of Elsanor. I learned what I could before I tore these from their chests."

The demon Aliana regarded her servant. The elfmaid was one of her favorites, talented in magic and very loyal. "What did you learn?"

Lura smiled. "Newburg is destroyed, and Lash reported that Zodiac is dead. According to what I learned from Commander Eldarin before I tore his heart out, the elves know nothing of our plans." Her smile dimmed. "Many druids did evade our trap, however; and Tayan has escaped from his prison cell."

Aliana nodded slowly. "Do not be too concerned. Without Zodiac, the druids will not venture from their woods—we will destroy them in time. I want you to make sure Hans takes Elsanor quickly. Once he has it, move ahead of him, eliminate any survivors and keep resistance from being organized." Leaning over, she crooked a finger to beckon the elf closer. Their lips met. Aliana kissed her deeply, first drawing out some life then breathing it back into her. Lura moaned with delight, her hand on her Master's face.

When the kiss was broken, Lura gazed lovingly at Aliana. "My life is yours, my Master."

Aliana caressed her hair softly. "You are a good servant. Once I have Elrad enslaved, we will cast away that flesh you wear now. You will become Lura the demon, and we will conquer this world together."

"For your glory," Lura breathed.

Giving her a smile, Aliana touched her forehead. "Return."

Lura faded from sight. The taste of her life force made Aliana feel hungry. Picturing her food slave in her mind, she faded out of the temple and appeared in a small rock chamber. A meager, ever-burning torch revealed a large shaggy man with red hair hanging by his arms on the opposite wall. Shackled so he could not sit, his arms were spread just wide enough to keep him from reaching the shiny battleaxe that still hung on his belt. The remains of a mail shirt hung on him in pieces. His head was bowed on his chest, not from sleep but weakness.

"Rise, slave!" she growled as she walked up to him.

The man groaned and shook his head. "No...no more...not again."

"Yes, again," she snapped. Reaching down, she grabbed him and pulled him upright. As she lifted his head, she could not help but grin at the hopelessness in his eyes. He twisted away as she tried to kiss him. Grabbing his chin roughly, she turned his head back and locked her lips on his. He kicked out weakly as she began to feed on his life force.

The warmth of his essence filled her as she drew it out of him. The real charge of energy was at the end. As he started to die, the magic that kept him from doing so flowed into her. She became lightheaded as sparkles dotted her vision and power sizzled into every part of her body. It was her turn to moan as her knees went weak.

She had to brace herself against the wall until the surges of power settled inside her. This was the energy that sustained her. Before she captured this source of power, one day of becoming solid in this world and using her magic would drain her for the next ten. She would be no more than a ghost until she regained her strength.

Although he looked dead now, in a few hours he would be restored. Whatever kept bringing him back to life also supplied her with an unlimited source of energy. She now stayed in solid form no matter how much energy she expended. Whenever she started to feel the slightest bit of weakness, she came down here for a recharge. Her magic and his everlasting life made her invincible.

She knew her food slave didn't remember much, if anything. Knowledge of their pact was burned from his memory by his repeated deaths. She could probably kill Tayan, and her slave would never know. Even if some small part of him did realize she had broken the pact they made, there was nothing he could do about it chained to a wall. The only danger was that Lucifer would know, and he took great offence when a pact made in his name was dishonored. Being in the land of the living did not insulate her from his wrath.

Tayan had somehow escaped from Elsanor. Knowing him, he was probably going for help. She had to do something--the last thing she wanted was humans pouring into Elrad. All the work she had done making Alderlan hate them would be undone if she let Tayan rally support.

If she hadn't made the pact, she'd simply have him killed. As it was, she'd spent a considerable amount of energy protecting him. In a way, it was amusing. Here she was making sure that one of her enemy's own people was being kept from harm. Wouldn't they be surprised if they knew!

Thinking about that, a grin crossed her face. Maybe it was time to protect him from more than her own minions. She didn't have to destroy him. She could do more damage by protecting him more obviously. It was time Tayan of Elrad had an escort.

Returning to the temple, Aliana went to the altar and picked up the two hearts. Both were fresh and moist; they would be perfect. Raising her arms high, she started her incantation, her voice booming through the murk.

"Master of Evil, King of Death, your servant calls upon your greatness to bring me a guardian!"

Reaching out with her soul, she touched the abyss. Power surged through her as she brought the hearts together over her head.

"Grant me my wish, open the portal!"

Squeezing the hearts, she slowly brought her arms down to the sides. In the air, a bloody arch formed in their wake. Continuing down to the floor, she drew them back together. Leaving them there, she stood up and stepped back.

"I command the portal to open!"

The area within the bloody arch turned opaque with the blackness of the abyss. Extending one hand towards the portal, she commanded, "Guardian, come forth!"

The darkness seemed to bulge into the room. As it expanded, it took the form of an extremely large dog. Its head was level with hers as it stepped through. Sitting on its haunches, it folded its wings. The Guardian's eyes opened, glowing red as it waited for her commands. The dim light of the room penetrated the portal; then the arch of blood fell to the floor.

The gargoyle was here, but for it to be useful she needed to give it substance as well as spirit. Placing her hands on the sides of its head, she willed it to open its mouth then pursed her lips and blew. Luminescent tendrils of life force flowed into the beast. With the life, she breathed magic into it as well. Slowly, the dull black creature turned lighter until it solidified into the color of mottled granite.

Looking into the red eyes, she said, "Go to Tayan of Elrad, protect his person, let no violence touch him. You now carry my wishes towards him and have my power to travel at will. Go."

The gargoyle rumbled out a low roar. Spreading its wings, it flapped them once and disappeared. The only proof it had been there were bloody splotches on the floor.

Aliana left the temple through the double doors at the base of the star this time. She passed between the vlaks that guarded her sanctuary. She looked much smaller than her six-foot height as she moved past them. Reaching up, she caressed the hard foreleg of one of her pets.

Although they were not intelligent, the lizard-like vlaks were very strong and well-armored with their thick, bony exoskeletons. The triangular spike at the end of their segmented tail was even more deadly than the long snout full of sharp teeth. Standing on their back legs, vlaks outran horses, even terrified ones trying to escape. Vlaks were fast, deadly and hard to kill--the perfect fighting machines.

Lit with glowing orbs that hung from the ceiling, the underground passages were much brighter than either her temple or her private chambers. Being a creature of darkness, Aliana didn't need light to see. Her eyes detected the slightest variations of heat and cold. Coupled with her ability to sense the presence of entities near her, it meant she had no need for light. Unfortunately, many of her servants did not share her ability, including vlaks.

Turning into a dark alcove, she opened the doors to her private chambers with her mind. There was no light save the bright glow of heat her slaves gave off. As she entered, the three slaves rose and awaited her commands. Once human men, she had destroyed their minds, leaving them without wills of their own. It did not matter that they could not see--they had been imprinted to be able to move about in her chambers without sight.

Looking at the shorter one, she told him wordlessly to fetch her blood wine. She sent a second for her crystal then had the third kneel down in front of her chair as a footrest. Sitting down, she propped her feet on his bare back.

Rubbing one foot along his ribs, she savored the feel of flesh. As her time in this world wore on, she began to develop an appreciation for things she had never considered before. The taking of life was a thing she needed to sustain her own. To take that life was exhilarating, both the deed and the terror it caused in her victim. This had been a pleasant surprise--she had never enjoyed eating souls in the abyss.

Lesser things also caused her pleasure. She exchanged life force with Lura to give the elf power and to bring her closer to darkness. In doing so, she enjoyed the actual meeting of lips. She had even toyed with the thought of kissing just for the sake of kissing. It had been the same with that knight she had seduced. She could have killed him outright; but to humiliate him, to feel him couple with her before she took his life, had been wonderful. The child from that union had been another surprise. It amused her to have the girl, a small version of herself to train. As she had gotten older, though, the girl took on more human characteristics. No amount of whipping could change her; she became more defiant. Eventually she ran away. Since it was her own child, she had decided not to hunt it down and kill it.

She had become even more sensitive in the last few years as she fed off her food slave. Once, she had tried to seduce him. He had resisted with a strength she hadn't thought possible in humans. No matter how hard she probed his mind and tried to arouse him, he blocked her out. In frustration, she broke his legs before she drained his life. His screams were some comfort; but in a small way, he had won. She was still thinking about how to make him suffer for that.

The slave returned to stand beside her with the crystal. He held the multifaceted gem in his open palm, staring sightlessly ahead. Aliana took the crystal and gripped it tightly in one hand. Putting her energy into it, she conjured a mental picture of Hans. She held it no more than a moment before his voice came into her head.

"My beautiful and powerful Master, what do you wish of me?"

She could now see him in a camp, holding his own crystal that connected them. "How are your new toys working?"

"Wonderfully, Master," he grinned. "The spears create total chaos when we drop them. By mixing them with plain spears, we can make the enemy wizards expel their energy on fakes. The zombie women also worked quite well--the elves took them in without a second thought. When I attack Elsanor, I will use them on a larger scale."

"Very good, Hans. The land you take will be yours to rule, once you give me the elven king's head."

"Thank you, Master."

Aliana slapped the crystal back into her slave's palm. "Put it away."

She knew she would have to make more hoarcs and breed more pilgyns. The bulk of her army was in Elrad; even if Hans didn't take large losses, she had to be prepared in case Tayan managed to rally support. It was such a shame she couldn't kill him.

Sliding a calf over her slave's lower back, she decided to leave serious thought for later. "Come, slave, it's time to service me."

Amber sat on the front seat of the coach, fingering her braided ponytail as she watched the countryside go by. When Tayan groaned and sat up to get his bearings, she turned to him and smiled.

"Good afternoon, sleep well?"

Stretching the kinks out of his arms and back, he frowned at the shrub and pines going by. "Where are we?" he asked.

"On the road to Paladnia. We should be there in a few hours." Digging into the bag by her side, she asked, "Hungry? I picked up some fresh fruit in Capetown, and there is some freshly cooked fish and some jerked venison."

He stared at her for a few seconds. "Oh, no." he breathed, flopping back to stare at the coach roof.

"Something wrong?" she asked innocently.

Tayan snorted a sarcastic laugh as he looked at her. "Wrong? Just because Zodiac kidnapped me and may have started a war with Elrad, why should anything be wrong?"

Folding the bag back over, Amber gave a huff. "He needs you to gather support for an attack on the plains. You cannot do that if you're in prison."

"While people I care about on both sides die in a useless battle?" he asked heavily.

Giving him a soft look, she said, "Tayan, I'm sure he knows what he's doing. Give him a chance."

Tayan turned his gaze out the window. Looking back at her, he asked, "Amber, how did I get here? We must have traveled close to three hundred miles. No one stays unconscious that long."

"I've been traveling a few days. Zit got me to Capetown. Once there, I got this coach to take us to Paladnia. I didn't take you out until today, when I was sure no one would be looking for you."

"Take me out?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

With a grin, she picked up the bag and shook it. "You were in here. We did it to keep anyone from knowing you were with me. Sending Odif to Elsanor would have been pointless if you were seen leaving Newburg."

His eyes went to the bag, fixing on it with hatred. The muscles in his jaw tightened. "Who put me in that?"

"It was the only way to get you away unseen," Amber repeated, giving him a puzzled look.

He shifted his glare to her. "Who?"

She drew herself up, braced for his anger. "Odif did, with my help."

She waited for him to yell, carry on or snatch the bag up and throw it out. The only thing he did was turn his head stiffly to stare out the window.

"It was the only way to get you out unseen," she said for the third time.

He ignored her.

"This coach line will take us all the way to Zayton. It's a new company and the fare includes our rooms at night," she went on, trying to get a response.

"Do you know the Duke of Paladnia?" she asked a little louder.

"His name is Sir Stazor," he replied without looking at her.

"He is a knight? I didn't think knights ruled."

He finally glanced at her. "Paladnia means 'pure city' in the old tongue. Years ago it was a town full of slavers, cutthroats and thieves. We went in and cleaned it up, Stazor stayed with his knights and the people put him in charge. He prefers to be called a governor rather than a duke."

"Why is that?"

"As I understand it, he does not want to be known as royalty."

"Really? How long have you known him?"

Tayan kept looking out the window at scenery he had no interest in. "You are just making conversation."

Amber had to force her smile to stay in place. "I've been riding with no company for four days. It would be nice to talk."

"Let's talk about coaches heading west--I'm going back."

Her eyes went wide. "You can't do that!"

Glancing at her, he said, "I am going back. I didn't ask to be kidnapped, so Zodiac will just have to find someone else to run his errands."

Amber's jaw tightened and her fingers curled around the edge of her seat. "Tayan, you are the only one who can gather support for him."

"You can do it. As you get to each city, just tell them you're there for Lord Zodiac. At the very least, you'll be seen by the nobles and rulers," he said in a flat tone.

It might have been the defeats they had suffered, her irritation from riding alone for the last three days or just being tired of his foul moods. Whatever the reason, she'd had enough. She stomped down on his foot hard.

Letting out a startled yelp, he gaped at her. She scowled and pointed a stern finger at him.

"Stop it now! You know very well that Zodiac is counting on you! You are the only one who knows

every head of state from Elrad to the Twin Kingdoms!" she yelled. "Tayan, I am sorry your wife died, I am sorry you got stuffed in this bag, I am sorry we killed innocent elven farmers, I am sorry you got accused of something you didn't do! What is done is done--we cannot change the past. What we can do...is do what is right! Quit feeling sorry for yourself and be the hero you are. Although I'm jealous as...anything of Odif, she was absolutely right—"

Just as suddenly as she had torn into him, she clapped her mouth shut, realizing she was saying more than she wanted to. Flopping back in her seat, she bit her lip and turned her face away from him.

"Why are you jealous of Odif?" he asked quietly.

She tried to blink back a tear, but it fell from her eye to run down and wet one of the small depressions in her cheek. She slapped at it, only smearing it into another small pit. It took all her will to not jump from the coach and run away. Why should she be jealous of Odif just because the druid was so pretty and self-assured? So what if it had been Odif who made Tayan face his grief then held him as he cried on her shoulder. Why should she be jealous of someone who knew how to handle any situation? Even though Odif was much too brazen, Amber could not help wishing that at least one man would look at her like they did at Odif. When Odif arrived in a place, men craned their heads and put on big smiles as they gathered around her. When *she* arrived anywhere she was lucky if they didn't turn away and snicker as they poked at their cheeks.

She had tried to believe that the pits in her face were to teach her humility. As time went on, it was getting harder and harder not to believe she was being punished.

Sliding onto the seat beside her, Tayan got into her line of vision. Gazing at her softly, he asked again, "Why are you jealous of Odif?"

She tried to turn away from him. As she did, he grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her back. She slapped his hands away and managed to keep from crying as she snapped, "Don't you have something to be angry about?"

Try as she might, she couldn't stop her lip from quivering.

Clasping her hand, he told her, "Odif has been around a few years longer than you. Twenty years from now, I'm sure you'll be the one commanding attention."

Amber suppressed a snort. The only place she would command attention was in a town of blind people. Maybe some day she might command respect like Mother Frieda did, but she would never turn heads. As a priestess of Leighna, that shouldn't matter to her, but it did. Desperate to turn the conversation away from herself, she asked, "Are you going to help Zodiac or not?"

Tayan cracked a grin. "Like you said, I'm the only one who can do it. I know Sir Stazor will be no problem--his people live to fight evil. What might be a problem is King Gunther. The last time he and Alderlan were together it didn't end very well."

Scrubbing her palm over her cheek to wipe away the tear stuck there, she asked, "Nothing too bad, I hope."

Tayan shrugged. "Bad enough. From the start of the conference the atmosphere was heavy with tension. You could almost smell the bad feelings in the air. The best thing I can say about it is that no one drew swords."

"That doesn't sound very encouraging," she agreed. Lacing her fingers through his, she said, "I'm sure you'll find a way."

"We will find a way," he corrected. "Zodiac didn't want you to come just to keep me company. Both Duke Jordan and King Gunther are loyal worshippers. As a holy figure, you will force them to think seriously about it."

"Me?" she asked, genuinely surprised. "I've never been to a royal court!"

"First time for everything," he told her. "You can practice on Governor Stazor."

Amber shifted nervously in her seat. She was a commoner and knew nothing about how to deal with important people. Sure, she had been accepted by Lord Zodiac into the Company, and sitting next to her was one of the most influential men who ever lived. It was different with Tayan, though. He was more like a regular person. Except when he was forced to in Newburg, he never let on how important he was. It had never occurred to her that she might one day be standing in front of dukes and kings by his side.

Seeing the concern in her face, he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Stick close to me--you'll do fine."

She refrained from telling him sticking close was exactly what she had planned on doing. "So, tell me about Governor Stazor."

Tayan told her about the city of Paladnia, and how Stazor turned it into a safe place for its citizens to live. Whether it was the company after riding alone for days or the sound of his voice, Amber began to feel better. As he went on, their eyes never wavered from each other. The coach slowing to a stop didn't get their attention, nor did the conversations outside the coach until another voice entered their world.

"Excuse me for a moment?"

They both looked to see a young human knight holding the door to the coach open. His armor was so finely polished it had a mirror-like quality to it. His helmet was in the crook of his arm as he waited for them to notice him. Beyond him was a guardhouse of perfectly cut blocks of stone.

"I am Tayan Montara of Elrad, this is Sister Amber Tanner of Capetown."

The knight bowed deeply to Amber. "Welcome to Paladnia, Sister." Looking at Tayan, he hesitated briefly then bowed. "Lord Tayan, it is a pleasure to meet you. The Governor speaks very highly of you. I am Sir Tartan--I will send a rider to inform Governor Stazor of your arrival."

"Send word I would like to see him as soon as possible."

"Yes, M'lord," Tartan said. Shutting the door, he waved to the driver then called out, "Marlen, ride to the palace. Inform the Governor that Lord Tayan Montara wishes to see him immediately."

The coach started up again, and Amber gazed out at the city. Paladnia had to be the cleanest metropolis she had ever seen. The buildings were colorful; both wood and stone were painted in bright colors. Whether they were passing houses or shops, nearly every window sported long planters full of flowers. There was no trash along the walks or alleys, and not one of the waste barrels located near each building was filled to overflowing. She also noticed there were no ragged people or beggars. Everything she saw indicated a perfect community. Even the air was much cleaner than other cities she had been in.

Shortly, the coach pulled up to the palace gates. The walls and guardhouse were bright white. Amber had to squint as another knight in polished armor came up to the coach and opened the door.

Stepping out, they were ushered through the courtyard by a pair of knights. They walked past a white fountain to see a priest with a ring of gray hair on the palace steps in front of the door.

One knight halted them. "Please wait here for a moment."

They stopped, and the priest held his holy symbol, the Cup of Odin, to his heart as he stared at them.

"It is nothing to be concerned about, we are required to do this with all our visitors," the knight told Amber.

By his action, Amber knew the priest was looking for an evil presence. It was insulting--she restrained the urge to do the same to him. "I suppose your priest would ask Odin himself to stand for such a test."

The knight grinned as he leaned closer to her. "He might."

That made her chuckle. The priest turned and went back inside without a word and came back out with two more knights. The tall blond one wearing chain mail over his clothes waved to them as the newcomers strode up to stand a few paces away.

"Greetings, Tayan!" Bowing to Amber, he said, "And to you, Sister."

"My name is Amber," she said, eyeing the priest, who was still watching Tayan. "Is there a problem?"

Sensing she was talking to him, the priest looked at her. "Sister, move away from Lord Tayan."

"Why?"

The priest started to say something else, and Stazor held his hand up. "Father Ross, do you detect something?"

"Yes," he said, furrowing his aged brow. "I don't understand it. Neither Sister Amber nor Lord Tayan has evil intent, but I feel Lord Tayan has protection from evil."

Frowning at him, Amber asked, "Isn't that good, to be protected from evil?"

Stazor also turned to the priest. There was a bit of stress in his voice as he said, "Please explain."

"Governor, Sister, when I say he has protection from evil, I mean that evil is doing the protecting. There is a presence around him that is blacker than anything I have ever sensed."

Tayan glanced nervously at them. "What is it?"

Ross shook his head. "I do not know. All I know is that it is strong."

"Are you sure?" Stazor asked, looking quite puzzled.

"What is around him is very powerful--it is like he is being protected straight from the pit by the devil

himself," Father Ross stated.

"Ridiculous!" Amber spat. "Tayan is not evil! He has had a rough time and feels guilt, that must be what you have sensed."

The priest eyed her sternly. "Step back and see for yourself, Sister."

Flustered, Amber did so. "Fine! I'll show you."

Pressing the talisman of her Goddess to her chest, she concentrated hard on Tayan. As she did, she saw what she expected to see. A light glow was around him, the presence of goodness. She thought then that a cloud was passing overhead, for beyond the light around Tayan it suddenly grew dark. Shifting her gaze off him for an instant, she saw the day was as sunny as it had been. Glancing at the sky, she saw no clouds. When she looked at Tayan, the darkness was still there. It did not touch him, but surrounded him just beyond the light.

Her mouth hung open; the talisman dropped from her hand to bounce at the end of its chain. f

"It can't be," she whimpered. "It's all around him!"

"Yes, a powerful evil force is watching him. If someone were to attack him, it would manifest itself," Father Ross explained. "I feel this strongly."

Tayan shifted nervously in place. "Maybe I should go. Amber can tell you what I came to discuss."

"Wait," Stazor said quickly. "We know your heart is good. If you are being plagued by evil, we must help you be free of it." Turning to one of their escort knights, he said, "Show Sister Amber to the sanctuary. I will be along shortly."

The knight beside Amber hooked his arm for her to hold. She didn't want to leave now--this was serious. Looking pleadingly at Tayan she said, "I should stay with you."

He gave her one of his gentle smiles. "Go with them, Sister, I'll be fine."

She wanted to plant her feet and stay put. Still, she hooked her arm under the knight's and let him lead her away. The darkness that surrounded Tayan filled her mind. How were they going to defeat it?

Stazor walked with Tayan toward the large guest building. Glancing around, he waited until they were out of earshot of the others before he asked, "What brings you, my friend?"

Tayan took a deep breath. "There is trouble in Newburg. Zodiac has told me he is going after the source of evil, but he didn't tell me where it is. At the moment, there is an army led by black knights surrounding Newburg, and in the town the elves and druids are ready to draw swords against each other."

"It sounds grim," Stazor observed. "What can we do?"

"When Zodiac is ready, he wants as many men as we can gather to attack. I do not yet know when that will be."

Stazor considered that for a moment. "He is being cautious. I understand why he has sent you to gather arms. What I do not understand is why evil is protecting you. I would think it would try to destroy you, to keep you from your mission."

"So would I." Tayan shrugged. As they came to the double doorway of the guest quarters, he mused, "Maybe it can't stop me. If it knew I was coming here, it might be trying to discredit me."

"That is a possibility," Stazor agreed. "There also is the chance that it wants you to finish your mission so it knows who its enemies are. There are many who only pay lip service to the gods. They are satisfied to sit in church and worship, but when it comes down to eliminating evil, they let others act."

Tayan could have made many remarks about that statement. Most people didn't want to become involved unless it was their home in danger. They didn't go looking for trouble or to get killed.

"I take it you'll help?" he asked.

"I can spare two companies at the moment. If there is time to prepare, I will have more. Lord Zodiac didn't say where or when, correct?" Tayan shook his head, so he continued. "Then I will start preparing today. Who else are you to visit?"

"Duke Jordan and the elf nobles in Tolina then King Gunther in Zayton, of course." Pausing a second, he added, "Possibly Krundle afterwards. I heard rumors of a fighting machine one of their generals is working on."

With a chuckle, Stazor said, "Oh, yes! General Cooper's infamous steel wagons." Waving a hand to dismiss the subject, he said, "Last I heard he had managed to seriously burn his best smiths. I wouldn't look to him--he might get you killed trying to help you."

Tayan couldn't help but grin. "What are these wagons?"

Smiling broadly as if telling a joke, Stazor said, "He has this crazy idea that boiling water can drive wagons instead of horses. As I understand it, he spent much of his duke's gold to build two wagons made of steel that didn't have a hitch. He tried to make them go with their own power, and both of them blew up. Three of his men died from scalding. Believe me, Tayan, you don't want any part of him."

Although Stazor made it sound impossible, Tayan had to wonder about the idea. Without horses that could be wounded or killed, an armored wagon could be turned into a mobile fortress. If this Cooper managed to get them working, they would be a formidable weapon.

Getting back to his problem, he asked, "Is there something you can do to find out what is watching me?"

Clapping a hand on his shoulder, Stazor told him, "We will do what we can. The good news is that you are in no danger for the time being."

A servant came out, dressed in a gold jacket over his white uniform. Flagging him down, Stazor told him, "Jubar, this is Lord Tayan Montara. Show him to one of the guestrooms, please."

Jubar turned to Tayan and bowed. "Very good to see you, M'Lord. If you will follow me, I'll see you to your room."

"Meet us in the chapel once you're settled," Stazor said and walked off.

Tayan didn't have anything to settle. He had been spirited off without any possessions. His pack was still in Eldarin's quarters, as were his sword and bow. He did follow the servant up to his room so he would know where to sleep at night. As they walked, he checked his pockets. He had a gold piece and a few silvers; hopefully it would be enough to at least buy an extra set of clothes and a few supplies. He would still need some kind of weapon--he'd ask Stazor to lend him one until he got his own.

The guestroom was actually a suite of three rooms. Besides a good-sized sitting room decorated with plush chairs and couches, there was a separate bedroom and a small room Jubar called a water closet. Tayan stood by as he explained the function of the strange-looking facility.

Motioning to the bathtub with metal bars coming down from the ceiling, Jubar told him, "These are the water pipes to fill the bath. Hot water is on the left, cold on the right." He reached over to push up a lever attached to the cold water pipe. Water spilled out until he pushed it back down again. "The chamber pot works in the same manner. I will have someone come in to draw your bath, but the chamber pot you will have to do yourself," he said with a grin.

"There is a cistern filled with hot water?" Tayan asked.

"It's not exactly a cistern. Did you notice the brass tank on the roof? The water comes from there and is heated in a smaller tank on the top floor. I would be glad to show you the plumbing, if you like."

Running hot water. It sounded intriguing, but Tayan had more important things to think about at the moment. "Maybe later. Where is the nearest place I can buy some clothes?"

Jubar bowed slightly as if he was happy there was something he could help with.

"What are you looking for? There is Laura's Tailor Shop if you would like something made, Pernell's for formal wear and Elanzo's Dry Goods for just about everything else."

"The dry goods store is fine."

"When you leave the palace, turn left. Elanzo's is just past the second street on the right. Is there anything else you require, M'Lord?"

Tayan shook his head. "Not at the moment." He thanked the man and headed out to find Stazor.

The inside of the palace chapel was the finest he had ever seen. Besides windows of stained glass depicting various religious leaders and the images of Odin and Leighna in bright colors, every piece of stone and wood was brightly polished. The letters and pictures carved into the columns were filled with gold, silver torch holders hung on each pillar. At the front, a tall pulpit sat to the left, and the altar was covered by a white linen cloth trimmed with bands of gold stitching.

In front of the altar, Amber stood with Stazor on one side of her and Father Ross on the other. None spoke as he walked in. The way they watched him caught his attention, especially Amber, who looked worried.

Halfway up the aisle, Tayan slowed, sensing something wrong. Not two steps farther, he caught a flash of motion to his right. He ducked out of instinct before his brain registered he was being attacked. Something whizzed by his head so close his hair was fluffed by the wind. His left foot swung up behind in an arc to kick at the shape, making contact with the attacker's arm.

Rolling away, Tayan shot back up in a defensive stance to face a knight holding a fully padded practice staff.

"What in the abyss is this!" he demanded.

As the two men faced off, a loud, deep roar sounded outside that made the building tremble. The knight turned away from Tayan and flung the practice weapon to one side then drew a more deadly broadsword as he faced the back of the chapel.

Stazor ran up the aisle. "It's outside, get ready!" he called.

Father Ross and Amber were right behind, and they all took positions around Tayan. Both Father Ross and Amber held their holy symbols, watching intently to the left and right.

Stazor started for the doors with the other knight. Glancing back quickly, he said, "Come, but stay together."

Tayan began to understand. They had set up the attack to draw out the thing shadowing him. Now, they were going out to try and destroy it. Stazor was a brave man, but he was sure whatever this was would not be stopped by so few.

"Wait, let me go first."

"We will send it back to whence it came!" announced Father Ross.

Jumping forward, Tayan dashed up behind the knights and stopped them with a hand on each of their shoulders. "Stazor, you go out there, and this thing will kill you."

Stazor's face was stone. "I cannot allow an evil thing to exist here."

"Then let me lead." Without waiting for a reply, he slipped between them and went to the doors. Behind him, Amber cried out a warning for him to get back. Ignoring it, he pushed the doors open and strode outside.

In the courtyard, the only thing he saw were several knights gathered together, weapons drawn. Like him, they were searching for whatever had roared. By their looks, they didn't see or sense anything. The others poured out of the chapel behind him in a semi-circle.

A few seconds later Father Ross announced, "It has fled."

"Holy presence drove it away." Amber breathed deeply with relief.

Tayan wasn't so sure. "Holy presence kept it at bay. I think it may have been called off."

"It figured out we weren't really going to hurt you, and the risk to itself was too great for it to stay," Stazor concluded.

"Probably."

His face screwed up in frustration, Stazor sheathed his sword. "We didn't even get a look at it!" Letting out a sigh, he said, "Tayan, it may very well kill you once you leave the city. Stay with us--I will send messengers to deliver Lord Zodiac's message."

"Thanks, but no. Whatever it is, I'm the one that has to deal with it." Glancing at Amber, he added, "I would appreciate it if Amber stays with you."

This brought an immediate response. Glaring at him, she said, "I will not! Tayan, I may be your only protection from that thing. Zodiac told me to stick by you."

He could just see Amber standing before some nightmarish beast. He was sure she'd try no matter how scared she was, or the fact it would tear her to shreds.

"He doesn't know about that thing. It was strong enough to enter a holy city and tried to enter the chapel itself. I doubt you would be any more than an annoyance to it," he told her sternly.

Amber drew herself up and looked at him defiantly, "I had thought insects to only be an annoyance before I met the druids. Now I know they can be powerful weapons. I know I am not a Mother, but I trust in my Goddess. Leighna will protect us."

"The gods have their plan, part of which might not be to save a young girl who chooses to face down the devil," Father Ross said heavily.

Amber shifted her glare to him. "If I may serve Leighna better in heaven then so be it. Tell me that you would back down from evil, and I will consider staying here."

"Sister Amber, we are more capable of fighting such," Stazor pointed out.

"Listen to the governor, Sister," Father Ross encouraged. Stepping towards her, he held up his finger to stress his point. "Your soul would be a great prize to a thing such as that. It might not attack you directly but play with your mind, trick you into doing something to weaken yourself. You do not know how devious evil can be! To have faith is very important, Sister, but so is knowledge. You are not prepared to do battle with our enemy."

"I stay with Tayan," she insisted. "I would ask to pray with you, Father, and have your blessings."

Seeing she was not going to change her mind, Father Ross shook his head sadly. "Come, we will offer prayers and ask for guidance."

Tayan watched them go into the chapel. With any luck, the priest would make Amber understand she was better off staying here.

"Maybe I should leave now," he mused.

"Do you really want her running behind your coach?" Stazor chuckled.

"What are you talking about?"

Folding his arms over his chest, Stazor grinned at him. "Are you that blind? The good sister is quite taken with you. You haven't been here half a day, and I can see it clearly. I do believe she also has cast herself as your spiritual guide."

"Even more reason I should leave her behind."

"I do not think Sister Amber can be stopped. She is using her strengths--faith, love and healing. These things are her armor, her weapons against evil. I only pray that those, with her determination, will be enough."

Tayan started thinking about Amber, how she always seemed to be near him, how she looked at him with those big brown eyes. He enjoyed her company and had not stopped to think why she was paying so much attention to him. If she was falling in love with him, he had to set her straight. His heart still belonged to his wife.

Suddenly, he wanted to discuss anything but Amber.

"I need to go get some clothes. When I return, could you lend me a sword and a bow? I seemed to have left mine in Newburg."

Stazor arched an eyebrow. "How did you come to travel in this state?"

Tayan didn't want to go through the whole explanation. "It's a long story. I have coin for some clothes, but not nearly enough for a decent sword--"

Stopping him with a wave of his hand, Stazor told him, "Tell Jubar what you need, and he will get it. Once you have your other necessities, we'll go down to the armory and outfit you properly."

Tayan shifted nervously; he knew the servant would get things much too expensive for the few coins he had in his pocket.

"I can only buy basic items, and the weapons will be only a loan."

Stazor shook his head. "You are a friend and you have a holy mission, two very good reasons I cannot allow you to pay. If you have limited funds then I am sure you will be needing them. Zayton is a long way down the road."

Stazor was right, it was a long way to Zayton. He was facing the choice of either eating or sleeping under a roof. Add to that the unexpected, and he'd be broke before he knew it. His food would be what he hunted, and his bed would be his tent.

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"You are more than welcome. I have city matters to attend to. If I don't see you beforehand, dinner is at six bells." Giving him a big smile, Stazor clapped him on the shoulder. "It's really good to see you again."

Tayan watched him depart then went to find Jubar. The servant took down everything he asked for and included some basic items like a pack to put all his stuff in and an extra bag for feed for his horse. Keeping all his belongings in that magic sack, he had gotten used to not lugging a backpack around. He asked about the horse, and Jubar told him that horses were a basic traveling need. By the time they were done Tayan wondered if he would later add on a wagon to the list as a basic need.

With his gear out of the way, Tayan began thinking about Amber again. He had that evil whatever-it-was watching him; he didn't want to worry about Amber trying to tangle with it. He could sneak out at night and leave her behind, but then she'd only press the coach driver to make better time to catch up to him. The last thing he wanted was one more death on his hands, especially hers. He decided to go talk to the driver and hope he was a decent enough fellow to not take her any farther.

Asking around, Tayan found out all the coach drivers passing through stayed at a place called the Roadhouse Inn. It was in the center of town and only a few blocks from the palace. He made sure Amber was occupied elsewhere and left to go pay their driver a visit.

The Roadhouse Inn wasn't a tall building, but the front stretched on for half the block. Three main doors led inside, and all three had different signs over them. The first read *Tickets and Booking*, the second *Dinner and Drinks* and the third *Rooms*.

Tayan went in the first door to find a prune-faced woman. Looking up at him, she asked, "May I help you?"

"I am looking for the driver of the coach that came in from Capetown today."

Frowning at him, she said, "I only know where the coaches are going. What is your destination?"

"We're going to Tolina then on to Zayton."

Scanning a small chalkboard on the desk, she tapped it with a bony finger. "There are two coaches leaving for Spring Valley today. Tomorrow another one is going straight through to Old Castle. You can pick up another coach at either of those places--we have no long distance runs from here to Tolina."

Tayan figured he'd better explain what he wanted a little more clearly. "We have a coach that is taking us all the way to Zayton. I need to find the driver."

"I will not have a through coach listed, sir."

"You can't tell me the name of the driver?"

Tipping her head slightly, she asked, "You don't know who brought you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then I can't help you, sir."

He thought it might help if he described the coach. "It was a red coach with black trim, a full-roofed model."

She shook her head as she sighed. "Nowadays, most of them are. Take a look in the stableyard out back--the driver's name should be on the side under his seat. The drivers usually gather in the dining room or the lounge. If you have a problem with your driver, you can find him there."

Realizing that was all he was going to get out of her, he thanked her and went out to the stableyard. He knew what the coach looked like, but upon seeing the line of eight vehicles backed against the rail he noticed six of the eight were red with black trim. As he got closer to look at the side door to see if it had

a window, he noticed the name of the company in bold white letters on the side.

Redman Coach Lines

Staring at it, he thought it had to be a coincidence. He couldn't imagine Eric owning a single coach, let alone a whole fleet. Inspecting them, he saw all six belonged to the same company. He did find the one he and Amber had come in on--it was the only one that didn't have a window in the door. Beside it was a stable boy with a bucket, washing the dust off.

The boy didn't notice him until Tayan was right beside him. Startled, the lad blushed and uttered a greeting. As he looked at Tayan, he became wide-eyed then glanced at the name on the coach. He gaped as he said, "*Wow!* Are you him?"

Tayan felt a chill shoot up his spine. "Am I who?"

"You the Red Man, the one who kills pilgrims and vlaks all by himself?"

The chill went into his blood. "Is that who owns these?" he grated.

"Yeah, well, Jake says that some of the drivers pay him to put his name on their coach. It helps keep away bandits--ain't no one wants to tangle with him," the boy explained.

A shadow fell over him. He had been riding in his father's coaches. Even when the man wasn't anywhere near, he still haunted him! Turning stiffly, he strode around to the front of the building. He had to do something to keep Amber from getting in one of those damned coaches and following him. Something to scare the daylight out of the driver...

Suddenly, he had the answer. He left the Roadhouse and headed back to the palace to get what he would need. The memory of his father was like a festering sore on his backside; it was about time he got some use out of the name Eric had made for himself.

The bald man wearing the leather apron and soot on his face looked at him quizzically.

"You want ruined chain mail?"

Tayan nodded at the smith. "The worse it is, the better."

"We don't keep stuff like that. The only thing I have here that comes close to what you're asking for is some remnants I keep to fix other suits. It isn't fit to wear."

"Show it to me."

Bending down, the smith opened one of the doors under his worktable. He pulled out some mail and

held it up with one hand. Dangling disjointed strings of chain, it looked to be half there, at best.

"There's no front to this at all, and the underarm links have all been taken out, as well as chunks of the back."

Tayan took it and held it up. "This is perfect, thanks."

Rolling it up, he left the perplexed man and went to the stables.

Jubar had neglected nothing; his horse was a seasoned, dappled gray. Just outside the stall, the saddle hung over a sawhorse with a blanket, saddlebags and bridle. His bedroll was already on the back of the saddle, ready to go. A long rawhide sleeve for a bow lay next to the saddle. He half-expected a note telling him where his pack mule was.

He put the mail, or what was left of it, in his saddlebags. Next he visited the armory. The squire there tried to get him into a full set of plate armor. He had to convince the boy all he needed was a good sword, a bow and a quiver of arrows. As he looked around at the long racks of weapons, he saw something else he'd need. He had the squire give him a heavy double-bladed battleaxe. He couldn't fight with it but he'd need it for the Inn, and he could always chop wood with it later.

Amber found him after he had deposited his second load in the stables. He had just started across the courtyard when she called to him. She was in full view; he had no chance to hide.

She wore a partial smile as she came up to him. "I've been looking all over for you. Where did you go?"

He knew she'd seen him come out of the stable, so he made up a story.

"I borrowed a horse to see if the south end of town had been rebuilt yet. It is--it looks good."

She eyed him as if she knew he wasn't telling the truth; but thankfully, she didn't challenge him.

"While you've been seeing the sights, I've been talking with Father Ross about our route. He says we should be careful in Spring Valley--the brothers there telling him they sense evil moving in. They haven't had any trouble other than the usual, but it might be a good idea to just pass through quickly. We can pick up another coach in town and be out before dark."

As far as he knew, Spring Valley was just like any other town. There were good and bad elements.

"I should be safe staying at the church," he told her.

Watching him closely, she asked, "You?"

A warning flag went up in his mind. He hadn't stopped to think about how to lie to her. "I meant we'll stay at the church; it should make you feel safe."

"You aren't leaving me behind."

"No, I'm not," he said quickly. Hooking his arm for her to take, he asked in a mock-formal manner, "Shall we prepare for our evening meal?"

He expected a wise remark, at least an irritated huff. She did neither. Slipping her hand up over his arm,

she kept watching him.

"By all means."

They walked back to their rooms, each deep in thought. He was thinking about his after-dinner plans--he'd have to be careful not to raise her suspicions. He didn't know what Amber was thinking about, but he could see the wheels turning in her head. He only hoped she hadn't figured out what he was up to.

In his room, he found neatly stacked piles of clothes on the dresser. Leafing through the shirts, he saw these were far more than basic wear. Made of silk and linen, the shirts were adorned with everything from frilly collars to a light blue one that looked to have real gold threads in the scrolled designs over the front. Every one had expensive polished shell buttons. The pants were the same. They looked finely made, some with contrasting seams down the sides, but there wasn't one pair of durable breeches to be found.

He needed good solid traveling leathers and woolens. This stuff was going to be ruined as well as attract bandits on the lookout for wealthy merchants to waylay. He had no time to exchange them here; he'd have to do it in Spring Valley.

Knowing Stazor, the governor would expect him to come to dinner wearing something fancy. He decided to go all out. After his bath, he put on the cream-colored silk shirt embroidered in gold and a set of dark blue pants. The shirt was a bit too blousy, and the pants a bit snug, but they did fit. Looking at himself in the mirror, he had to laugh. His reflection reminded him of a gypsy dancer. He looked ridiculous, in an amusing sort of way. Once Amber saw him, she was sure to gasp at this gaudy display; and maybe chiding him would take her mind off their troubles.

He was in a cheerier mood as he strode up and rapped on her door. Standing straight and stiff, he waited for her to answer. She did, coming out in her normal brown robes. At seeing him, she froze and her mouth dropped.

With a flourish, he offered her his arm. "Shall we go, my dear?"

She swept him up and down with her eyes and a flush came to her cheeks. Her hand reached blindly for the door as she breathed, "Excuse me...for a moment."

She then slammed the door shut.

On the other side of the door, Amber leaned against the wall, hand to her chest as she tried to catch her breath. He was gorgeous! She had always thought Tayan was handsome, but with that frilly shirt and those tight pants hugging his hips...

Squeezing her eyes shut, she took a few deep breaths. "Leighna, give me strength!" she whispered.

If she were to survive the evening and not melt into a puddle at his feet, she would need all the strength

she could get!

His voice came through the door, sounding irritated. "Amber, I know I look silly, but all the clothes Jubar gave me look like this."

Silly? He had nearly stopped her heart! Composing herself, she straightened up and smoothed out her hair, more out of nervousness than any attempt at being neat. She opened the door, fixing her eyes on his, trying to ignore anything below his chin.

"I was not prepared to see you dressed like a common street performer," she told him, trying to sound crisp.

Slipping her hand around his arm, she felt the smoothness of the cloth and had to force herself not to look down.

"It's all right to laugh, I feel kind of silly. Think anyone else will notice?" he asked with a grin.

"I don't see how they could not," she told him honestly. She decided to keep an eye on him--he wasn't going to be safe if any other women were there. Those pants were on the edge of being scandalous!

When Odif strutted around showing all she had, it only confirmed that she was crude; but for a man to show his shape--well, it scattered her brains. The more she didn't want to get another good look at him, the more she really wanted to. A few times on the way to the dining hall she silently chided herself for snatching glimpses. She was going to have to pay a week's penance for the things she was thinking!

The hall was filled with knights and their families. Tayan sat at one side of Stazor while Amber sat to their hosts other side. The dinner went well for him, not once did anyone poke fun at his attire. Most of the knights wore similar clothes, but their pants fit properly. Stazor announced his commitment to helping Zodiac rid their land of evil, which was echoed by others. Thankfully, the conversations were focused on Zodiac and not him.

After dinner they mingled as minstrels played. A few of the ladies made pains to converse with him. Amber seemed to be in the right place each time to intercept them and either coax them off or stress the benefits of being pure and chaste until she drove them away. Whatever her reasoning, he was glad to have her keeping away unwanted attention.

One young lady in white with a head of blond hair piled high on her head eyed Tayan intently. She tried ignoring Amber and even went so far as to ask him out "for a walk" as she leaned slightly forward to make sure he got a look at her cleavage.

Tayan told her as politely as he could, "I am escorting Sister Amber this evening. Perhaps another time."

The lady stared at him, shocked that he would deny her. She spared Amber a long, haughty glance and told him, "It is very...charitable for you to give your attention to her. After all, she may never again know the attentions of a man." She then scratched her cheek, trying to hide a smirk. "Being of the church," she finished with a false smile.

The last part was put in as an afterthought. He could sense Amber stiffen beside him with an audible intake of breath. If the young priestess tore into her, he'd let her get in a few good licks before he broke it up. The woman hadn't even bothered to veil her insult very well.

"Sister Amber is very brave and has more character than many women I've met," he told her pointedly.

Raising an eyebrow, she asked, "Oh? I suppose she is an inspiration."

"I can heal wounds--or give them, should the situation demand," Amber cut in with acid in her voice.

The woman gaped at her. Forcing a smile back onto her face, she said, "Everyone has to be good at something."

Amber stared coldly back at her, her eyes looking like fire could shoot out at any second. "Everyone should know how to defend themselves. It would be a great joy for me to teach you." Only then did one corner of her lip turn up into a slight grin. "Do not be too concerned, I will heal you when you require it."

The idea of physical combat was enough for the woman to bid Tayan goodnight with a slight curtsy and weave her way out of sight in the crowd. He picked up Amber's hand and put it back on his arm.

"Don't pay any attention to her. You're more woman than she'll ever be," he whispered.

Drawing herself up, she said, "I will keep you safe from these tarts."

Even though she didn't thank him, he could see gratitude in her face.

She could not, however, save him from a few of the young knights who were eager to hear of his exploits battling evil. He ended up telling the story of the famous cavern battle near Krundle and the weeklong lowlands battle in the place now known as the Fields of Blood. The knights listened intently as he told of the ground so soaked with blood it began to run in small streams. Their eyes gleamed at how he and the Company stood atop piles of the dead; and how the Company, badly hurt and tired, formed a ring so the wounded could be tended to. Once the wounded were healed, they'd get up and take the place of another who was ready to fall.

Tayan himself was wishing he could forget those bloody days. Once he finished with how they had to rest for the following week before pressing on, he excused himself. The knights were eager to hear more, but with Amber's help he escaped by stating they had a long day of travel ahead of them.

They walked slowly back to their rooms in the cool evening. Tayan knew Amber was self-conscious of her face. The woman's biting remark had hurt her deeply. He did his best to pick up her mood as they wandered their way back to the guesthouse. It seemed to be working--she was smiling and gave a giggle when he poked fun at those "brazen women."

The atmosphere turned into more of a courting mood. He didn't realize it was happening until he went to leave her at the junction in the hall where they split to go to their own rooms. Without thinking about it, he bent to kiss her goodnight. His brain caught up with him halfway to her lips. Forcing himself to stop, he straightened back up and mumbled a "Night, Amber...I had a good time."

He desperately hoped she hadn't noticed, but her face said she did.

Her cheeks colored as she gazed up at him. "As did I. Goodnight."

He wanted to bolt away from her. How stupid could he be! Walking stiffly to his room he paused to look down the hall. Amber stood before her door, watching him with a big grin on her face. She waved her fingers at him then slipped inside.

Tayan went inside and began pacing, angry at himself. She was getting the absolutewrong idea! He had only wanted to cheer her up. Starting to kiss her was reflex, nothing more. Amber was a good friend, but that was all she could ever be. He briefly entertained the notion of going to explain it to her, to see her one last time before he left.

"That will only make things worse," he muttered to himself. It was best to just leave while he had the chance.

He checked the hall three times before he no longer saw the sliver of light under her door. Stepping as quietly as he could, he left the guesthouse, taking pains to stay out of sight of her window in case she was looking out. The stable was empty. He donned the ruined chain mail and hefted the clumsy ax, wondering how anyone could fight with one of these things. Only the gate guards were about as he led his horse out into the city.

He tried to forget Amber and focus on the task at hand. When he walked into the Roadhouse he had to be mean. He had to glare and snarl as if he was about to kill everyone in the place just because they lived. It wasn't in his nature to treat people badly unless they proved they deserved it, but this one time he'd have to act like his father. He had to be convincing. Be the man who had followed him from Tolina, the one who had stuffed him into that damn sack! The more he thought about his father, the darker his mood became. He didn't need someone like Eric watching over him. How dare the man keep him safe when Lucinthia was about to be killed!

A thought stuck him. Father Ross claimed the thing watching him was as dark as the devil himself. He could think of no one who better fit that description than Eric. The bag had come from Eric, the coach he rode in belonged to Eric and quite possibly that thing watching him came from Eric, also. It figured. Eric sent that thing so he would not be harmed, so he could go on suffering without his beloved wife.

As these thoughts ran through his head, he gripped the ax harder and harder until his forearm ached. His strides became longer, and his jaw clenched so tightly he threatened to break his own teeth. His blood pulsed hot and strong through his veins. By the time he came to the dining room door of the Roadhouse and raised a foot to kick it in, there wasn't a person in the world who would ever guess he wasn't the Red Man.

Chapter 6

Zodiac walked carefully through the main hall, threading his way around the mass of people sitting on the floor. This room, like every other one, was packed with former residents of Newburg. Of the Company, he had seen Gloredaniel in JoJo's lab and met Zit in the hall. He knew that Scorpio was somewhere around, but he needed to find the rest.

Stepping around a mother huddled with her three children, he made for the chapel. If Mother Frieda made it back, she was sure to be there.

“My Lord!” came from his right. Valeri had spotted him. The slim greenish woman in her plain gray dress dodged through the crowd to run to him, hugging him tightly. “They told me you didn’t come through!”

“I made it.” He patted her back. “How are we holding up with food and places for all these people to sleep?”

Releasing him, she wiped a tear from her eye and shook her head. “Not well, M’Lord. We have food, but not enough pots or ovens to cook fast enough. We’ve filled every bed and most of the floor space in every room. There are just too many. Scorpio has sent groups to the village to try and find shelter there. I have four messengers waiting outside the gates for you.”

“Outside the gates?” he asked. “They could wait in the stables.”

Valeri shook her head. “No, M’Lord, it’s full of people.”

He sighed and hugged her again with one arm. “Well, at least they’re alive. I want to get the Company together. Find whoever you can and have them meet me in the chapel so we can talk.”

“I’ll look for them, but the chapel--”

“Is full of people,” he finished.

She nodded. “Every bench and flat place someone can lie down on.”

“All right then, in the courtyard by the gates.”

“Yes, M’Lord.” She looked up at him for a second then said, “I’m very glad you returned. We missed you.”

Smiling at her, he said, “I missed both of you, too,” then gave her a light slap on her behind. “Now go on, we have a lot to do.”

“Yes, M’Lord.” She smiled back then returned through the crowd with a bounce in her step.

He had reached the main doors when Kimmy found him. She ran up and wrapped her arms around his neck so hard he thought she was trying to choke him. He got her to ease her grip; but she held onto him as she started to talk in an endless stream, trying to tell him everything that had happened at once. He didn’t really hear what she said as he gazed into her gray eyes. The green tint of her skin somehow made her smooth features even prettier--both she and Valeri were the best thing that had happened to him in a long time.

He put a finger to her lips until she quit trying to talk then asked, “First, what was it you were saying about the tree?”

“It’s burning. Some druids are putting it out, but just before it burst into flames I heard men screaming from inside it. Scorpio said you hadn’t come through.” Touching his face, she gazed at him lovingly. “I thought you were dead.”

“Not yet, you still have to put up with me,” he assured her with a grin.

Looking at him seriously, she said, “When you die, I do, too. I will not serve another...lord.”

He had forbidden them to say “master,” but he knew what she meant. “This castle is your home, no matter what happens. You do not have to serve anyone you do not wish to.”

“Right.” She nodded. “I am yours.”

He didn’t have time to get drawn into another one of these discussions. “I forbid you to end your own life or have someone do it for you,” he told her sternly. “Now, where is my brother?”

“In the courtyard. He is getting men to help build shacks outside the walls for people to sleep in.”

“And have you seen Odif?”

She nodded. “Zit found her wandering--he said she was near a band of halshaken as they were being attacked. I put her in the room next to ours. She is suffering from something I’ve seen before. Her body is awake, but her mind isn’t. If I may, I will need to spend most of my time with her.”

“You can heal her?”

“I think I can bring her back,” she corrected. “During slave training, some girls withdrew into themselves. We were taught how to help bring them out of it. Some did come around and were saved, those who could not were beheaded.”

Zodiac swallowed. Every time she told bits of what they had gone through as slaves, his stomach turned. “Well, go do what you can for her...and we are not going to behead Odif.”

“Yes, M’Lord,” she said then gave him a kiss before she went on her way.

Despite his best efforts, Zodiac could not get everyone together. Zit was caring for Trelem, who had gotten caught in the blast that destroyed the tree. Frieda insisted on staying in the chapel until all the people there were cared for. Scorpio was busy managing the masses outside. Duncan, JoJo, Gloredaniel and Entaurus had closed themselves away to perform some mysterious magic. He decided to leave them to their tasks and ordered everyone else to gather in his rooms for dinner.

The messengers were, just as Kimmy said, waiting outside the gates. He sent two to Elrad and two to Capetown to spread the word. Heading back, he found Liefelm in the courtyard. The one-legged man was eager to do something to help, so he sent him in search of Odif’s mother. In case Kimmy couldn’t help Odif, someone would need to care for her; and they had to start towards the plains as soon as possible.

Valeri found him again as he was walking back into the castle. Smiling, she said proudly, “We have found places for everyone, and there is another kitchen set up in the forge.”

“The forge?”

She nodded. “The fire pits there can cook as well as heat steel. I heard that Scorpio has another fire pit set up outside the walls. The problem of feeding all these people is solved.”

“Good work, very good,” he told her. He raised an arm and she quickly slid beside him, wrapping an

arm around him as he draped his over her shoulder. Despite the huge number of people, everyone was at least going to be able to eat and sleep. As long as he got the residents of Newburg on to other places in a day or two they would not be too much of a problem.

“Are you ready to rest yet, M’Lord?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

Valeri’s idea of rest after he came back from somewhere had nothing to do with sleep. Once she got him in bed, she would do her best to wear him out.

“Not yet, we still have much to do.”

She cast him a pouting look. “You are not going to wear yourself out, are you, M’Lord?”

He chuckled and gave her a squeeze. “Let me guess, that’s your job?”

She pressed close to him. “Kimmy is caring for Odif, so this is my chance to have you all to myself. I’m sure Kimmy will have her turn tomorrow.”

He was sure she would, too. His thoughts were not on snuggling, though; he was wondering how Kimmy was doing with Odif.

Odif lay crumpled on the floor, her auburn hair a tangled mass over her face. She wept as she tried once again to reach out for Kimmy.

Kimmy slapped her hand away. “No!” Leaning over her, she barked, “Get up on your own!”

Odif curled up and hugged her arm as if Kimmy had hurt it terribly. In her mind, a bright ball of fire raced at her. Her ears heard Kimmy’s commands, and her eyes saw the floor in front of her; but none of this registered in her mind. When Kimmy grabbed her hair and hauled her head up to look her in the eyes, Odif flinched as she lived through being tossed through the air once again. She felt the pain and shock of a hundred trees being ripped apart at the same time as strong warriors died with their minds screaming in horror.

“Up!” Kimmy growled, pulling the prostrate druid by the hair. She had just enough strength to get her to her knees. It amazed her that someone who looked as trim as Odif could be so damn heavy. The only thing that swelled her arms and legs was muscle, and there was nothing to her stomach but flat ripples.

Odif did stagger up, but when Kimmy let go, she whined and reached for her. Kimmy stepped back and bade her to follow. Odif collapsed in place and kept crying.

Kimmy dropped to her knees. Gripping the sides of Odif’s head, she made the woman look at her.

“You must get up. If you can’t walk then Master will take your head, understand? You must walk or die!”

Odif gripped her arms, whimpering. By the vacant look in her eyes, Kimmy knew she hadn’t understood. If she were a slave, her fate would be the chopping block. The Master was counting on her to bring Odif out of this, so she had to keep trying. Threats were not going to work, so she wracked her brains to think of something to bring her out of her state of shock. There had to be something she would

respond to!

She had to think like a druid. What would be strong enough to get through to her?

Druids worshiped the Goddess of Nature. Using her limited magic, she forced her words into Odif's mind.

"Your goddess is watching you, and she is very disappointed! She wants you to get up, now!"

Whether it was Kimmy herself starting to rise or her words, Odif got to her feet. Kimmy let go of her and she stayed up. Pointing towards the door, she said, "I am going out, and your goddess wants you to follow me."

She watched closely. Odif moaned but walked in halting steps just behind her. It looked like she might collapse at any second, but she was moving on her own.

Zodiac's sitting room was full. The small table was surrounded with Duncan, Gloredaniel, Jo-Jo and Entaurus. On the sofa, Glier sat beside Pynlee with Scorpio on the other side of him. Mother Frieda sat by the fireplace, bracketed by the two humans Theo and Hutch. Zit and Shilo sat propped against the windowsill. Valeri had brought in a cart with the food.

Kimmy ignored the others, who had gathered for dinner. With terse commands, she led Odif past them and had her sit on the floor in the far corner. She took the plates of food Valeri offered, setting one in front of her charge. Odif's nose twitched as if she smelled the food, but she didn't move to eat until Kimmy grabbed her hand and put it on her plate with a command that her goddess wanted her to eat.

"How is she doing?" JoJo asked.

Giving him a brief smile, Kimmy replied, "Better. She can walk and eat by herself. It will take time."

Mother Frieda raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps you can instill some decency into her," she said dryly.

"I think Kimmy has done wonders already," Pynlee stated from her seat on the couch. Looking at Glier, she added, "I think she will recover--Odif is tough."

"Tough as oak," he agreed.

Scorpio moved to sit by Odif, but Kimmy waved him away. "No, don't come to her. Make her say your name and come to you."

Odif looked up at him. Widening her eyes as if to bring him into focus, she held an arm out to him and mewled.

Kimmy pushed her arm down. "Who is he?"

Odif shook her head. She knew the man standing there, but to think of his name was too hard. She mouthed what she thought might be a syllable, but she wasn't sure.

"Scorpio," he said gently as he laid a hand in his chest.

"Your goddess is watching, say it," Kimmy coaxed from beside her.

Odif tried. What came out was “Orrrroo.” Tears formed in her eyes as the greenish woman made him sit down. He was someone she wanted near her!

Suddenly, the greenish woman was holding her face again as she looked at her.

“You must concentrate! Use your ears and listen! If you understand then nod your head like this,” she said, moving her head for her. “Do you understand?”

Something in the back of Odif’s mind told her this was important. Try as she might, she didn’t comprehend most of it. One thing did sink in--she had to use her ears. Dropping her head to look at her plate, she slowly picked up a wedge of peppered potato and chewed it.

Sounds came to her as she ate. She strained to hear garbled words that made no sense as those around her talked. She dimly noted a man had come in, one she knew. He was saying something about they were all that was left. This was bad. As she strained to hear what he was saying, she caught other words.

“We’ll leave Odif in Kimmy’s care for now. Shilo, you go tell King Alderlan what’s happening in his kingdom. If we aren’t here when you get back, go to the Circle of Spring in the east; we’ll meet you there.”

She knew Shilo--he had wings. The Circle of Spring was a holy place for her. She connected the king’s name with a silver-haired elf who wore purple and red. She nodded her head slightly.

“Duncan, how did your viewing go?” Zodiac asked.

Duncan, he was one of the wizards.

Entaurus spoke up. “We saw a city on the plains from a distance. Over the city were three giant hammers. A black hand held the head of one, as if keeping it from striking. The second hammer tried to fall but was stopped by another hand. As the third came down, the hand holding the first let go and grabbed it. At this point, the first hammer rose up and came down. Both hands tried to grab it, but it smashed through them and destroyed the city below. We take this to mean that three main forces will attack, and one will get through to kill whatever rules there.”

Odif nodded again with a brief move of her head. She saw the picture in her mind, but something seemed to be missing. Black was the color of pure evil and eternal death--those hands were not of nature.

“It could also mean the knights who went to the plains all those years ago are still alive, being held captive,” Duncan added. “The first hammer was red, the color of anger and revenge.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t it be white if it were the knights?” Frieda asked.

A red hammer. Forcing her attention through the sounds of explosions in her head, Odif strained to hear what was going on. No one was paying attention to her as she continued to nod. She was listening now, intently listening.

“If it is them, they’ve been held over twenty years,” JoJo said. “That would make me a bit angry.”

“What about the other hammers?” Zit asked.

“The second was two colors, a green head with a brown handle,” Duncan said. “I think that would pretty well describe us--druids for brown, holy for green.”

“White is holy,” Gloredaniel corrected. “Is it possible the second hammer is the druids, and we are the third. That one was many colors woven together, marble-like.”

“So, Tayan is not going to make it?” Glier asked.

Duncan said, “We only see symbols, not actual events.”

Her mind was starting to work. Odif knew Tayan--he was her brother. She let out a whimper as she thought about him. He held so much sadness for such a kind soul. Many regrets, pains and joys--he was as laced with colors as was the third hammer.

Zodiac’s voice was stern. “The important thing is we’ve seen the destruction of that city. We need to get as many capable people together as we can and get moving.”

“Do we know where to go?” Pynlee asked.

“The city is in the center of the plains, a few miles north of a small lake surrounded by woods. The druids can take us there,” Duncan said.

“Doubtful,” Zit replied. “I don’t have that much power. Trelem is hurt, Barkum is missing and so is Odif’s mind. All the others who can help us have been sent to the western borders to keep that army out of Longforest.”

Odif’s focus was still on the hammers. Her thoughts were foggy, but there was something they were missing. What did hammers mean? She got the impression that it didn’t mean an army of any kind.

“All right then, we ride,” Zodiac stated. “Glier, find out how many of the remaining elves can help us, as well as anyone else we can dig up.”

“Um, Zodiac? What if I go look for Eric Redman?” Zit asked.

Odif sensed the unease that passed through the room. She only had a vague idea of who this man was. He was a specter that hung just out of reach--a mean, hard soul that lurked in the shadows. She also had the impression he was very important.

“We can’t waste time looking for someone who can’t be found. Maybe Tayan will run across him in his travels,” Zodiac said.

“Maybe his father will find *him*, ” Glier mused.

“That’s right!” Pynlee gasped, “I’d forgotten Eric is Tayan’s father.”

Suddenly, the picture in Odif’s mind changed. The ghost took on a hulking form. Tayan’s father...her father. Her mind worked harder to see him. Her mother had told her he still lived. The picture of the red hammer came into focus.

“Daddy,” she breathed.

Her voice was soft but got everyone's attention. They all watched her as she shifted one leg under herself. Her dad was lost--they needed him. She needed him. The missing piece of her life needed a face to go with the form. She rose on her own to find the greenish woman she now recognized as Kimmy in front of her.

"Sit down and eat!" Kimmy barked.

Odif reached up and grabbed her by the shirt, pushing her to one side. "I have to find Dad," she whispered.

Like a woman in a trance, she fixed her eyes on the door and started towards it. She wasn't listening as closely now, so she didn't catch Glier's comment or Frieda's snort. Her mind was on the hammers. Trelem had once told her she was nature's hammer. If that was true then she was the green and brown, and Tayan had to be the multicolored one. The last, the red one, was their father. All three of them would have to be at the city on the plains. Two hands could stop two hammers, but not three.

Suddenly, Zit was in front of her, holding a winged seed of ash in his hand. "Odif, your best chance is to go to Tolina. This is from a tree on Lady Salinthia's estate. Go and find Jeni Redman--if anyone knows where he is, she does."

Gazing at him blankly, she took the ash seed and brushed past him. Everyone had their eyes on her as she walked as if entranced out the door. The room was so quiet Kimmy's soft voice seemed to boom.

"Should I follow her?"

Zodiac shook his head. Sitting down, he blew out a tired breath. "Well, I wasn't counting on her, anyway."

Glier pointed to the door as he looked at Zit. "You mean Odif and Tayan are related?"

"Brother and sister." Zit smirked.

"And they...lived together...all that time?" JoJo asked, eyes wide.

"Yeah, great, isn't it?" Zit giggled.

Mother Frieda drew herself up and scowled at him. "That's disgusting!"

Zit shrugged. "They didn't know. Tayan still doesn't. We've been keeping it quiet--we figured news like that might send him over the edge."

"Who is *we*?" Zodiac asked harshly.

"Just me, Odif and her mother. Odif was going to tell him, but then Lucinthia died; so she wanted to wait until he was over that first," Zit explained.

The only one relieved by this news was Scorpio. He knew that Odif loved Tayan on a deep level, and finding out she was his sister was a much better explanation than what he had imagined. He also knew Tayan was not getting over the death of his wife.

“She might have a long wait,” he commented.

“Probably,” Zit agreed, “But I think it’s a good idea to let Odif tell him.”

“Then we will,” Zodiac stated. “Now, back to business. First, we gather as many as we can then we start for the Circle of Spring. Duncan, prepare all the magic you can to help hide us as we travel the plains. Scorpio, you’re in charge of arming the volunteers. Valeri, we’ll need supplies for everyone. Zit, find as many druids as you can to help us. We’ll meet you at the Circle in two weeks. Shilo, fly to Elrad and let King Alderlan know what’s going on. Send him my greetings and tell him we’ll help however we can. Kimmy, you’ll stay here to make it happen. Everyone else, pack up and help recruit. We don’t want just willing people but the willing and capable.” Standing up he clapped his hands once. “Eat up and let’s move--we’ve got an army to raise.”

Once Odif was in the woods her mind started to clear. Instead of just perceiving everything as incomprehensible objects, she began to see the trees and hear the chirping of birds. She found a small oak and knelt at its base. Saying her prayers as she had done every day of her life, she once again became aware of her environment. The glory of nature flowed through her being. The faint smells of the forest came to her, as did sounds and the sense of knowing what plants and animals were near. She felt the presence of everything from large trees to the worms in the ground under her knees. The death of that bit of forest in the north became a dim memory as she returned to being one with life. The isolation of being locked inside herself was burst open as the essence of life filled her. When she rose, she took a moment to close her eyes and breath in a long, slow breath, rejoicing in nature.

“Odif, are you all right?”

She grinned--it was Scorpio behind her. She knew his presence as well as his smell.

“I’m fine now.”

The image of the hammers dominated her mind. She knew the one representing her would be stopped, and it wasn’t lost on her what that meant. She had one last task to perform before she left. Turning around, she hugged him. He hugged her back with a flood of gentle emotions.

“There is something I need you to do,” she whispered.

“Anything,” he replied as he stroked her hair.

“Go to the village down the road. Take the first side path to the right and go up to the top of the hill. There you will find a woman named Rayla. We made an agreement; I am asking you to keep it for me.”

He hesitated for a second then spoke with conviction. “I will, if at all possible.”

Pulling back, she gave him a kiss and gestured back towards the castle. “I want you to go see her now. I suspect my agreement will be to your liking.”

Shifting in place, he asked, “Eric, this red man, he’s your father?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“And you are going to look for him.”

“I will find him,” she corrected.

He cracked a grin. “I believe you will. After you do?”

Moving her gaze to the castle for a second, she decided not to tell him what was after that. “Then we’ll see what happens next. Just take care of Rayla for me.”

“What is she, an old lady?”

“One hundred-sixty-five, but she doesn’t look bad for her age,” she finished with a shrug.

Scorpio chuckled then looked at her more intently. “This isn’t goodbye, is it?”

“We will see each other again,” she assured him. She didn’t add that it would probably be in her goddess’s gardens.

His face became more serious. “I’ll miss you. Take care and come back as soon as you can.”

“I’ll miss you, too.” Jerking a thumb over her shoulder, she said, “I really have to go now.”

He found himself not wanting her to leave. It felt as if, once she was gone, he’d ever see her again. “I can’t see you off?”

She gave an exaggerated sigh. “You are. Stop being sappy and go find Rayla.”

“Right. See you later then.”

If he didn’t move soon, she was going to kick him in the ass to move him. “Later, now go!”

He cracked a grin and waved as he left. She didn’t watch him but got down to business. Dwelling on it would do nothing but make her as weepy as he was getting. At least she had placed him in good hands.

First things first--she needed a new staff. She found a suitable branch of oak; and after thanking her Goddess and the tree it came from, she broke it down to a rough six-foot length that still had knobs of smaller branch stubs on it. Most of the bark was gone; she picked at the remainder as she walked to a large ash. Standing at the tree, she held the seed Zit had given her and put her hands on the trunk. Concentrating on the tree and the seed, she whispered the words of travel. The tree’s bark softened, and she felt the portal open. Stepping in, she was carried to the tree the seed had come from.

Scorpio stopped at the castle to find that many townsmen were volunteering to go on Zodiac’s quest. Corraling a group of a couple hundred, he told them to pass the word to be outside the gates in the morning for training. Fifty he selected to start with right after he got back. With the daylight he had left, he didn’t think he could screen many more than that.

With that done, he got a horse and rode to the village, looking for this woman Odif wanted him to watch out for.

It was a typical druid community. On either side of the road were the main rows of log-and-shingle huts, with a stone well in the center of the village. He found the path easily enough--the man he asked knew exactly where Rayla lived. A quick conversation told him that Rayla was the local healer and grew fine pears and apples for the village as well as for trade.

Going up the narrow path, he had to duck a few times under low-hanging branches. True to Odif's word, a hut sat at the edge of an orchard. A donkey grazed nearby its shed; the two-wheeled cart it pulled sat in the ruts that went into the orchard.

Dismounting, he tethered his horse to the cart and found a dark-haired elven woman washing clothes behind the hut. She looked young, even for an elf. The sleeves of her light blouse were pulled up, showing her flawless arms; her long skirt only showed her ankles and her bare feet.

"Excuse me, ma'am, I'm looking for Rayla?" he asked.

The woman looked up. Worry crossed her youthful face. "Is someone hurt?"

"No," he assured her. "I am here for Odif. She said she and Rayla had an agreement."

The woman's face brightened up in a wide smile. "Oh, you are Scorpio!"

Putting her wash down, she came over and hugged him. "You are more handsome than she told me."

"Thanks," he said with a nervous grin. "Is Rayla here?"

"Silly boy," she grinned, slapping his arm. "I'm Rayla. Would you like to come inside and sit?"

It was odd hearing her call him *boy*. The woman only came up to his chest; and with her thin frame and elven face, she looked like a child herself.

"I'm kinda busy right now. I just wanted to stop by and let you know that I came to fulfill Odif's agreement."

Shock replaced her smile. "Right now? I would think we should get to know each other first."

Okay, he was confused. "I don't understand."

"I take it she didn't explain our agreement." She grinned.

"No, ma'am."

"Well," she said in a drawl as she took his hand, "Odif explained to me you wanted to have children. I've been getting a strong urge for motherhood again. We talked about it and decided that when you and I were ready she'd send you to be the father of our children."

Scorpio's jaw went slack. He couldn't believe what he heard. "I...umm."

"It doesn't have to be this minute. Like I said, we should spend some time together first. She told me you were very good," she finished with a wink.

"She told you about...that?" he choked. Was nothing sacred?

Rayla's brow furrowed. "Hey, be happy she thinks enough of you to brag. If Odif says you're good then you really must be."

In his mind, he saw Odif telling her about their most intimate encounters. Cheeks flushing with embarrassment, he mumbled, "I, umm, gotta go."

Looking at him like he was her son, she gave a sigh. "Scorpio, I am a good person and will be a good mother. Why don't you do whatever it is you have to and give the idea time to settle. We'll talk about it in a couple days. Does that suit you?"

He nodded blankly.

He got back on his horse and waved to her, still in shock at what this "agreement" was. By the time he was heading back down into the village, he still didn't know if he should be mad at Odif or not for finding a woman to bear his children. The only thing he knew was that he loved her more than ever for trying.

Returning to the castle, he found the gaggle of men waiting for him. Zit was to one side, organizing them into a line. Tethering his horse, he helped get them into loose ranks then started to see how many would be useful.

Starting at one end, Zit walked ahead of him, looking at each man. "Bad knee," he said, pointing to the first one. "Too old," he said about the second. "You're okay, but wrap up your left elbow," he said to the third.

Going down the line, Zit eliminated every one who had something physically wrong with him. It amazed Scorpio that druids could just look at someone and know everything about them.

By the time Zit weeded out the group, they had thirty-two left. Scorpio took his turn, asking each what skills he had then for a quick demonstration. Being from a peaceful town, most only knew the bow for hunting. The smith in the group didn't know how to shoot a bow, but when Scorpio gave him a sword the man chopped a log in half with one swing. Two others couldn't do much of anything and were asked to stay for castle defense.

The next day his group swelled threefold as Zit and the others recruited and sent him the ones screened as suitable. All were eager for revenge and listened well. He formed them into teams of ten and ran them through drills as well as competitive runs around the castle.

The second day, Zodiac told him he had found healers for the teams. All were druids, which Scorpio had expected.

At mid-day, the number of teams swelled again to a total of thirty and the healers arrived. Scorpio was surprised to see Rayla's smiling face as she strode up to him. Her hair was fluffed up in tight curls, making her look very cute. The grayish-green shirt she wore hugged her small torso, and her brown shorts were tailored to accentuate her hips.

Reaching up to playfully pinch his chin, she said, "Don't worry, I'm going to take good care of you."

Chuckles peppered the crowd. Pretending he didn't hear, he told her, "I have to assign you to a team."

She frowned at him. "I'm on your team, aren't I?"

Afraid to hurt her feelings, he gave a half-nod. “Yeah, but I haven’t made my team yet.”

“Well, we’re the first.” she said triumphantly. Stepping back, she batted her eyes and asked in a sultry voice, “How do you want me?”

A chorus of “oooh’s” and a few more descriptive remarks came from the men around him this time. Ears burning, he glared at them.

“All right, we have work to do!”

The first exercise was a trip around the castle, so he had time to collect himself.

In the few days Zodiac had given them, Scorpio got the new men armed and trained well enough they could at least watch each other’s backs. Rayla spent as much time with him as he would allow, and he made sure he kept himself very busy. Despite her flirting, he found she was an outstanding healer and quickly picked up on the Company’s tactics.

By the time they mounted up, Zodiac’s force was seven hundred-forty men, elves and druids led by the surviving members of the Company. The small army was not composed of the most seasoned warriors and only a few hundred had horses, but at least they were a start.

Chapter 7

Amber walked down the street beside Sir Arlan, watchful of her surroundings. Unlike the neatly kept and safe streets of Paladnia, Spring Valley’s streets smelled of sewage and contained a variety of misfits ready to take her purse, or her life. The tall knight beside her made the scruffy-looking hoodlums shrink back into the doorways they peered from.

She knew the danger of this part of town and also knew that Tayan’s horse had been sold at the inn they were heading towards. She didn’t believe the stablemaster’s story; Tayan would never leave town and not take his belongings. She only hoped the innkeeper would shed some light on what had really happened.

Sir Arlan pointed to a faded sign hanging in front of one of the weatherworn gray buildings. “This is it.”

The sign proclaiming that this was the Paradise Inn was strung up by frayed rope. Poorly drawn birds bracketed the name, and at one time must have had some color to them. The poverty of the neighborhood had drained away any brightness from the figures as it had from the buildings. As they approached, the door opened and spilled one poor wretch from inside. The man took a step towards them then thought better of it and walked off in the other direction.

Amber went to the door and waited for Sir Arlan to open it for her as he insisted on doing. She looked up at him as he laid a hand on her arm. He wore a serious face.

“This time, I will enter first. Stay close behind me.”

She gave a nod and followed him into the dark interior. They stayed by the door for a moment to let their eyes adjust to the dim light. As the shapes around the tables came into focus, Amber could see she and her escort were commanding attention. Every hostile set of eyes in the place was on them. Sir Arlan ignored the stares and wolfish grins at Amber and went for the unpainted bar. She kept a pace behind him, trying not to see the heads rotating to watch them as they moved.

The chubby, brown-haired man behind the bar was as unkempt as the rest of the place. His shirt--Amber guessed it was once white--was mottled with stains. He moved his bulk to stand directly across the bar from Sir Arlan. When he shook his head, his jowls wiggled.

“Head back out, mister, we don’t serve your kind here.”

Sir Arlan looked down his nose. “We did not come for drink. We need information.”

“Whatever you want, you ain’t gonna find it here.” Waving a fleshy arm at the door, he said, “You best leave before there’s trouble.”

Amber stepped up to the bar and put on her best smile. “If we could have just one moment, please.”

The man eyed her as if trying to see through her clothes. “Missy, the only way you’ll get a moment is to get on the bar and take off that robe,” he said, which caused laughter and catcalls from around them.

Sir Arlan sucked in a sharp breath as his hand went to the pommel of his sword. Before he could make matters worse, Amber acted. She grabbed the barkeep’s middle finger and twisted back as she pulled him to her. He gave a grunt of surprise then pain as he looked up at her fearfully.

Still speaking pleasantly, Amber said, “Sir, I am very willing to remove any part of your body necessary to get the information I seek. Do you understand?”

He gave a slight nod. “Yes’m.”

“Do you know where Lord Tayan is?”

He glanced at his tortured finger. “No, ma’am, never heard of him.”

She leaned closer, putting enough pressure on his finger to make him grimace. “There was a horse sold here two days ago, a dapple-gray with a saddle and pack. Who sold it?”

The man shook his jowls. “Dunno, ma’am, I didn’t have nothin’ to do with it.”

Amber noted his other hand reaching for something under the bar. Sir Arlan noticed, too; he drew his sword and laid it over the back of the man’s neck.

The man stiffened. “I’m tellin’ ya, I don’t know nothin’!”

She tugged a little harder. “Maybe pulling this off will help you remember?”

“I don’t know nothin’!” he cried.

A strong voice called out, "Let him go!"

Amber turned to see a stout man with dark hair standing with his hands on his hips. His hard eyes and leathery face told of one who had fought in more than barroom brawls. To each side of him were men holding crossbows on them. Sir Arlan stepped in front of her, his shield raised. She didn't want to fight in a room full of hostile men, but Sir Arlan's pose told her it was imminent.

"No!" she barked, "Fighting will not help us find Tayan!"

"Tayan?" the dark-haired man asked. "Tayan of Elrad?"

Amber released the barkeep's finger and moved around Sir Arlan. "Yes, do you know where he is?"

The man eyed her cautiously. "Why are you looking for him?"

She walked towards him as she spoke, unmindful of the weapons trained on her. "He came this way a few days ago. We found his horse at the stables back by the main road; the man there said he had left them. I need to find him."

The man raised his arms and motioned for the other men to lower their bows. "You still haven't told me why."

She tried to think of how to put her explanation, not knowing whom she could trust. "We got split up, and Lord Tayan arrived here before I did. I have information he needs, and I know he will be very upset to learn you didn't help me."

Crossing his arms over his chest, the man scratched his chin. "You say you know him--describe him to me."

Sir Arlan stepped up beside Amber. "Do you doubt the word of a Sister of the cloth?"

The man gave him a casual glance. "And you are?"

"Sir Arlan Gateman of Paladnia. This is Sister Amber Tanner of Capetown."

The man gave a slight bow. "You may call me Nathaniel." Waving an arm as if to impress them, he said, "I have traveled with Lord Tayan and helped save him as well as the elf king from vlaks. Now, Sister, if you would describe him to me, maybe I can help."

Although she thought it was foolish, she gave him the description he asked for. He listened intently then gave an approving nod.

"That's him," he agreed. His eyes swept the room. "This is not a good place to talk. You're staying at the church, correct?"

"Yes, but I'm trying to find out what's happened to Tayan," she insisted.

Nathaniel shook his head. Waving at her robes, he said, "You aren't going to find out anything. Go back to the church; I'll come see you when I know something."

"We are to trust you?" Sir Arlan asked, making it plain there was no way he was going to do anything of

the kind..

Crossing his arms over his chest, Nathaniel stared him down. "Look, tin man, I have my reasons for wanting to find Tayan alive and well. A very important friend of mine will be highly upset if he finds out I let anything happen to him."

"Who might that be?" Sir Arlan demanded.

"The Red Man."

Sir Arlan threw his head back and laughed. "The Red Man? He's a myth, a spook story! He's a phantom made up by coachmen to keep the bandits away."

Nathaniel's face turned dark. "He's real, whether you believe in him or not."

"Real, huh?" the knight asked with a raised eyebrow. "You're telling me there is a man who can fight his way through an army of hoarcs, drive away pilgrims and kill vlaks all by himself?"

"I was there--were you?"

Amber had heard these things but never believed them. Still, the man's words did have a ring of truth to them. The men at the Roadhouse Inn had said they wouldn't take her any farther because the Red Man had warned them not to. By the looks on their faces, they were scared to death of him. She then remembered what he said about being with Tayan and King Alderlan.

"You were with the king's caravan when it was attacked?"

Shifting his gaze to her, he nodded. "That's right. I was part of the bloodiest ambush of all time. Out of four hundred, we had nine men left when it was over. If it wasn't for Eric I doubt any of us would have lived."

Thinking back, Amber connected the name with the person that elven woman was looking for. "Eric...Redman, that's his name?"

"He is not real," Sir Arlan stated. Turning to Amber, he said, "We should be on our way--we've no time for fairy tales."

"He is real, but you should be going," Nathaniel advised her. "I'll visit you when I have something."

Amber didn't want to leave; she had a dozen questions for him. This man was at the ambush where Tayan's wife died. If anyone knew what had happened, it was him. Shrugging off Sir Arlan's hand as he tried to steer her away, she asked, "What happened to Princess Lucinthia, and why does Tayan hate this bag so much?"

Yanking the bag out of her robe, she showed it to Nathaniel. He looked at it as if remembering something.

"Where did you get that?"

In a rush, she told him, "Tayan gave it to me. As I understand, he was put in it to keep him alive until help came. Who put him in there, who is this Eric Redman and what happened to Tayan's wife?"

Nathaniel looked at her for a moment. "I don't know what happened to the princess. We came around and she...was dead. That's all I can say."

"And Tayan?"

Pointing to the bag, he said, "Eric put him in there, that's all I can tell you. Now you had better go."

She could see in his face he knew more than he had told her. She was about challenge him when Sir Arlan grabbed her more firmly by the elbow.

"We are leaving, Sister."

Thinking about it, she decided maybe he was right. This man wasn't going to say anything else in front of these people. To prolong their stay was not going to do any good. To Nathaniel, she said, "Inform me as soon as you find anything."

In her heart she knew he could find out more than they could. Still, it was aggravating to have to sit and wait for news. Turning abruptly, she led the way out. As they neared the door, two men stood to block their way, one brandishing a knife. Not breaking stride, she kicked the knife away then dropped low to punch the other man in the groin. Before they could react, she spun quickly and her heel came up to smash the knife-wielder's nose. The wounded men fell to the floor, grabbing their injuries and moaning. Three others who had looked like they were about to join the mugging backed off.

Sir Arlan gaped at her as she straightened up and glared at Nathaniel. "I give you three days."

With a stiff arm, she shoved the door open and walked out into the bright sunlight.

Outside, Sir Arlan caught up to her as she strode down the street.

"Sister, where did you ever learn to do...that!" the stunned knight asked.

She kept her eyes straight ahead as she told him, "I trained with Lord Zodiac's Company. Every woman needs to know how to defend herself."

She passed some of the waiting time at the church praying. She paid penance for her actions against the two men by taking on the scrubbing and washing chores. Although the priest and the other brethren outwardly showed disapproval at a Sister's beating up common street thugs, she did hear whispers of pride behind her back. Some were calling her the "fighting priestess."

She also noted there were many who also suddenly had penance to pay, easing her chores. The second night after dinner it seemed everyone had to wash their own dishes and help clean the chapel.

The second night was also when she got a visit from Nathaniel. She was taking out wet robes to dry on the clothesline when she saw someone slip from the shadows. Not knowing who it was, she dropped the robes on a nearby barrel and went into a fighting stance.

The dark figure held up his arms. "Whoa, Sister, I don't have a knife and I like my nose square on my face."

He took another step towards her, and she recognized him. "I didn't want to be seen coming here, and I

was sure you would appreciate some discretion.”

“You have news?” she asked, standing upright.

“Yes, and not very good news, I’m afraid. Martin Toma, the man currently calling himself duke, has Lord Tayan. He is being paid a king’s ransom to ship him off, unharmed.”

“Who’s paying him, the elves?”

Nathaniel chuckled. “I don’t think so. What I do know is he’s working for someone to the north, somewhere on the plains. It must be important—I heard Tayan killed twelve of his men, and he still ordered no harm to come to him.”

Amber’s heart sank. The plains. That was where Zodiac wanted to attack.

“Where is he? How can we free him?”

“He’s in Toma’s castle northeast of town. As far as freeing him, we can’t. Toma has five hundred men and a well-fortified castle. The best thing I can tell you is to find Eric. He’s the only one I know of that has a chance at getting through.”

Amber was tired of hearing about that man. “He’s not here, we are!” she snapped. “There must be some way to get inside!”

Nathaniel shrugged. “I don’t plan on dying for a hopeless cause, and you sure don’t look like the harem girl type.”

“What are you talking about?”

“One of Toma’s men was at the Paradise Inn. He said Toma has women guarding Tayan now. It seems he won’t kill women when they bring him food.”

Her mind worked quickly. This was a chance. If she could only get in to guard Tayan, she could rescue him. “How does he pick these women?”

Nathaniel nervously rubbed his cheek. “I, uh, don’t think you could do it. He uses harem women wearing nothing but see-through silks. They have other...duties besides guarding. I don’t think you could pull it off.”

Amber flushed at the idea. He was right, she couldn’t possibly walk around virtually naked; and she shuddered to think of what those “other duties” entailed.

“There must be something we can do,” she whispered.

“Well, I can’t think of anything, short of storming his castle. He has ears around town, so I’m not even going to think about that. I’m sorry, Sister.”

“So am I. If you hear anything else, will you tell me?”

“Yes, but I better go. You know where to find me.” He gave her a bow and faded back into the shadows and was gone.

Amber picked up the wet robes. She hung them up, wracking her brains to come up with some way to get into the castle. Toma was working with evil, she felt that much, so going to him with a plea was out of the question. She thought about going to him with threats, but how could she back them up? Even if Governor Stazor did send his knights, they would arrive long after Tayan was gone. Sneaking in was out of the question, unless she went as one of those harlots. What kind of penance could ever make up for such a shameless act?

A mental image of Odif, walking along the riverbank as nude as the day she was born, came to her. Amber had been ashamed for her, but Odif had thought nothing of it. Odif was bold, she was brazen and she had the reputation for bedding many men. It was Odif who should have come, not her. Despite herself, she was once again feeling jealous of the druid woman. She knew Odif still cared for Tayan on a deep level. The druid would have no problem with ripping off her clothes and doing whatever it took to get inside.

Her eyes clouding with tears, Amber sat in the dirt of the churchyard and cried.

“Dear Leighna, help me!” she sobbed as she held her face in her hands. She was not fit to deal with these kinds of things. Mother Frieda should be here; she would know what to do. Frieda had such a commanding presence that this Toma would probably drop to his knees before her and beg forgiveness. Pynlee, with her talking sword, would be able to creep in unseen and spirit him away. Glier, with his strength, would rip the gates from the castle walls. Jo-Jo, Entaurus or any of the wizards would make them cower in fear before powerful magic. She felt as helpless as a baby. Why did Zodiac choose her to come?

“Why me?” she asked the night. “Of all people, why me?”

“Why you what?” asked a voice.

She turned to see the hunched shape of a beggar woman. Embarrassed, she got up and brushed herself off. “I’m sorry...is there something I can do for you?”

The woman shuffled closer. “Tell me why a lovely child is crying in the dirt in the middle of the night.”

Amber shook her head and tried to smile. In her grief, she had forgotten that the homeless came here to find whatever food and shelter they could.

“It’s nothing. Do you need shelter?”

Tipping her head, the woman asked, “You are young and strong and have the blessings of Leighna. What troubles you so?”

Amber shook her head. “I am here to serve, not to be a burden.”

There was sympathy in the woman’s voice. “You burden yourself, child. I see you are a priestess--have faith and let Leighna guide you. Father Wright tells us to look to the scriptures for answers. Perhaps you might find what you need there.”

Amber felt a pang of shame. The woman was absolutely right. In her self-pity, she had not thought of going to the one place where she might truly find help. “Thank you. Would you like to come inside?”

The woman patted her hand. "I'm fine--go seek your answers." She then wandered towards one of the sheds for the homeless.

Amber had a direction, one she should have thought of herself. She went to the rectory and sat down with Leighna's bible. Lighting two candles to make reading easier, she began thumbing through the pages. How scriptures would help her at a time like this, she had no idea. Her mind kept drifting to thoughts of harem women in their scandalous outfits. Nothing in Leighna's words allowed for that kind of behavior.

She came to one of her favorite parts, the writings of the prophet Maria. Maria hadn't been pretty either--from some passages, Amber got the idea that she was a homely Slavonic woman. Maria had used her unwavering faith to sway thousands to Leighna's wisdom. Every time she read of Maria's deeds, she felt better and came away with a bit more knowledge.

The place she stopped to read was when Maria had confronted the council of knights for the sake of several prostitutes who were to be sentenced.

She read:

The Prophet Maria stood before the gathering of knights and asked, "And how do you find that these women cowering before you are evil?"

The head knight, Sir Palance, said, "Each of these women practices fornication, selling herself for mere coppers. They seduce and corrupt--in this way they are spreading evil."

The Prophet Maria waved a hand at the women awaiting their fate. "These women have no skills to trade. The husbands who should be caring for them and their children have been killed or have gone away. They sell themselves not for greed or gain, but to put food in their children's mouths. I say this to you, sad is the world where women are forced to bed strangers to feed their own, and cursed are those who can judge without mercy the acts of desperate mothers."

The head knight asked our Prophet, "And how are we to judge whether a woman is practicing evil or surviving with the only coin she can offer?"

Holding her head high, the Prophet Maria said, "This I say to all. As the Goddess of Light, holy Leighna, said unto me, though mortals may hold the deed in contempt, no evil shall come of any act done for the sake of love. It is for the love of their children that these women do what they must, and it is for the love of Leighna that I stand before you in their behalf."

Amber stopped and read one phrase over again aloud. "No evil shall come of any act done for the sake of love." She had read this passage many times, each time coming away with the message of forgiveness. She admired Maria for standing up to a council of knights. Maria had braved powerful men, armed only with faith and Leighna's blessings, and had emerged victorious. Again her attention was drawn to that single phrase: *No evil shall come of any act done for the sake of love.*

Amber read it twice more then read the entire passage. Was it saying what she thought it was saying? Was Maria telling her that she was free to do whatever she needed to? In a strict sense, Maria was talking about prostitutes, but the message was more universal than that single incident.

Yet despite the clarity of that one phrase, she didn't believe that Leighna would allow her to go traipsing about all but naked.

She kept reading, not really comprehending the words. The phrase stuck with her. Her fingers flipped the pages, yet her mind was on why she really wanted to free Tayan. Lord Zodiac wasn't the reason; neither was Tayan's mission. She wanted Tayan with her. She wanted to break the shell he had formed around himself and have him love her as much as she loved him. Was it only selfishness that drove her? Selfishness was a sign of evil, not holiness. Father Ross had warned her that evil might try to trick her into doing something to weaken herself. Was Tayan's capture designed to make her break her vows, therefore weakening her in Leighna's eyes?

Amber closed the bible and put it away. The questions she was asking herself should have simple, clear-cut answers. They were nothing of the kind. She had vowed to live a life of service and humility. Service was to help others, to give guidance and faith to lost souls. Humility was to do so while giving credit where it belonged, to Leighna. The brown robes she wore outwardly spoke of humility, of not drawing attention to herself with flashy clothes or by parading about in alluring attire. To cast off her robes was to cast off her humility--Leighna was sure to punish her for such a transgression. She knew this, yet the words of Maria came back to her.

No evil shall come of any act done for the sake of love.

She wanted to weep at the frustration of it. Wandering to the chapel, she knelt in front of the altar in prayer. Clasp her talisman tightly between her hands, she prayed with all her soul for guidance. Clearing her head of colliding thoughts, she concentrated on her prayers for Leighna to give her humble servant direction.

Her knees began to get sore. That she noticed told her that her concentration was wavering. Clasp her talisman tighter, she tried to ignore her hurting knees.

"Sister?"

She looked up to see Father Wright.

"Are you troubled over those men you struck?" he asked with a frown.

She shook her head--if it were only that simple! "Father, I have a very difficult problem. I hesitate to even speak of it."

The priest sat down on the steps beside her. "For a woman of your strength to be so troubled, it must be difficult. Will you discuss it with me? Perhaps we may come to a solution together."

She hesitated to tell him, but if she could not trust the head of the church, who could she trust?

"Father, it has to do with a man. He is a good man beset by evil. If I do what I believe I must to free him I may be shunned by Leighna, yet I cannot stand by and let evil take him away."

"That is a problem," he agreed. "What evil besets him?"

"Martin Toma."

Father Wright chuckled. "You don't mean our duke, do you? He openly supports the church and is very generous with his gifts to the poor. How can you think he is evil?"

Warning bells went off in her head, but she ignored them. "Father, he is holding Lord Tayan and plans to send him north, where evil will have him."

"What makes you think that?"

"That is what I know," she stated. "Dark things have been following us--in Paladnia one tried to enter the church to get at him. Lord Zodiac sent me to guard Tayan, and now he's being held in Martin Toma's castle."

"Lord Zodiac sent you to guard him?" he asked in disbelief. "Sister, I think the devil has your senses! Duke Toma is a good man. He is not the one who lives in the woods and consorts with heathen druids!"

They both rose to their feet at the same time. Out of instinct, Amber cocked her body into a defensive pose, her right shoulder pointing at the priest.

"Father, Lord Zodiac has found the source of evil, and he needs us to spread word and gather support for an attack on the plains."

The priest's face flushed. "You are working for a Longforest lord? Where are your loyalties child--to druids or to Leighna?"

"To both!" she said firmly. "Druids do not believe as we do, but they are decent people. Lord Zodiac is trying to rid our lands of evil. The druid Odif is by no means pure, but she commands power to help us remove evil forever!"

"You hold allegiance with the likes of Odif the Druid?" he asked, raising his voice to a roar and pointing a finger at her. She slapped it away with the back of her hand. Flustered and enraged, he backed a safe distance away from her. "I should have known you were not a real Sister when you attacked those men!"

"They pulled a knife on me! What was I suppose to do, pray they would not kill me?" she asked with acid in her voice. "And *I am* a real Sister, just not one who will stand for being assaulted!"

"Neither will I stand for you accusing Duke Toma of siding with evil!" he shot back. "Renounce your accusation, renounce the druids this minute or I shall have your robes!"

Forgetting where she was, Amber glared at him. "The only way you will get my robes is to pull them from my dead body!"

Right after she said it, she knew she had just made a horrid mistake. No matter how angry she was she had no right to talk to him that way. Her face softened. "Father, I'm sorry..."

"You will be sorry!" he yelled, shaking all over. "At the first light of dawn, we will hold a hearing on your...blasphemous behavior! At that time you will hand over your robes, or they will be stripped from you! You will leave this church with lash marks on your flesh to show others what happens when common wenches masquerade as Sisters of the cloth!"

Her life was over. Amber knew she would no longer be associated with the church. Messengers spread news quickly these days--within a few weeks, Father Wright would notify every church and parsonage

for a hundred miles around. Word would get back to Capetown that she had been cast out. Her head swam; she would be humiliated. She had failed Tayan, Lord Zodiac, her own parish and, worst of all, Leighna.

“Father, please,” she begged. “I said I was sorry.”

Stabbing a finger at the door, he boomed, “Get out! Do not return until first light!”

It was all she could do to hold herself up and walk out of the chapel. How had their words gotten so out of control? One minute she was praying for guidance, and the next she was being banished from the church. It didn’t seem real. She worshiped Leighna, she was faithful--how could this happen to her?

She had no more than crossed the threshold when her legs would no longer hold her up. Collapsing on the chapel steps, she hugged herself and cried in wracking sobs. In the morning her way of life, her very identity, was going to be taken from her. Her reason for being would cease to exist. She had feared that evil would weaken her. It didn’t have the chance to--she had done it herself.

Yet even as she wallowed in her misery, that one phrase stayed in her mind. *No evil shall come of any act done for the sake of love.*

How sorely she wanted to believe it.

Only Father Wright, Sir Arlan and the scribe were present when she returned to the chapel at dawn. She walked down the aisle in a plain brown blouse and skirt she had gotten from the homeless shelter, holding her beloved robes folded neatly in her left hand. As she approached the men gathered in the first row of pews, she noted that only Father Wright was watching her. Sir Arlan seemed to be interested in the stained glass windows to his right, and the scribe was intent on his parchments.

Amber had thought much about what had happened here the previous night. Father Wright was either blinded by Toma’s gifts, or he was in league with Toma. Either way, it didn’t matter. She had asked Leighna for guidance, and her Goddess had taken away her robes. There had to be a reason behind it; she refused to believe that Leighna would cast her aside. Without her robes, she was just like any other person on the street. Also, without her robes, she could do what she had to in order to free Tayan. Although this was not what she had expected, Leighna had answered her prayers.

In the sleepless night she had endured, she came to a decision. What happened to her didn’t matter. She would go into that castle and allow herself to be humiliated and let them do as they wished with her. When she had the chance, she would get Tayan out and on his way. She knew it was going to work, for no evil could come from any act done for the sake of love.

Fixing her eyes on the altar, she walked past the men to gently lay her robes between the offering plates and the gold candlesticks. Kneeling, she clasped her talisman in her hands and prayed, “Dear Leighna, thank you for your blessings. Please give me the strength to cope with the humiliation that is brought to me. You are my light and life, in your name I pray, Amen.”

She rose and turned around to see Father Wright looking at her intricately carved talisman. The torch of the tiny green goddess was even painted yellow.

“Young lady, I believe that also belongs to the church,” he said evenly.

She knew he had left out her title as a final insult.

“This was a gift from Father Bennet. You have my robes as you insisted, but hear this--when my mission is complete, I will be back for them.”

The priest’s face reddened. “You will never again wear holy robes!”

Amber knew that might very well be true. It was hard to step down and walk away from her beloved robes, but what happened to her was not the most important issue. She had her path; and if Leighna led her away from robes forever, she had to accept it. Passing Father Wright, she stopped. There was one last thing she had to say.

Looking at him defiantly, she said, “You may take my robes, but it is more than cloth that makes a Sister, or a priest. I have my faith, and that is something that can never be taken away.”

“Just get out,” he grated.

Suddenly, Sir Arlan blurted out, “Sister, why has this happened to you?”

“She is no longer a Sister!” hissed the priest.

Amber answered the knight as if Father Wright weren’t even there. “Sir Arlan, I have been defrocked because I consort with Lord Zodiac, and I know that Tayan is being held by Duke Toma. Would you be kind enough to inform Governor Stazor of our situation? I will send word if I am able to free Lord Tayan.”

“Enough talk, get out of my church!” the priest barked, taking a step towards her.

Sir Arlan blocked his path. “Is this true?”

Pointing an accusing finger at Amber, he said, “She consorts with druids and spreads lies about good and decent men!”

“And when is her trial?”

The priest smirked. “She has foregone a trial--didn’t you see?”

“I saw a Sister have her robes removed for no good reason. If she believes that Duke Toma is not the man you think, it should be investigated! How dare you take such action by yourself!”

The angry finger came up at Sir Arlan. “You are a knight! Do not meddle in the affairs of the church!”

Sir Arlan swayed in place as if restraining himself from beating the priest. “I am reporting this to Governor Stazor and High Father Ross. Your word is questionable, good Father.”

Wright was beside himself. “You...find me questionable? I shall inform your superiors!”

“Please do so,” Sir Arlan grated. “As for Sister Amber,” he continued, stressing “sister,” “she shall be allowed to keep her robes until a proper trial is held by no less than two Fathers and three Mothers, as the law decrees.”

“You cannot tell me what to do!”

Sir Arlan swelled his chest up, glaring at the priest. “As you said, I am a knight. That means I am the law. Return Sister Amber’s robes or be held in contempt of the laws set by Odin himself!”

Without waiting for Father Wright to reply, he turned to tell Amber to pick up her robes.

She had already gone.

Chapter 8

At the Paradise Inn, Nathaniel sat across the table from Amber, considering her request. In normal clothing, she did have a nice figure. Despite the pits in her face, her large breasts and slim waist would be enough to get her into the castle.

“You understand that I will have to offer you as a virgin. You do know what that means?”

Amber nodded stiffly. She was doing this for Tayan and their mission, but it felt as if she was selling her soul to the devil.

"Whoever...gets me, I need to be inside as soon as possible."

Eyeing her figure, he said, “All right. Madam Lisa has makeup that should smooth out your face. She’s taking a group of dancing girls to the castle--can you dance?”

“Yes.” She had seen the type of dancing these women did. Alter a few fighting moves and exercises, and that was basically all it was.

Nathaniel sighed. “It’s settled then. If you dance well enough, custom has it you can pick the man to...deflower you. Whatever you do, be back here no later than noon tomorrow. The coach will not wait any longer, and if you do have Tayan no place in town will be safe. Not even the church.”

“I understand.”

“And now, my payment?” he asked, making motions of opening his shirt.

Amber swallowed hard. All she had done so far was to think about it and plan. The tavern was empty except for the barkeep, who was watching intently as he washed a few mugs. This was the first time she would show her body to anyone, and the idea was horrifying her.

“If you can’t do it here, there is no way you will do it in a room full of sex-crazed noblemen,” Nathaniel pointed out.

Feeling as if she were exposing her soul, she unfastened her blouse and slowly opened it wide. Nathaniel

gave a low whistle, and the barkeep dropped his mug.

“Now those are very nice.” Seeing the flush in her face as she looked off at nothing, he asked, “Are you sure you can do this?”

Fighting the urge to clap her blouse shut and run from the place in shame, she lowered her gaze to stare him in the eye. “I have to.”

Shaking his head slightly, he gave her a grin. “Sister, I would not want to have you mad at me.”

She closed her blouse, much to the dismay of the barkeep. “I have no reason to be, unless the coach is not here.”

Nathaniel got up, shoving his chair back. “It will be. Let’s get you to Madam Lisa; she has a ton of work to do on your face.”

For the next few hours, Amber went through the most humiliating experiences of her life. Madam Lisa was a tall woman with short pale hair. Her low-cut dress fit her snugly. Although she was very sweet to a few men who had drifted into the house, she was a taskmaster with Amber.

The first thing she had her do was strip naked. She made her turn this way and that, made her bend over then raise her arms over her head. As Amber performed these maneuvers, the madam studied her body, every once in a while grabbing a pinch of skin. The last inspection was the worst--she did not take anyone’s word that Amber was a virgin. Amber had to clench her teeth and suffer through Madam Lisa poking a finger up into her to verify she did, indeed, have her maidenhead. After that, she made Amber dance naked as she watched with a critical eye.

After Lisa decided she would be “serviceable,” she allowed Amber to don a wrapper then took her to a room that stank of powder and perfume. When she was done, Amber noted her face did look smooth for once. What she felt was that her face was pasted thick with mud. She sneezed at the powder and wrinkled her nose at the amount of perfume sprayed over her. In short, she looked and felt like a common whore.

The only thing she was allowed to pick was the color of the minute patches of cloth that would go over her groin and breasts. Her top resembled more of a double-pocketed sling than it did clothing. The bottoms were just big enough to hide her crotch and expose a good portion of her behind. What worried her most, though, was that there was no place to hide the bag she planned on stuffing Tayan into. Talking as sweetly as she could, she finally convinced Lisa that the bag, folded and strapped to her chest, would give the men a bit more to visualize. Folded in half, the bag only went halfway around. She used silver clips to attach long cords to the bottom corners, which she then wrapped around to her back, twisted and drew over her shoulders. Slipping the ends into her cleavage and back up, she slightly pleated the center of the bag and cinched them in place. Light-colored silks were tucked into her thong and top for effect, which Lisa explained would have to be flung away as she danced. Finally ready, she boarded with the others into a coach that took them to the castle.

Tayan pressed against the wall beside the door of his windowless room. He had heard a male voice outside--maybe they were replacing his guards with men again. Listening closely, he heard the man whispering to the women. The door suddenly swung open and spilled one of his guards, a young woman wearing nothing but sheer silks, into the room. Just as quickly, it slammed shut and the bolt was thrown.

She backed away from him. "Please don't kill me, I only bring a message."

"I'm not going to kill you." Even without his weapons he had broken the necks of three guards and killed two others by driving their noses into their brains. During his capture, they had taken pains and the loss of men to wrestle him to the ground. He killed every man he had the chance to, but he couldn't harm women.

Lifting a hand to brush the light-brown strands of hair from her face, the woman said, "The duke wants to talk to you. Will you give your promise not to hurt him?"

"*Lethim* come ask," he replied flatly.

Giving him a forced smile, she glanced at the mattress on the floor. "Perhaps I could convince you?"

The woman was so thin her ribs showed clearly. She looked sad, standing there offering to lie with him to extract a promise. That anyone could convince women to give themselves so freely made his stomach turn.

"No, not that way."

Biting her lip, she glanced at the door. "Please, there must be something I can do."

He knew she was afraid of some kind of punishment if she didn't get him to cooperate. "What will he do to you if I don't?"

In a tiny voice, she said, "Please, I have been very good. Not once have I been whipped. Agree not to hurt him, just this once."

It figured. If she failed to get his promise, she would be beaten. He motioned toward his meager bed.

"Sit down."

Quickly, she did so and began pulling off her few clothes. As she did, he went to the door and announced, "All right, whoever wants to talk, come in. I won't hurt you."

"You swear?" a male voice asked.

"I swear," he sighed. He stepped back as the door opened. Two women preceded a short, dark-haired, goateed man in tailored leathers.

"Brave, aren't you?" Tayan sneered.

The man shrugged. "I have been ordered not to hurt you. If it were otherwise, you'd be on the rack for all the men of mine you've killed. I am Duke Toma."

"Who do you work for?"

Toma waved a hand to dismiss the subject. "You will see them soon enough. In the morning, I'm having you sent north to meet my Master." Pausing, he regarded his prisoner for a moment then said, "Despite the fact we are enemies, I have respect for you, Lord Tayan. When you are taken away tomorrow I

think you shall not live much longer.”

Brushing the women aside, Toma walked up to him. “I offer you one last night as a man. Give me your word you will not attempt to escape, and you will be able to join us in real food and drink. I am having dancers brought in--any you desire will be yours. You will also have better...accommodations.”

Tayan’s first impulse was to flatly refuse, but then he thought for a second. If he was allowed to roam, he could get an idea of where he was--and how to escape later.

“All I have to do is agree not to try and escape during your party?”

Toma grinned. “I note how you put that; but, yes, that is correct. Your guards will still accompany you, of course, but the dinner, drink and...whatever...are yours for the night.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Unlike some of our associates, I follow old customs. You will not get such fair treatment in the north. I urge you to take advantage of it while you can.”

“So, you’re a man of honor.” Tayan snorted.

Toma straightened and glared back at him. “I am, indeed. You may think I am on the wrong side, if you like, but do not question my honor!”

“Is that why you have women guard me?”

Toma stabbed a finger at him. “*That* is exactly why. I would never kill a defenseless woman, and I know, as a man of honor, neither would you.”

Tayan saw he was telling the truth. He didn’t know whom this man was working for, but the duke wasn’t lying. He also might be able to wring some information out of him, if he was lucky. If he did escape, he needed to know what was going on here in Spring Valley.

“Very well, I accept your hospitality. I swear to you I will not attempt escape while I am in your presence. Does this satisfy you?”

“It does. I shall send servants to attend you.” Toma turned and strode out. The women left shoulder to shoulder so Tayan could not slip by them.

He thought he was alone until he turned back to the bed. There was the light-haired woman, lying naked with his blanket covering her to her waist. She smiled at him and extended her hand in invitation. He shook his head.

“Leave.”

In the next few hours, serving girls came in a stream. A pair of green-skinned Slavonic women had him sit in a reclined chair. These two washed his hair and shaved him while others showed him suits of clothes to pick from. Another slave trimmed his fingernails and toenails then had him strip to his drawers and gave him a sponge bath. They insisted on helping him into the crisp white shirt and black pants he had picked. He noted that the whole time female guards clogged the doorway, moving only to let others in or out. Roughly half of them were greenish Slavonic women. The Slavonic race was often called the slave

people--no one had records or knowledge of any Slavonic tribe roaming free. They were a strange people, eager to please to the point of suicide, which made them very valuable in the slave market.

He talked to the women as they worked on him. Smiling pleasantly, he asked seeming pointless questions of where they came from and how they were being treated. The Slavonic women were eager to tell him about how close their quarters were to the kitchen and storerooms, and where those places were. He began to get a feel for how the castle was laid out.

Duke Toma arrived, dressed in a bright red shirt and blue pants. He seemed pleased with Tayan's garb. Clearing the slave women out of the cell, he had them stay behind Tayan as they went to the dining room.

Tayan paid close attention to his surroundings as they walked down the hall. He noted every turn and every window, slowly mapping the place in his head. There was a balcony on his left just before they reached the stairs. Seeing this, he asked Toma if he could take a look outside.

Toma bowed slightly. "Of course. Perhaps you will see how fruitless an escape attempt will be."

Stepping out onto the balcony, Tayan surveyed the scene before him. Below was the inner courtyard. It was an unusual shape--the curtain walls narrowed as they went away from the castle, meeting the wall with the main gate with about half their original width like a hemi-hexagon. In the center of the large courtyard was a square, flat-topped building with a pair of guards on the roof and another set at each corner that he could see. A huge, pedestal-mounted crossbow adorned the middle of the roof. Beside it he noted the outline of a trapdoor set into the roof. A lower outer defense wall surrounded the castle.

Looking at the battlements, he observed that in three places on the side walls and at each side of the gate the walks widened and held the same crossbows with man-sized spring arms. The last time he had seen crossbows that size was when King Alderlan's caravan was attacked.

"Were you part of an ambush about halfway to Old Castle two years ago?" he asked Toma.

"If you mean the one on King Alderlan, no. I show more quarter than that. Once an enemy is beaten, it is pointless to keep slaughtering the survivors."

The look on Toma's face was grim. Tayan could see he detested what had happened.

"Then how can you side with those who do things like that?"

Toma sighed. "That is the price of doing business. One of my main sources of income is the slave trade. Governor Stazor has been trying to ban slavery, and very few in Capetown will trade with me. Their actions force my choice of allies."

Tayan watched as a wagon leaving the courtyard was searched. Getting out was not going to be easy. Glancing at Toma, he mused aloud, "I often wonder how a man such as yourself would like having chains clapped on him."

"I would not like it," Toma admitted. "I am not in that position, however."

Tayan looked him in the eye. "For any person to own another is wrong."

Arching an eyebrow, Toma said, "Oh, really? When a man takes a wife, she is his. Should we outlaw marriage?"

“That is not the same, and you know it.”

“Til death do us part is a very binding form of slavery, even though both parties agree. The Slavonic people live to serve; I know of none who do not belong to someone. They take pride in the fact that they serve well.”

“If that is all they know, how can they do otherwise?” Tayan countered.

Looking at him thoughtfully, Toma asked, “You think you can change someone who was born and bred to be a slave?”

Zodiac had two Slavonic women at his castle; and although they insisted on staying, Tayan knew they could leave whenever they wished.

“I don’t believe anyone wants to be a slave.”

Toma grinned. “Very well. Ellie, come here.”

A greenish girl with long jet-black hair rushed over to Toma from the cluster standing nearby and curtsied. “What is your desire, Master?”

“Ellie, you are no longer mine. I am giving you to Lord Tayan here. He is now your master.”

Ellie turned to Tayan and repeated the bow. “What is your desire, Master?”

He had no intention of playing whatever game Toma had in mind. “I do not want one of your slaves.”

“Ellie is not mine. She is now yours to do with as you please.” Toma smirked.

“Get back with the others,” Tayan told her.

“As you wish, Master.” She sank down again and obeyed.

“Shall we go to dinner?” Toma asked, waving a hand at the door.

As they continued to the dining hall, Tayan saw a male servant come out from under the stairs with a sack of flour, which meant the storerooms were there. He now had a grasp of where the kitchen lay. Down one hall he noted guards coming out of a room buckling their armor. There was no way he was getting out through the main gate, and even the side gate was probably guarded. To slip away, he’d have to find the escape tunnel. Every castle had one—he just had to know where to look.

The dining hall was set up much differently than any other he had seen. What first got his attention was the seating arrangement. The center of the room, where he was used to seeing long tables and chairs, was empty. Instead, men sat near the wall, facing in. Small individual tables sat to their sides, as if to not get in the way. The only other entrance was a curtained arch across the room. By the multicolored curtain a tall, pale-haired woman watched them come in. Slaves moved about, filling cups and serving food.

Toma’s throne sat directly ahead of them and, like every other chair, faced the empty center of the room. A pair of Slavonic men in gray slave clothes knelt to each side awaiting the duke’s commands.

Tayan had his own chair and small table to Toma's left. Their escort stood behind him except for one slave--Ellie knelt beside him, crouched on her heels. He had no more than sat down when a plate of roasted meat and fruit appeared beside him then a cup and pitcher of ale. He picked up the pitcher--and flinched as Ellie shot to her feet and grabbed it from him. Her face was stricken as she filled his cup.

"I am sorry, Master, I should have been quicker. Please forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive."

She flashed him a forced smile. "Thank you, Master."

He glanced at Toma, who was holding out his own cup for a slave to fill. Toma had told the girl she was his, but he didn't want a slave. "Your name is Ellie, right?"

"Yes, Master."

"Would you do something for me?"

"Yes, Master."

"Stop calling me 'master.'"

She frowned at him, tipping her head slightly. "I do not understand."

"My name is Tayan, not 'master.'"

She gazed at him for a few seconds. "Yes, Tayan."

He nodded. "That's better."

"May I get you anything else, Tayan?"

He shook his head, so she squatted back down on her heels at his side. Seeing this, he told her, "You can get a little more comfortable."

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Tayan," and she sat cross-legged. Even though she didn't say "master," he heard it in her voice. He was about to tell her he wasn't her master when Toma's voice boomed out.

"Bring on the dancers!"

Against the left wall, minstrels began playing flutes, drums and lyres at a frenzied pace. Across the room, the curtains were pulled aside and a line of scantily clad women spilled into the room dancing and twirling. As they formed a circle in their flowing gossamer costumes, Tayan scanned the watchers.

Most looked to be merchants, although a few wore mail shirts that told him they were warriors. The only weapons he saw were the thin, broad-headed spears of the guards bracketing the entrance the dancers had used. Such weapons were mostly for show. Pressed into combat, they would break easily. By the rate the guests were drinking and their hooting and hollering, any response from them would be slow, at best. Despite his promise, it was tempting to toss one of his female guards into Toma and make a break for the storerooms. Toma seemed to take pride in old traditions. Storerooms were in the lowest levels of the castle and had the best chance of having an emergency tunnel.

His eyes fell on Ellie as he pondered these things. Slaves, especially Slavonics, were not thought of in terms of what they knew. People like Toma paid as much attention to them as they did the furniture. Quietly, he asked, "Ellie, have you been down to the storerooms?"

"Yes...Tayan," she replied, keeping his order in mind.

"Have you noticed any doors other than the one under the stairs?"

She nodded. "Yes, Tayan. There is a locked door that leads to the courtyard, for the wagons to use."

"How about in the floor?"

She frowned at him. "A door in the floor? No, Tayan."

"You don't need to use my name every time you speak," He sighed.

"Yes, Master."

"Don't call me master!"

Ellie's mouth worked up and down as she stared at him. "I...am confused..."

"Just talk to me," he coaxed.

Screwing her face up, she bit her lip. "I must show respect."

"Then look at me when you talk to me."

Shifting nervously, she dropped her eyes then looked back up at him as if she had no idea what to do.

A roaring laugh from Toma got their attention. Tayan glared at him as he waved his cup in their direction.

"Ellie!" he laughed, "Your master is new. As a new slave needs to be taught, so does a new master."

Ellie glanced at him; then a smile came to her face as she looked at Tayan.

"I understand! You do not know how to be a master."

"I am not your master," he grated.

"Oh, yes, you are!" She nodded brightly. "I am yours. I will teach you--I am a very good slave."

Tayan dropped his head and groaned.

"She is a very good slave." Toma snickered.

Shooting him a glare of contempt, Tayan said, "I do not want a slave."

Shrugging, Toma chuckled, "Well, you got one." His grin faded to a more serious look. "Just remember to be merciful. Before anything...happens to you, you must pass her off to another; or she will be forced

to accept the same fate that befalls you.”

“I refuse to give one person to another to be owned.”

“Then you condemn her to die with you.”

“She is not going to die.”

Toma raised an eyebrow. “Let’s hope not--a fine slave such as Ellie should not go to waste.”

Disgusted, Tayan turned to watch the dancers. He had no intention of really watching the women; he just didn’t want to look at Toma or Ellie, who was now on her knees trying to explain to him how a master should act.

One blond dancer, however, did get his attention. What drew his eye was the way she moved. Unlike the softer movements of the other, too-skinny women, her spins and swinging legs looked as if she were putting her whole body into the motion. She almost seemed to be fighting an unseen foe--even her face was set a little harder than the others. As he watched, he recognized what he knew as the block-spin-kick maneuver Odif had taught everyone in the company. She then danced low in the trip-set-stomp maneuver, followed by popping up and doing the slap-spin-elbow-heel stomp used against unarmed opponents. She threw her head back and made other, dance-type steps to soften the moves; but he saw them for what they were.

He focused on her body as she danced in her unusual fashion. Her legs flexed with tight muscles. She wasn’t starvation-thin like the rest but had a softer hourglass shape. She was also the only one with a generous bosom, held in with a wide, dark cloth. As he studied her face and the color of her free-flowing hair, he realized whom she looked like.

It couldn’t be! Amber was far too modest to dance virtually naked in front of a room full of men; and certainly she would not be dumb enough to come here, even if someone had brought her to Spring Valley.

The woman was scanning the room now as she danced towards him. Her eyes fell on him for a second, locking with his before she danced away towards the middle of the room. In that brief time, he got a good look at her. Her features eerily resembled Amber’s--she even had the same eye color. Unlike Amber, however, the cheeks of her pretty face were completely smooth.

He breathed a sigh of relief. He had never seen anyone look so identical to another. Well, from the neck up, anyway.

He had no idea what Amber had under her loose robes. Watching the dancer more intently, he wondered if Amber had the same endowments as this woman. She was grace in motion and could be much more than one of Toma’s dancers if she chose to be. Despite himself, he began to enjoy her performance. Other women occasionally blocked his view, but he managed to follow her with his eyes.

The music began to wind down; and the dancers made one last circle then danced their way back through the curtains. He noticed the blonde give him one last glance before she disappeared, locking eyes with him briefly.

It wasn’t Amber, but he began to puzzle on her dance style. She knew every weaponless combat move the Company used. None of the other dancers performed anything like what she had been doing. She

was either someone who had been to Longforest or was at one time part of the Company. He knew everyone who had been in the Company for the last fifty years. As he thought about it, he could only come to one conclusion.

Odif was the only woman bold enough to dance like that. Odif could also shift her shape however she pleased. In Newburg she had made herself look like him right down to the inflections in his voice. Somehow, she had found him. Why she chose to use Amber's shape, he didn't understand. It didn't matter what she looked like, though; he knew she was not about to leave him here. He knew how she thought. The first dance she had spent marking him and the locations of guards and doors. When she came out for her next dance, all hell was going to break loose. Between the two of them, Toma wouldn't know what hit him.

Sitting back, he started planning. Once she had caused enough havoc here, he'd lead her to the storerooms. Ellie said the doors were locked, but locked doors made of any material were not a problem now. Once outside, he would take care of any close-range threats while Odif used her druidic power to turn every creature and every element against Toma's men. They could just walk right out the front gate.

"Tayan, now the dancers have gone, will you listen to me?" Ellie asked from beside him.

He turned to see her gazing pleadingly at him. Leaning towards her, he whispered, "When I tell you, run into the hall."

"Yes, Tayan. Don't you want me beside you?"

Nodding, he said, "Don't ask why, but once things get...confusing, stay as close to me as you can."

"Worse than they are now?" she asked fearfully.

"Much worse." He grinned, looking over at Toma, who was talking to a messenger and a priest who had come in. "We'll be leaving in a hurry."

She nodded briefly, accepting what he said even though she had no idea what was going on.

"Now, Tayan, I have been trained for pleasure, all forms of cooking and poison detection--"

"Ellie," he interrupted, "just sit quietly until I tell you to go then do it fast."

She clapped her mouth shut and sat on her heels.

A pair of dancers had taken the floor to low flute music and the heavy beat of drums. Splitting up, they danced close to the tables, dropping their sheer silks here and there as they went. One stocky merchant stood and waved a coin at the lighter-haired one as she came close. The woman started to bow in front of him then quickly popped back up and danced away. The man grabbed a couple more coins and called for her to return.

She did, this time taking the coins from him and laying them at his feet before she moved on. The man sat back down with a satisfied grin.

More dancers started trickling out one or two at a time. The light-haired one went over and sat with the merchant, first picking up her coins. Soon, another dancer bowed to a man then sat by him. As he watched women selling themselves, he looked for Odif to reappear. He knew she had gotten a good

look at the room. What was she waiting for?

“Excuse me, Lord Tayan,” Toma said formally. When Tayan looked his way, he went on. “Did you know a knight by the name of Sir Arlan?”

He shook his head. “Why?”

“I understand he was from Paladnia. I just received word that he has been killed by bandits as he was leaving town.”

By the satisfied look on Toma’s face, Tayan highly doubted he had nothing to do with it. The priest beside him also looked quite content with this news.

“Why did he have to die?”

Toma shrugged. “I heard he found out about you and was heading back to inform his superiors. We are looking for his friend, just to explain the tragedy of what happened, of course.”

So, Tayan thought, *Toma isn’t so noble after all*. “I sincerely hope you do not find him.”

“Her,” Toma corrected. “And, yes, we will find her.”

Tayan scanned the floor, looking to see if Odif had come out yet. Roughly half the dancers were either dancing or attending men, but no Odif. He was tempted to ask Toma if he wanted to surrender now.

“She’s probably on the road back to Paladnia by now,” he offered. “Are you ready for a siege?”

“Oh, yes,” Toma assured him. “Stazor may come, but I’m sorry to say you won’t be here to see it.”

“You got that right,” he muttered. Louder, he said, “I must warn you--if I do find that you’ve caught her I will have to try and free us both.”

“I would expect no less.” Toma nodded with a wave of his cup. “When we catch her, we’ll let you know.”

I’ll let you know, he thought. Growing impatient, he scanned the room again. Still no Odif. What in the abyss was taking her so long?

More dancers came out until it looked like every one except Odif was here. They were now cycling between dancing and sitting by the men they’d picked. Even the tall, pale-haired woman was walking out onto the floor. He half-expected her to strip off her long silver dress and start dancing. What she did, though, was raise her arms and look at the minstrels.

The music stopped. When she had everyone’s attention, she announced, “We have a special offering tonight! Two young virgins will be given to the gods of lust!”

Her announcement caused a roar of cheers and jingling of purses as men offered money for the unseen girls. She waited until the noise died down then said, “The first is Felicia, a prime young resident of Spring Valley.”

The curtain opened, and a short brunette came out wearing a forced smile as she moved to stand by the

woman.

“Ten gold!” one man cried.

“Twelve!” cried another.

“Fifteen!”

“Twenty-five!”

Dropping his head, Tayan tried to block out the sounds of this disgusting auction. Concentrating on his own thoughts, he wondered if Odif had maybe slipped out and was going to come in from the hall behind him. Everyone’s attention was focused on the girl being sold--the time was perfect. He stole a glance behind him; even the guards were watching. He was sure these last two girls would be the finale, so it was now or never.

The girl went to a richly clad merchant, who gave the pale-haired woman a sack of gold. As he took his prize and left, the woman announced, “And now I present Sarah, who will dance and pick the lucky man who will be the first to know her charms!”

She moved aside as the curtain erupted and the blonde burst into the room and did a flip, followed by three quick spins.

The room went wild.

Not only were men calling for her, they began spilling their purses out on the tables and begging for her to come their way. By the time she had crossed the center of the room in her dance, men were leaving their chairs to wave her to them. The guards tried to shout over the uproar for the men to sit back down. As she passed, men were stepping away from their chairs, shouting louder for her to come back. Amid the howls of lust, Tayan sat back and shook his head. Leave it to Odif to make a grand entrance.

Then, to his right, he heard a more ominous shout.

“It’s her! That’s the one right there!” the priest yelled, pointing right at Odif.

So much for surprise. Grabbing Ellie by the arm, he hauled her up as he got to his feet.

“Go now!” he barked and shoved her towards the door.

Odif was still dancing towards him, unmindful of the priest’s yelling. One of his guard women stepped in front of him. At the same time, he noticed two men jumping up from Toma’s other side, going for Odif. Grabbing the woman’s arm, he swung her around and flung her at them. She managed to keep her feet with a stumbling run into the men. The three fell in a heap.

Amber stopped dancing as she saw Tayan in motion. She also saw Father Wright pointing at her and yelling. Her heart went into her throat--they were in deep trouble. Forgetting her dance, she ran straight for Tayan as he twisted a second woman around from behind him by her arm.

Toma was on his feet, screaming for the guards. Tayan planted his foot on the woman’s behind and gave

her a shove right at the duke. A third one of his guards grabbed him from behind but suddenly let go with a grunt as Amber kicked her in the ribs.

The woman stumbling toward Toma collided and, trying to hold him for support, dragged him to the floor with her.

“Follow me!” Tayan barked at Amber, who was now right beside him. His other guard women thought better of trying to grab him and let them run past.

The main advantage they had was that most of the room thought this was a fight for the virgin. Not having heard the priest or Toma’s yells, they enjoyed the spectacle, cheering and laughing as people were tossed about. It wasn’t until Tayan kicked one armored guard in the chin then used that guard’s spear to kill the other one that they began to realize something was wrong.

The two had fled from the room by the time a crimson-faced Toma got to his feet. His voice was hoarse with anger as he screamed and jabbed an arm at the door.

“Seal the castle! I want that bitch’s head on a pole!”

In the hallway, Amber heard Toma’s command as she ran behind Tayan. Her heart slammed in her chest--she was going to die, she just knew it! Before she did, she had to get Tayan out of here. Once he was free, they could do what they liked with her.

In her peripheral vision she noticed a green-skinned girl running behind her. She stopped short and put all her weight into her elbow as she thrust it backwards. Ellie ran into it, taking it in her lower ribs.

Hearing the *thooof*, Tayan spun to see Ellie hit the floor on her back. He skidded to a stop and ran back.

“Odif, no! She knows the way out!”

Odif gaped at him as he tried to get Ellie to her feet. She was twitching, her mouth and eyes wide open in pain, desperately trying to breathe. Odif helped him get her over his shoulders as men poured into the hall and started towards them. Tayan ran as hard as he could for the storerooms.

The door underneath the stairs was closed.

“Under the stairs, get the door!” he rasped. There was no way they were going to get inside and get the door shut again before someone caught up to them. He didn’t relish the thought of trying to fight carrying Ellie, and he wasn’t going to leave her. If only Odif would use some of her magic!

The door swung open; and a male slave came out carrying a basket of corn. Seeing the people barreling down at him, he froze.

“Move!” Tayan roared. The startled slave tried to get out of the way but not fast enough. Tayan caromed off him and just managed to keep from falling or dropping Ellie as he staggered through the doorway and against a wall. Odif slammed the door shut, holding the ring in both hands with a foot braced against the frame. Thinking quickly, Tayan grabbed a torch from the wall and wedged it into the ring just as someone yanked it from the other side. The torch bent with a cracking sound but held. He knew it wouldn’t hold for long.

They were in another small hallway with four doors to the left and another three to the right. He hadn't planned on a whole section of storerooms. Ellie was making small movements, gasping in tiny breaths. She wasn't going to be of any help. In fact, she needed help. He didn't dare put her down yet.

He had to find the right door but there was no time to open every one. Starting down the hall, he told Odif, "Look for one without hinges."

"Why?"

He glanced at her, not too surprised she even sounded like Amber. "That means the door opens in, we can block it. It also might mean that's the one with the tunnel."

Behind them, the torch cracked louder as more men pulled at the door. Someone yelled for a pry bar. Another yelled that the doorframe was starting to burn. Glancing back, Tayan saw he was right. The torch had ignited the frame; fire was creeping towards the ceiling. With any luck, even if they didn't escape, the damn place would burn down.

At the third door, he found what he was looking for. Kicking it in, he saw steps descending into darkness. "Get a torch," he ordered Odif.

She snatched one from the wall and followed him down a couple steps. She shut the door as the sound of splintering wood told them the torch had given way.

Gently as he could, Tayan squatted down and set Ellie on the steps. She gritted her teeth and hissed, but thankfully she didn't scream. Above him, Odif slipped the bar attached to the door into its brackets. From outside, the first sounds of doors being slammed were accompanied by Toma's voice demanding that the search be quick.

Below, the room held stacks of crates. It looked to be about thirty feet square, with walls of smooth worked stone. He didn't see any other way out, though he was sure there had to be one.

"Well, if we can't get out, at least we have a few minutes before they get in," he said quietly. "Let's get Ellie off these steps."

He picked her up as gently as he could, but she let out a short yelp of pain as he lifted her. The door above rattled as someone banged on it.

"They're in here!"

"Get axes!"

Taking her down to a short stack of crates, he laid her on them. Beside him, Odif was shaking with fear, glancing up at the door.

"What is wrong with you!" he asked harshly. "I could have used some more help up there! And what's with using Amber's shape? She would not appreciate you prancing about like that. Now do what you can for her--I'm going to look for a way out!"

He stormed away, hoping she would drop the façade and change back into herself. Odif acted weird sometimes, but this was the first time she had put their lives in danger.

Amber looked down at the greenish girl holding her hands to her lower ribs. She knew they were broken and that quite possibly the girl was bleeding on the inside. If she weren't healed, she would die. If Tayan didn't find a way out, they would all die. This wasn't what she had planned at all.

Ellie spoke a couple gasping words. "Leave me."

Amber laid a hand over hers and tried to smile. She wanted to tell her it would be all right, but she didn't believe that herself. She noted there were now chopping sounds at the door above. Soon, it would be her neck they'd be chopping at.

In the dim light of the single flickering torch, Amber knew she had to make her peace with Leighna now. Her robes didn't matter, neither did the fact she was going to be killed. What did matter was her soul. Closing her eyes, she began whispering her prayer for healing, for if Leighna healed this girl, she knew she was forgiven.

Tayan hurried down the third aisle of crates to slide his hands over the wall. He could make out enough detail to keep from running into objects thanks to his elven heritage. This wall felt the same as the previous two. Smooth stone, no cracks or indentations that meant there might be a door. Giving a huff, he started down another aisle, and his foot kicked something that sounded like metal. Bending down, he felt around for what might be a weapon. What he found was a small ring attached to the floor.

This had to be it! Feeling around it, he found the edges of a two-foot-square trapdoor. He pulled on the ring; it stayed in place at first then broke free with a pop and the squeal of rusted hinges. From below, cool, musty air wafted up. He had found the tunnel.

He left the door open and went back to Odif and Ellie. As he passed the stairs, he looked up at the door that was now leaking light down the stairway. The light shook and got a bit brighter as another ax slammed into it. They had a way out, but not much time to take it.

Ellie was sitting up holding the torch as he returned. Odif was wiping her face like she had been crying. He'd figure out what was wrong with her later; right now they had to keep moving. Jerking a thumb back over his shoulder, he said, "I found the way out. Let's go!"

She shook her head and unhooked her top. "Even if we get away, I'm sure they have dogs to track us." Taking the clips off the cloth, she shook it out and opened it up. It was a bag. "You have to get in one more time," she told him.

Tayan gaped at her. Although he didn't mean to, his eyes fell on her breasts. They were soft and pillowy...he had a hard time forcing his eyes back up to her face. She had gotten the bag from Amber--that's what had given her the idea to take her form.

He shook his head. "Odif, I can't. I'll tell you why later, if you must know."

Taking a step towards him, she grabbed him by the front of his shirt. Daggers were in her eyes as she growled, "You call me Odif one more time, with Leighna as my witness, I will knock out every one of your teeth!"

Her face was inches from his. Part of the makeup on her left cheek was peeled away, showing the pockmarks. His mouth worked up and down twice before he managed to speak.

“Amber?” It had been her all along? His face flushed as the realization hit. By the gods, he never would have thought...

“At least you got my name right. Now get in the damn bag!” she barked, interrupting his thoughts.

Behind what was left of the door, Toma called out, “We’re almost through. Bowmen, at the ready!”

The next ax blow was followed by a crashing noise and one of the boards from the door came bouncing down the steps. If the door wasn’t breached yet, it soon would be. To get to the tunnel, they would have to cross through the light now pouring down the stairway. He had to think of something else, quickly.

“Tayan, now!” Amber hissed. “I do not want to die for nothing!”

Turning to look at her, he knew she would suffer horribly before Toma finally had her killed. He grabbed the bag from her and held it open. “You first, just dive in.”

“And how will you get out?”

“The same way you will. Hurry, please!”

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she jumped up. For a brief second, her breasts hung in front of his face then she disappeared.

Ellie’s jaw hung open as he held the empty-looking bag out to her.

“Ellie, I need you to do something very important,” he told her.

She nodded vacantly as she took the bag. “Yes, Master?”

“After I get in, hide this bag. Tell anyone who asks that we left through the tunnel--are you listening?”

She shifted her eyes to look at him. “Yes, Master.”

“You tell Toma I gave you to Arthur Cooper, who lives in Tolina. Take this bag to him or his wife and explain what we just did.”

“Yes, Master.”

“You won’t forget now, will you?”

“No, Master.”

Creaking steps got his attention. He got up on the crate as legs appeared. Taking a deep breath, he dropped in.

Ellie rolled the bag up and was tucking it into her waistband as the first bowman descended the last few steps. Leveling his crossbow on her, he demanded, “Where did they go, slave?”

“They left through the tunnel.” she replied dutifully.

“They’re in the tunnel!” the man cried up the stairs.

A short while later, as armed men ran by, Ellie walked up the hall to Duke Toma. Seeing her, he planted his hands on his hips and asked, “So, what did your Master do with you?”

She replied as ordered. “He gave me to Arthur Cooper, who lives in Tolina.”

“Do you know where Tolina is?” he asked with a smirk.

She shrugged nervously. “No, but I must find it.”

Sweeping her body with his eyes, he sighed, “You are a very good slave, Ellie.”

“I never disappoint my Master,” she said proudly.

“No, you don’t,” he agreed. “I will miss you. As a parting gift, go to the Redman Coach depot and tell the dispatcher to bill me for your trip. He will tell you how to get to Tolina.”

“Thank you very much.” She smiled. “I wish you well, ex-Master.”

A few moments later, Ellie walked out the main gate.

Chapter 9

Odif emerged into a lovely garden. Besides the tree she came out of, a maple and a willow stood guard over a colorful array of flowers and neatly trimmed bushes. A red-slate path curved past her to lead towards a large mansion decorated with columns. To her right were a high stone wall and a small stone building. She heard the laughing of children. Straight ahead, she saw a boy disappear as he ran off towards the mansion.

She followed him to a courtyard where other children played a game of tag. The boy she had followed was stockier than the others. He ran fast but seemed a bit clumsy as he tried to tag another boy. To one side, an elf woman sat stiffly on a wrought iron bench next to a baby carriage, watching them play.

Odif stopped and watched, a smile spreading on her face. She remembered when life was this simple, when her worst fear was whether or not her mother would find out she had ruined her appetite by eating cinnamon bark half the day. The boy finally cornered a shorter elf by the woman’s bench, yelling, “No touchbacks!” after tagging him.

The elf woman glared at him. “Art! Do not play near the baby!”

He stopped and frowned at her. “But Selsteran--”

“Selsteran is not a clumsy oaf! Now move away!” she said with a whisk of her fingers.

Art walked away, his shoulders drooping. He didn’t see the elf girl run up and slap him merrily on the

shoulder.

“Tag!” she giggled and ran away from him.

Odif wondered why the woman had treated the child so harshly. Studying Art, she saw his ears were not quite pointed, and the tips of his eyebrows turned down slightly. Art was mixed blood, human and elf. He was trying to play, but now it didn't look like he had his heart in it.

She shifted her attention to the woman, who adjusted the baby's blankets as she muttered to herself “If only his mother had stuck to her own kind, he wouldn't have happened!”

The remark by itself was bad enough, but Odif saw Art glance at her after she said it. The grin on her face faded as the hair on the back of her neck rose up. She stepped into the courtyard and walked towards the woman. The children saw her, slowing to stop and watch as she passed Art, who was gaping at her. The woman didn't look up until she was standing in front of her.

The women gave a start then glared at her. “How did you get in here?”

Odif glared back at her. “We need to have a talk.”

“Get out now or I'll call for the guards!”

Turning her right hand palm up, Odif concentrated on the air directly above her hand. “*Flammar.*”

Fire burst from her palm to crackle in dancing flames a few inches above her half-curved fingers.

“Do you think they'll be fast enough?” she asked.

The woman's eyes went wide. “Dear Odin!” Sitting with her back pressed against the bench as if to escape the flame, she asked, “What do you want?”

“From you, not to berate children. You think you're better than one of us ‘mongrels?’ Try me.”

The woman's face flushed. Glancing about fearfully, she said, “Please, leave us alone.”

Odif closed her hand, extinguishing the fire. “You leave Art alone, and I'll leave you alone. Where may I find Jeni Redman?”

The woman shook her head, still pressing against the back of the bench. “She's not here.”

“Where is she?”

“I don't know.”

“Hey, lady, who are you?” Art called from behind her.

Odif turned to him. “Odif Longforest. Do you know where she is?”

Art's face opened up with joy. “Awwwww, *wow* ! You're the real Odif?”

The other children began to congregate in a semicircle around her. She nodded to him. “Yes, and you

are?”

“I’m Arenthanas Lemallan Cooper--Jeni’s my sister,” he said proudly. Pointing to the baby, he added, “That’s Erica, Eric and Jeni’s baby. Erikenthansia Redman is her whole name.”

Odif raised an eyebrow. “And Eric, he’s this Red Man I’ve been hearing about?”

Art bobbed his head. “Sure is. He killed a whole army of hoarcs and killed a vlak all by himself! Him and Jeni got married then he went to look after Tayan but they got attacked by real mean stuff.”

Erica was her half-sister. She was glad to know about her, but that didn’t bring her any closer to finding her father. “Do you know where Eric is?”

Giving her a shrug, he said, “Nobody knows. I think he’s still killing bad things somewhere. He better come back soon, ’cause Jeni, Mom and Dad are starting to have fights over Jeni wanting to go look for him.”

Pulling back the hood on the carriage, Odif looked down on the tiny girl wrapped in pink blankets. Her fine, silky hair was strawberry blonde. Erica gazed back up at her with almond-shaped blue eyes.

“Hey, Erica.” She smiled as she reached down to tickle the tiny chin. She leaned her staff on the bench then lifted her sister and held her, not aware of the woman’s slipping off the bench and running away.

“That’s Aunt Shanni,” Art told her, pointing at the fleeing woman.

Odif heard her crying out that someone was stealing the baby. She sat down, cradling Erica in her arms. “I need to talk to Jeni. Do you know where she is?”

Art bobbed his head again. “Yup, she’s off doing business things. Jeni owns a bunch of coaches and two stone quarries. Mom and Dad are both real busy, too, that’s why Aunt Shanni came to watch me.”

“Here comes your aunt,” one elf boy announced nervously.

She was flanked by two large, rough-looking humans with clubs in their hands and mean scowls on their faces. Shanni’s expression was set in confidence as she pointed to Odif. “John, Hal, make her put down my great-niece and throw her out!”

Calmly, Odif laid Erica back in her carriage. Tickling the baby’s chin again, she said in a musical voice, “I’ll be right back. Big sister’s got to kick some ass, yes, she does.”

Standing to face the men, she gently pushed Art away and spoke in a more serious tone. “You and your friends move over there for a few minutes.”

Art backed up, shifting his eyes from the guards to her. “You’re gonna fight?”

“I’m going to teach them a lesson.”

Odif moved away from Erica and waited. Shanni stopped. The men continued on to halt a few paces in front of Odif, sweeping her with their eyes. Neither had seen womenfolk who walked around in just a thin shirt and shorts, let alone a pretty one like her.

John motioned toward the gates, almost apologetically. "Ma'am, we don't want to hurt you. Please, just go."

Folding her arms in front of her, Odif said, "You're both handsome men; I really don't want to hurt you, either. Can we be friends, and you just let me wait for Jeni?"

"Get her out now!" the woman yelled.

Hal glanced back at her briefly, "Look, Lady Shalenthansia wants you out. We have to do as she says."

"That's right, ma'am, you can come back later," John offered.

Odif let out an irritated sigh. Raising her hands, she tried to explain. "I came to find my father, and Jeni Redman is my best lead right now. I am not leaving until I talk to her."

"I'm sorry, you have to leave now." John reached to take her arm.

In an unhurried motion, Odif grabbed his wrist and pulled his arm past her then tapped the back of his knee with her foot as she twisted his arm so it was locked straight up behind his back. Before he knew it, he was kneeling and looking at the ground, unable to move.

Holding him immobile, Odif asked, "May I please wait?"

"Let him go, ma'am," Hal said firmly. "We're not fooling."

"Neither am I." She stepped in back of her captive then let go of his arm and gave him a shove with her foot. As John dove face-first onto the ground, she stepped up to Hal. He tried to grab her only to also find himself diving for the ground.

Odif stepped back, waiting as the men regained their feet. "I really don't want to hurt you. Why don't you just stay down?"

Both men got up, flustered and angry.

"We're through playing with you!" John hissed. "Either you leave, or we'll make you leave!"

Odif snorted at him and shook her head. "I don't think so."

Both men came at her, striding side by side. She waited until they reached to grab her arms then she made her move. Spinning low into them, she kicked John's knee and elbowed Hal in the ribs. Passing between them as they stumbled, she dropped down and swung a leg to kick Hal's feet out from under him. As he fell, she jumped up and kicked John square in the back, sending him flying onto his face once more. She backed off, waiting again for them to get up.

Shalenthansia was glaring at the men, flustered at their failure. "Get up and throw her out!" she barked.

Odif pointed an angry finger at her. "If I have to hurt them, I'm going to hurt you next!"

Art called out, "Hey, Aunt Shanni, please let Odif stay!"

Hal had gotten to his feet. Hearing Art, his scowl softened. Looking at her cautiously, he asked, "You're

Odif...the druid?"

"Yes, can I stay now?"

Holding his scraped nose, John asked, "How do we know you're her?"

Holding her arms out, she spoke firmly. "*Piorga Flammar!*"

Fire shot out in a stream just above the men's heads. They ducked, looking at her fearfully then bolted for the gates. Shalenthansia followed, uttering a mix of crying and screaming sounds.

Alone with the children, Odif went back to the carriage. She wouldn't mind sitting with her sister--it would be a welcome change of pace.

Some of the children went home, but others, including Art, sat near her as she held Erica and played with her. She was asked all kinds of questions, from whether druids really lived inside trees to if she really ate people. She was amazed at some of the things their parents had told them. Patiently, she told them what druids were really like and how they lived. Leading them to the gardens, she explained to their eager ears how living things grew and how each form of life depended on others. By the time Erica was becoming hungry and cranky, she was gaining a small group of converts.

Erica sat on Odif's lap, whining and sucking her fingers. Odif looked around for something to give her, but none of the plants near her were edible to a child.

"Art, do you know where Erica's food is?"

Jumping up, he said, "Yeah, I'll go get her goat's milk" and ran off towards the mansion.

"Goat's milk?" She was expecting something soft, but goat's milk?

A girl in a yellow jumpsuit grinned at her. "That's what babies eat! I get to hold the bottle for my baby brother."

"What's wrong with your mother's milk?"

The girl bit her lip, holding back a grin. A boy asked, "What's mother's milk?" The girl giggled and pointed to her chest, which got them all giggling.

Odif didn't understand what was so funny. Looking quizzically at the girl, she asked, "Weren't you fed your own mother's milk?"

The giggles turned into laughter. The tallest girl, who wore a frilly white blouse and light blue skirt, blushed and lowered her head. The girl in the yellow jumpsuit cried, "That's what goat's milk is for!"

Odif's brow furrowed. She spoke a little more harshly than she meant to. "Are you goats?"

The laughter died out as they saw her stern look.

"Well, are you?" she asked firmly.

"No," one boy said meekly as the others shifted in place.

“Then you should not be raised on goat’s milk!” Slipping her hand up under her shirt to clasp her right breast, she concentrated on producing milk. The unused glands started to fill, becoming sore as they were suddenly stretched like lungs taking in air. Her breast became heavy as it swelled. She ignored the prickling pains and lifted her shirt, coaxing Erica to drink.

“Goat’s milk!” she huffed. Smiling down at Erica she said in a musical tone, “You don’t need to drink goat’s milk this day, no, you don’t.”

Erica began suckling in earnest as milk flowed from her nipple. Odif found the sensation pleasant, even satisfying. She was feeding a child with her own breast. It made her wish she were able to have a baby of her own.

But that was one joy she would never know; so instead of dwelling on what was never to be, she resumed talking to the children. They were gaping at her, clearly very uneasy.

“We should go now.” one boy said, and drifted away. Others filed after him, and soon only the tall girl remained. She hovered for a moment, not sure whether to go or stay. Once the others were out of sight, she settled down by Odif, watching Erica intently.

“Does that hurt?” she asked quietly.

“No, it actually feels nice. What’s your name?”

The girl looked up. “My friends call me Ali.”

“Well, Ali, this is why woman have breasts; there is nothing to be ashamed of.” she said gently.

Ali nodded slightly. After another moment, she asked, “Can I try?”

Odif suppressed a chuckle. “Sorry, but no. You’re a bit too young. When you grow up, I’m sure you will have your own babies to feed.”

Ali looked at her like she was about to ask another question then shifted her gaze to where the others had gone. “Maybe I better go, too.”

Before she got up, Odif asked, “Has anyone ever explained things like this to you?”

Snapping her head back to look at Odif, she said, “We don’t talk about private parts.”

Odif raised an eyebrow. “Private parts?”

Ali blushed again, giving a half-hearted gesture to her chest and groin. “You know, parts that are always covered up.”

“Oh.” She got the picture. Ali’s mother thought it was rude to talk about basic life functions. The poor girl would probably be terrified the first time she had her cycle, and be even more so with her first boy, not having any idea what to expect. She wanted to go slap the woman silly for keeping her daughter in the dark. Ignorance never helped, and she had seen plenty of times when it hurt or ruined lives.

Laying her hand over Ali’s, she softly said, “Anything you want to ask, I’ll talk about with you, okay?”

Ali gave a shrug. "I'm not allowed."

"We can keep it our secret," she coaxed.

A glint of gratitude shone in Ali's eyes, a slight smile came to her lips. "OK, but don't ever tell Mother or Father."

"That's a promise," Odif said with a wink. "I don't know how long I'll be here; but while I am, you can come see me at any time."

Ali cracked a grin. She checked to see that none of the others were sneaking back then asked, "Can we even talk about boys?"

Odif nodded. "Whatever you like."

Erica tugged at the bottom of her shirt, partially covering her face as she played with the cloth. In a few jerky movements, she pulled it out and down, concealing herself.

An excited cry of "My baby!" came from the courtyard, followed by someone barking orders.

"Ali, you better go tell them where we are," Odif said as she pulled her shirt up. Erica grabbed one of her fingers and gazed curiously at it with one eye as she nursed.

Ali had no more than left when a troop of armed elves came into view led by a frantic-looking elf woman in a brightly flowered dress. Her head jerked from side to side as she searched the garden. Her eyes settled on Odif and she stopped in her tracks, extending her arms to the sides to halt the others.

The lead elf, wearing the dark blue clothes of a noble, stepped up beside her as he commanded, "Wait here."

The elf woman slowly approached. Stopping just a few paces away, she said, "Please, don't hurt my baby."

Gently getting Erica to release her finger, Odif said, "You must be Jeni."

"Yes, please give me my baby," the woman said in a frightened tone as she held her arms out.

Odif studied her. Her bright blonde hair was offset by dark blue eyes that almost looked purple. With her slim form and well-tailored dress, she was quite pretty. She could use more muscle in her thin arms and be a bit more aggressive about getting her child back, but no one was perfect.

"I am not going to do any harm to Erica. I came to talk to you."

The noble elf laid his hand on his sword. "Return Lady Jenasalinthia's child--or else."

Quickly scanning the group, Odif didn't see one that looked seriously threatening. They had swords and most had shields, but not one was armored.

"Or else what?" she snorted.

Jeni turned to the elf. "Belenaris, please let me handle this."

Shifting his gaze between Odif and Jeni, he nodded briskly. "Try, M'Lady, but we'll be here if she refuses to give up Erikenthansia."

Jeni turned back to Odif then noticed Erica was nursing. A blush came to her face. She reached out tentatively, stopping as Odif held up a hand.

"Can you wait until she's done feeding?"

Jeni's face screwed up in frustration. "What do you want?"

Calmly, Odif said, "I am looking for Eric Redman. I was told you were the last one to know where he was."

On her lap, Erica began to play with her shirt again. This time, she shoved it up to expose what she was doing to the men a few yards away. A couple stared, a few others grumbled and looked at the ground.

Jeni's face softened. "What do you want with my husband?"

"I need his help--it's very important I find him."

Shifting in place like she wanted to snatch Erica away but was afraid to, Jeni gave her a shrug. "I want to find him, also, but he's nowhere to be found." Her voice sounded a bit strained as she asked, "Why do you want to find him?"

Odif had no idea who knew what about him and didn't want to talk in front of two dozen men. She wasn't even sure if Tayan knew he was alive. She nodded towards the men.

"Can they leave? I think we should talk more privately."

Jeni stiffened and glared at her. "You come here, scare the wits out of my aunt then hide in the garden and suckle my baby. I demand to know right now who in the abyss are you, and what do you want with *my husband* !"

Meeting her gaze, Odif spoke evenly. "I am Odif Longforest, and your husband is my father."

"Your father?" she asked breathlessly. "Impossible."

"It's impossible he's still alive," Odif corrected, "but he is my father and I need to find him."

Regarding her for a moment, Jeni folded her arms over her chest. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Odif shook her head and sighed. "If you're asking for proof, all I can tell you is my mother saw him two years ago in the Jude. One of my friends, Zit, told me about him when we went to clear hoarcs out of the Jude Fortress."

"The place where Eric fought the black knight."

"Right." Odif winced as Erica found a few strands of hair in easy reach and tugged. Rescuing it from the

baby's grasp, she sat her up and started patting her back to burp her. Erica noticed her mother and gave a gurgle as she reached out for her.

"Go see Mommy?" Odif asked as she lifted her to Jeni.

Jeni wasted no time in taking the child and enfolding her in her arms. As she stepped back, Belenaris yelled, "Now!"

Odif shot to her feet. Bringing her arms up to the sides, she concentrated on the insects of the garden. Behind her, a cloud of bees began to congregate. The first men to come at her would find themselves being stung on every exposed inch of skin. To her surprise, Jeni stepped in front of her, facing the men.

"No! Stay back."

Pointing his sword at Odif, Belenaris spat, "Jenasalinthia, she tried to steal Erikenthansia!"

"I did not!" Odif gasped.

Jeni glanced at her then told the man, "Belenaris, if she really wanted to take Erica, she would have done it. It's all right--thank you for coming."

It was obvious by his pose he didn't trust Odif. He moved up beside Jeni as if to protect her. "I am only looking out for you and your precious child. I'll send my men away but prefer to stay beside you."

Jeni shifted her gaze from him to Odif indecisively a few times. Finally, she said, "All right, but whatever we discuss goes no farther, understand?"

"As you wish, M'lady." Turning to his men, he dismissed them with a wave of his hand. Glancing at the cloud of insects behind Odif, he asked, "Could you make your friends go away?"

Odif let the tiny creatures go about their business. The ones that flew towards Jeni, she directed away. This didn't seem to relieve Belenaris--he watched her as if she was going to grab Erica and run. She sensed unease from Jeni, though she looked happier now she was holding her baby.

"Do you want to talk inside?" she offered.

Jeni eyed Odif, still clearly not sure what to make of her. "Yes, this way, please."

Belenaris remained tight to Jeni's side as they went into the mansion. Odif walked a few steps to one side, taking in the finely carved stonework and smooth marble floors. Although there was very little gold work, the wood and stone were polished to a glassy finish. They went through a large foyer and into a study that had high, arched windows filled with glass.

"Is this all yours and Eric's?" Odif asked absently.

Jeni glanced at her. "This house belongs to my grandmother. We only live here."

"No doubt the lady is awestruck by the finer things in life." Belenaris smirked.

Odif shook her head. "Quite the opposite, this place is dead. It reminds me of the mausoleums in Paladnia. I prefer to be surrounded by living things."

Jeni led them to a half-circle of upholstered chairs near the windows. "Please have a seat."

She sat down herself, cradling Erica on one arm. Belenaris took the closest chair to her. Odif went to the window and sat on the floor with her back to the wall, facing them.

"Don't you use chairs?" Belenaris asked.

Odif ignored him. Her position was defensive, should he decide to call in his men. "What can you tell me about where Eric might be?"

"What do you know?" Jeni asked in a cool tone.

"I know he was here right after he left the Jude. Zit told me he had gone with King Alderlan's caravan when they started home. The caravan was attacked about fifty miles this side of Spring Valley. There were few survivors--Tayan was badly hurt and Lucinthia was killed. I tried to get more details out of them, but no one would talk to me. At the time, I was more concerned with Tayan...he took Lucinthia's death very badly."

Jeni bit her lip. "And Eric?"

"Except for rumors, no one spoke of him. Based on what I learned of the attack, he should be dead, but he isn't."

"And how do you know that?" Belenaris asked caustically.

Odif studied his glaring face. She could not tell if someone was evil or not, since druids didn't readily define people as such. At the moment, she wished Amber or Frieda were here to tell her if it was safe to speak freely in front of him. The unnatural forces at work had to have many spies to deal such devastating blows. She could not trust he was not one of them.

"I know."

"So do I," Jeni said softly. "You know as much as I do. How can we find him?"

On her lap, Erica gave a kick and tried to get comfortable. Lazily, she grabbed Jeni's collar. Jeni looked down at her for a long moment, lost in thought.

Odif got up with a sigh. "I was hoping you would know more. Thanks for your time." She started to walk away and Jeni rose to grab her arm.

"Stop! You can't go yet--how will we find him?"

Odif looked into her stricken face. That was a good question, how was she going to find him? He was gone without a trace--even wizards needed somewhere to begin looking. "Have you tried a seer?"

Jeni despairingly shook her head. "A few. One told me he died, which I know isn't true. Others had, well, not very believable explanations."

"Do you have anything that belonged to him--clothes, weapons, anything?"

“Yes, let me put Erica down and I’ll show you.”

As Jeni left, Belenaris sauntered over to her. “You are very convincing. How much do you want?”

“What?”

Standing stiff-legged, he planted his hands on his hips. “Lady Jenesalinthia has lost her husband. She does not need any more false hope from the likes of you. It is bad enough she pines over a dead human; I will not have you using her misery for personal gain.”

She shifted her weight to her left as she turned her right side to him. “Any more from you and she’ll be grieving over a dead elf,” she warned him.

Wearing a look of disgust, he snorted, “Really?”

“Really.” Snapping her foot up, she kicked him under the chin hard enough to throw his head back and lift him off his feet. He landed flat on his back, out cold. She knelt down beside him and laid her hand on the unconscious elf’s forehead. He had cracked his skull hitting the floor and a couple teeth would ache, but he would live.

“Next time, I won’t be so gentle,” she told him then followed Jeni.

She came in as Jeni put Erica in her crib. The baby swung her arms and made grabbing motions at Odif.

“Naptime, sweetheart,” Jeni coaxed, but when she made her lie down, the child kicked and cried.

On the other side of the crib, Odif leaned on the railing. “Try singing to her, it might help.”

Shooting a glare at her, Jeni focused on Erica, rubbing her belly and cooing to her until she quieted down. It took a while, but eventually Erica’s eyes started drifting shut. Once she was sleeping, they crept out into Jeni’s sitting room.

One of the maids came in, looking worried. “Mrs. Redman, young Lord Tolham has had an accident in the study. I’m afraid he is unconscious.”

“That Belenaris guy?” Odif asked.

“His proper name is Lord Tolham,” Jeni explained.

“No accident--I knocked him out.”

Jeni gaped at her. “Why?”

Odif thought about explaining how pompous he had acted or how callous he was. Instead, she just shrugged. “He was being an ass.”

Jeni put a hand to her forehead as pain crossed her face. “You can’t just...knock someone out like that!”

“Yes, I can.”

“No!” Jeni said, flustered at her. “This is not the woods!”

Odif didn't have time for nonsense. If a man acted badly, he paid for it. "Are we going to find Eric or not?"

"Yes," Jeni sighed. To the maid, she said, "Please attend to Lord Tolham and give him my apologies when he wakes up."

"Yes, M'lady," the maid said with a bow and walked out.

Odif had a seat as Jeni went to get one of Eric's belongings. What she returned with was a battered chunk of metal. At first, Odif thought it was some kind of art--the thing was bent nearly in half, splotted with dark colors and had holes torn into it.

Jeni handed it to her. "This is one of the few things we found at the place where the caravan was attacked. It's the chest plate to the armor Eric was wearing."

Inspecting it, Odif saw the dark colors were bloodstains. She wasn't sure, but the thing looked like it had been beaten on by vlaks. "He lived through this?" she asked.

"I believe he lives. What about you?"

She didn't see how anyone, even Glier, could live through a thrashing like that. Vlaks didn't leave people alive once they attacked. "Our wizards had a vision. In that vision, they saw three hammers. I don't think they know what it means, but I do. I believe it means three people: myself, Tayan and Eric. The thing that lives on the plains can be destroyed only if all of us are there at the same time. Since he has to be there then he must be alive."

Jeni's voice sounded strained. "You came to make him go fight this thing?"

Odif looked up to see her gazing crossly at her. "Partly, yes. I also really want to meet him. By Tayan's description, as well as all the stories I've heard, he's a monster. I don't think that's the case, is it?"

Jeni's face softened. "No. Eric is a good, loving man. He did what he did because that is what he believed at the time." She looked at her hands as she rubbed her thumbs together. "At first, I really didn't believe the things he did. Later, I came to realize it was all true. It broke my heart to think he was like...that. But I also realized he was only doing what he thought was right. He was not evil, he was misguided." Waving a hand towards the room where Erica was sleeping, she added, "In there is a beautiful child. A child that deserves a good father, and he deserves her." Stopping to wipe a tear from her eye, she looked up at Odif. "We need him here. I need my husband back."

The way she spoke, Odif had no doubt Jeni loved him. "All right, but when I find him, I have to borrow him for a while."

"Is he really your father?"

Odif nodded. "And Tayan's."

Nodding to the twisted backplate, Jeni asked, "What are you going to do with that?"

Odif traced the ragged edge of a hole. "Real seers do not need hints, nor do they try to pump you for information to help make their vision. A real seer also has an aura about them. I'm going to take this to

every one I can find. Somewhere in this city, there has to be a true seer.”

“Let me come with you. I can show you the ones I’ve already visited and help weed out the ones we know are frauds.” Glancing at the door, she added, “And I can help keep you out of trouble.”

“Good luck with that part.” Odif smirked.

Chapter 10

Odif agreed to wait in Jeni’s rooms while the elven woman saw to Belenaris and calmed down the household. While she waited, she explored the apartment. Besides the plush sitting room with its overstuffed chairs and polished wooden table, there was a bedroom with a large canopy bed big enough for at least three people. A small desk with one chair nestled between two closets across from the bed, and a wide chest of drawers sat on either side of the room. Noting the bed table had a folded letter on it, she went over and unfolded it then sat down to read it. The script was crude, like a child had written it; a few words were lined out and re-written.

Dear Jeni,

I love you more than life. I ache for you every day. The scrolls you told me to study I do every day. I can read pretty good now. Every time I pick them up and look at them I can see you writing and rolling them up for me. The bag Arthur gave me is very useful. I keep everything in it under my armor. Sergeant Kelnac says we will be a few months getting to the border of Elrad. Tayan does not know I am here. We are in Old Castle right now. Not much has happened except for we pulled a woman from under her wagon that turned over and I ran off a few hoarcs. Sergeant Kelnac wanted to go back and tell everyone how good I did. I made him stay quiet. There was only eight hoarcs, and Tayan might find out I came with him. I want to tell Tayan how sorry I am about what I did to his mother. I know he hates me for it. I do not blame him for hating me. I only wish I can make it up to him. I have seen him a few times riding with the elves. He looks good on a horse leading the soldiers and I am very proud of him. We are going to stop again in a place called Spring Valley. I will send a letter from there. I will always be thinking of you.

Eric

Odif felt a lump rise in her throat. This was a letter from her father. She read it a second time, and a third. The man who wrote this was no monster; he was the loving man Jeni described. He was a man who had feelings, good and bad, just as any other. He was a man of nature.

The third time she read it, she focused on his mention of the bag. Tayan had the bag he was found in.

She remembered Entaurus had found what he thought were children's scrolls in it, scrolls that had the alphabet on them. She also remembered the painting they found. Tayan had told her who the people were--the baby in the painting was Jeni. Suddenly, she wanted to find Amber and root through the bag again. If Eric had it then maybe there was something in there that could help her find out what had happened to him.

"Do you always go through other people's things?"

The elf woman standing in the doorway had slightly darker blonde hair than Jeni and her eyes were a much lighter blue, but she had Jeni's facial structure. She stood with arms crossed over her chest and wore a dark green jacket over her lighter green frilled dress.

Odif blinked back the tears clouding her eyes. "You must be Saur...enthansia," she said, hoping she got the name right. Tayan had told her the name of the woman in the painting. "Jeni's mother, right?"

"Yes," she said crisply. "What is this I hear about you being Eric's daughter?"

Odif nodded and held the letter up. "I was hoping that this would tell me a little more. It has, but no clue as to where he has vanished to."

Saurenthansia gave an irritated sniff. "That belongs to Jeni. I am asking you to have some common decency. If you have any respect for Jeni or Eric then please put that back where you found it."

Odif folded the letter and placed it back on the table exactly as it had been. She was in no mood to be snapped at but decided to hold her temper. City people were trying, and she would have to deal with them.

Clasping her hands between her legs, she said in a calm voice, "I want you to understand something. I do not want to start trouble. I came to find my father, and I will do whatever it takes to find him. If that offends anyone then so be it. I do not have much time, so may the gods help whoever stands in my way."

"We have no intention of getting in your way. If you can find him then we will do everything we can to help." Saurenthansia walked over and sat on the bed beside her. "Jeni has been at wit's end searching for news of him. Lately, she's been taken with the idea she needs to go looking herself. The only reason she isn't running all over creation is Erica. We've sent word all the way from the Sylvanari to Newburg and we have heard nothing."

"That's pretty much what I've learned so far," Odif admitted. "But I have to find him."

Saurenthansia got up, motioning for her to follow. "You can call me Sally--or Sauri, as Mother does. Come meet the rest of my family; and if you would be kind enough, apologize to my sister for scaring her out of her wits."

Odif shrugged. "Sure, as soon as she apologizes to Art for her insult."

Sally stopped and looked at her. "What insult?"

Recalling the moment as well as she could, she quoted, "If your mother would have stuck to her own kind, you wouldn't have happened." Rising, she added, "I have learned to deal with remarks like that, and so has Tayan. Maybe Art should be spared such insults from his own family."

Sally's nose flared. "Come with me," she said, her voice sharp, and strode out.

The ring of chairs in the study was full. Jeni sat by an elderly elf woman. On her other side was a graying human man with broad shoulders and a leathery, aged face. Next to him was Art, who sat by a well-dressed, stiff-backed elven man; and across from Jeni was the elf woman who had run screaming from the courtyard.

On seeing them come in, Art jerked the aging human's sleeve. "Dad! Look, I told you, it's Odif!"

The stiff-backed elf shot to his feet, watching them approach with a critical eye. As Sally walked over to him, he said in a chilled tone, "My wife has been assaulted by this..." Pointing a finger at Odif, he spat, "...woman! I demand she be arrested!"

Sally moved around him and faced her sister, staring down hard at her. "Did you insult Arenthanas?"

Shalenthansia glanced at Art then Odif. "No," she said coolly.

"Liar," Odif growled.

The elf pointed his finger at her again. "You be quiet."

Odif let the chest plate fall to the floor. "Unless you don't want that finger anymore, stop pointing it at me."

Shalenthansia gave the man a frightened look. "Honey, please sit down, that witch shoots fire."

"Fire?" Odif asked malevolently, "Will fire get the truth out of you?"

"Odif, *no* !" Jeni and Sally chorused at the same time.

"Enough!" the older elf woman rasped, striking her cane on the floor. Glaring at Shalenthansia, she said, "Shanni, the truth!"

Her neck muscles seemed to be working hard as the woman forced herself to look up at Sally. "I am sorry if Arenthanas heard anything he thought was...demeaning."

"I heard it from the other side of the courtyard," Odif stated.

The old elf woman turned her stare to Odif. "Hush!" Returning her gaze to the seated woman, she took a couple of labored breaths and asked, "Shanni, do you owe Art an apology?"

Shanenthansia studied her lap for a moment. Swallowing, she said haltingly, "I never meant Arenthanas to hear it. If I hurt his feelings, or yours, Saurenthansia, I am sorry."

Sally nodded slightly. Looking at Art, she asked, "Do you forgive your aunt?"

Art forced a nod as he watched his lap. "Yes, Mom," he said dully.

"Then it's forgotten," she stated. She turned to Odif, flicking her eyes briefly at Shanenthansia.

Odif sighed. Unfortunately, that would be the best apology either of them would get. Stepping close

enough to see her face, she told Shanenthansia, "I am sorry for scaring you. I too, forgive you for what you said. I was just as hurt by it as Art was."

"Then it is settled," the old elf woman stated. Looking at Odif, she said, "I understand you are looking for Eric."

"Yes. Jeni is going to help me while I'm in the city." As Odif looked at the old woman, she noted that her face had become paler. She wasn't sure what, but there was something wrong with her.

Shanenthansia and her mate rose, neither looking pleased that Odif was planning to stay. The man bowed slightly to the old elf woman.

"We have other matters to attend to, with your permission, M'lady?"

The old elf woman nodded. As the pair left, Sally introduced her and the man next to Art. "Odif, this is my mother, Salinthia, and my husband, Arthur. I take it you've met our son, Art."

Odif noted the man's gray hair was lined with strands of dark, as if the color was trying to defy old age. He still bore a sturdy build and bright eyes. Envisioning him with a smooth face and dark hair, she imagined he had been quite handsome. "Hello, Arthur, Salinthia."

Clasping his hands under his chin, Arthur asked, "What makes you think you can find Eric when no one else can?"

Odif sat on the arm of a vacant chair and explained. "Jeni is going to help me find a seer. Once I know where he is, it should not be that hard to go get him."

"Odif can tell if a seer is real," Jeni added. "I can reschedule a few meetings to make time, and I'll visit the coach yards as we go through the city."

Salinthia reached over and laid a hand on her arm. "Jeni, I'm sure what Arthur is concerned about is your getting your hopes up again." She stopped to take a few breaths that started to become labored. "You must prepare yourself...in case you can never find him."

"We will find him," Odif assured her. As Salinthia paused in her fight for breath, Odif saw pain briefly cross her face. She assumed it was the aged elf's breathing muscles giving out with old age.

Arthur flailed an arm at her. "How can you be so sure? You find out he may be alive and come here, getting Jeni all excited. We've been looking for years, not days--"

"Dad, please..." Jeni winced.

He ignored her. "You don't see Jeni's disappointment when a lead turns cold or rumors are found to be just rumors." Leaning forward, he said, "I am tired of having Jeni's hopes smashed again and again. I want proof you can do what you say."

Looking at the family, she tried to put herself in their place. They were city people; and from what she had seen, they had no option but to trust others. Apparently, that trust had been misplaced. Only in cities did she find people who were skilled at just one thing. This family most likely would be hard-pressed to survive without the servants who saw to their daily needs. Jeni looked anxious, which was understandable. Odif had no idea what she was going to find--maybe it *was* best if she did this on her

own. Getting up, she scooped up the chest plate.

“I have to go. If I find anything, I’ll be back. Tayan is coming; I would appreciate it if you help him gather an army to help us. He’ll probably see your duke first then come here for support.” Stopping, she added, “One thing is terribly important. No matter what, Tayan has to go to the city in the middle of the plains. I don’t care if he has only himself and a bent stick to defend himself with, *hehas* to be there.” Her piece said, she started to leave.

Jeni shot to her feet, intercepting Odif, “I have to come with you! You could use my help, and I need yours.”

Odif frowned at the small woman. “Pushy, aren’t you?”

Staring up, she said, “You might be a great druid, but you know nothing about dealing with civilized people. If you go out there and bull your way around, no one will tell you anything. I’ll take you, and I’ll do the talking. We’ll both get more information that way.”

Her parents weren’t going to appreciate it, but Odif figured Jeni had a right to go. She only hoped the girl was strong enough in case they found bad news.

“All right, let’s go.” Glancing back to Sally and Arthur, Odif told them, “Don’t worry, I’ll watch out for her.”

Jeni called for a coach. When it came, Odif climbed aboard, noting the Redman name on it.

The city turned out to be a miserable place. Beyond the protective walls of the estate, the crowds were endless, as were the various stench of rotting garbage, horse manure and sewage. The people seemed oblivious to the reek as they went about their affairs. Odif’s nose started to run, and her eyes burned. The only winds were brief gusts that seemed to do nothing other than stir up more filth from ground level.

“How can you stand this stench?” she asked, swallowing a gag.

Beside her, Jeni wrinkled her nose. “It gets bad some days. I’ve learned to live with it. There are good things about being in the city.”

There had to be thousands on the streets. She noted a peddler with his wagon on a corner offering his wares--whole fish, a few fruits and bread loaves. How wonderful they must taste after being in this all day. Even the halshaken would not eat fish half a day dead, let alone one hanging in stinking heat.

“Like what?”

“We have plenty, there are always things to do, and we are well protected by the guardsmen.”

Two of the guardsmen she referred to were walking by. They eyed Odif and whispered to each other. She didn’t notice anything special about them; they were just men with armor and weapons. They weren’t even paying close attention to what was happening around them. She bet that a hoarc could take them both out fairly easily. As for the rest, the forest had plenty, too; and she was never at a loss for something to do. Jeni had to be making the best of her situation. She didn’t see how anyone could like this place.

Odif spent a grueling day searching for a legitimate seer. They found two Jeni hadn’t already eliminated. Although they lived what seemed like miles apart, both had the same signs proclaiming their

all-knowingness and had very similar dark and heavily curtained rooms in which the bandana-crowned women in voluminous dresses wanted hard coin before they could “summon their spirits.” It took Odif only a short time in their presence to realize the only thing they were all-knowing about was how to get people’s money.

After their visit to the second fortuneteller, Jeni suggested stopping for lunch. By what Odif had seen of the city so far, she was hesitant to eat anything. As it was, she had a queasy stomach from the unrelenting foul smells. She needed a break from the odors, someplace where real air could find its way into her lungs.

Remembering that Tolina was built on both sides of the Jude River, she asked, “Can we go down to the waterfront for some fresh air?” She desperately needed a drink to clear her throat out.

Jeni gave her a queer look. “Fresh air...at the waterfront?”

“Is that a bad idea?”

Jeni wrinkled her nose again. “If you don’t like this then you’ll vomit at how that smells.”

Odif felt faint. They had fouled the river, too? “You’re kidding.”

“No, the sewers drain into the river. The city walls are built high on both sides to help keep the smell out.”

“Dear Goddess,” Odif whispered, raising a wrist to her forehead. She remembered seeing the fish for sale. They ate fish from...

“Why aren’t you people dead?” she blurted out.

Jeni laughed. Quelling her mirth, she patted Odif on the arm. “I’ll take you somewhere clean and decent, okay?”

She could not imagine anyplace here that fit that description.

“We’re leaving the city?” she asked hopefully.

“No, silly!” Jeni giggled. “The Troll’s Lair has a rooftop restaurant. It’s not far from our house, and it has very good food.”

Rooftop--maybe it was high enough to catch a fresh breeze. She was beginning to feel as if she’d spent the day in Zodiac’s cesspool. “All right, but no fish.”

“No fish,” Jeni agreed.

The Troll’s Lair was a large, three-story inn. As they approached, Odif noted that this building was one of the tallest in the area. The upper floor had balconies and curtains, while the middle and lower floors had shuttered windows. The front door was set in with a canopy extending over the walkway to the street. Instead of a sign proclaiming its name it had three troll statues, one on each side of the doors and one on a platform above the canopy. The carvings were very good, but not too accurate, if one knew trolls. The shape of the furry bodies was right, as were the squarish heads with thick, wide ears; but never had she seen a troll stand perfectly upright, let alone cross its arms over its chest or appear so regal

in the face as these did.

Inside, they went up the wide, carpeted stairs past well-dressed people who looked at her with distaste. Most greeted Jeni with a pleasant “Good afternoon, Mrs. Redman” and tried to act as if she were alone. The only people to even look at Odif were a few young men who grinned and whispered to each other.

The rooftop smelled much cleaner, to Odif’s relief. They were shown to a small table near the waist-high wall that marked the edge. Someone finally spoke to Odif--the waiter asked her what she wanted. After hearing the options, she decided to let Jeni pick one of the many names for meat they had and a “fresh” fruit salad.

As they waited for their orders to come, Jeni asked cautiously, “Is your mother alive?”

Odif nodded. “She lives in the Jude. For the last few years, she’s been studying the wildlife there, including vlaks.”

Jeni’s eyes went wide. “She studies vlaks? How does she do that?”

The only thing she knew about vlaks were that they were big, bone-covered lizards that attacked anything that came close.

Odif grinned. “These vlaks are no longer controlled by wizardry. You see, a vlak in its natural state is a scavenger about the size of this table. They don’t bother anything bigger than themselves; and if confronted, they curl up into a ball and wait for the intruder to go away.” Tipping her head north, she said, “The vlaks left behind during the Great War are starting to revert back to their natural state. Each generation is a bit smaller than the last. When I visited Mother last year, they were used to her enough that we just walked into their nesting area. The closest we came to harm was when a mother vlak hissed at us to warn us away from her hatchlings. In another two or three generations, we think they will be back to normal.”

Jeni shook her head in wonder. “I’m surprised they didn’t kill you.” She took a sip of water and commented, “I thought druids killed monsters like vlaks and dragons.”

“We destroy unnatural creatures. Vlaks seem to be returning to normal over time. Dragons, monsters made from a winged lizard called a kila, will never return to normal. They’ve been deformed too badly to even breed.”

“So, a form of dragon exists in nature?”

Odif leaned on one elbow, tapping the table as she spoke. “Kila are nothing like dragons. They only grow as long as your foot, and they’re prey to many things, mainly eagles and falcons. Dragons were made to combat Alnargons. When the Alnargon population started to diminish, elf and human wizards started making their own dragons to fight with. As you can see, this has all but wiped out the kila. Only a few kila are left in their natural habitat, and we are guarding them closely.”

Jeni tried to keep from grinning at how upset she was being over what happened to a flying lizard. Like most people, she didn’t see how the loss of one creature could affect anything. There were so many different kinds of animals, what did one matter?

“Odif, have you ever thought that maybe it’s best the kila are almost gone? If what you’re saying is true then with no kila there will be no more dragons.”

“Do you have bats?” Odif asked crossly.

“Yes, too many. We’ve tried to get rid of them--they stink, and Art got sick from spending too much time up where they live under the roof.”

“And I’ve noticed there aren’t too many large birds around here, either.”

Jeni shook her head. “No, just seagulls here and there.”

Counting on her fingers to stress her point, Odif told her, “As well as large insects, kila eat bats--they are one of the few things that do. Fewer bats means the ones left are not so numerous that they stink up their lair. Birds of prey eat kila. The bats eat the insects, kila eat the bats, falcons eat the kila. That is the balance, one species checks another. Kila in your roof also warn you of strangers. They know what kinds of things regularly go near their lair and get upset, making a high-pitched sound, when they see something they aren’t familiar with.”

Sitting back, satisfied her point was made, she added, “You have no kila, so you have too many bats and not enough birds. Even in the city, if nature is out of balance, we suffer for it.”

Jeni gave an understanding nod, cringing inside at what Odif’s response might be if she asked why they needed more birds in the city. Changing the subject, she said, “After lunch, I have to stop a couple places before we look for another seer.”

Odif nodded slightly as she hooked an arm over the back of her chair. “These businesses you have, is one of them the Redman Coach Line?”

Odif’s pose wasn’t one a lady should take, but Jeni decided not to mention it. “Yes. We only own twenty coaches, but there are many more drivers who pay us to put the name on their own coaches. I keep visiting the depots to make sure the coachmen are keeping up the standards I’ve set.”

“Why would someone want to put your name on their coach?”

Jeni sighed. “At first, it was because of Eric’s reputation. When I opened our stone quarries, we had three wagons. One of our drivers was stopped by bandits; but when they found out it was Eric’s wagon they were going to rob, they backed off and let him pass. The driver bragged about it, and soon independent coach drivers came to me wanting to work for Eric so they, too, would not be bothered by bandits. I set up the arrangements, and soon every driver in the city was asking to join our company.” Picking up her glass to take another sip, she said, “I know that sooner or later the fear will fade, so I’ve concentrated on making Redman Coach Line stand for quality. We have regular routes, and every coach has to have a full roof and cushioned seats. I’ve set up the depots, and all the dispatchers work directly for me.”

Odif raised an eyebrow. “People are that afraid of my father?”

Jeni nodded. “Terrified. We don’t even need guards for the cross-country runs. Most of the bankers and nobles use our coaches on a regular basis; they know they will be safe.” Waving a hand at the headwaiter standing by the door, she added, “That’s why I can bring you here; the owner doesn’t dare say no.”

“It sounds like you’re living well off his reputation.”

Jeni's face went blank then turned dark. "What do you mean by that?"

Odif shrugged. "Just that if he wasn't so feared, you wouldn't be making so much money."

Jeni's face reddened. "I have *never* tried to--" Her voice was low but stern. "You want to know the truth? I wish he wasn't so feared! I wish the tales would not grow so cursedly tall!" She sucked in an angry breath, swelling her small frame. "Ever single copper the quarries and coaches bring in belongs to him! I am running *his* businesses. Don't you dare accuse me of taking advantage of Eric!"

Odif raised her hands in surrender. Jeni had taken her comment very personally. "I didn't mean to say you were."

"Excuse me...ladies?" the waiter asked meekly. He was eyeing Odif closely, noting not only her bosom but her well-muscled arms. As soon as she looked his way, he diverted his eyes to the table. "Your fruit salads are here."

Carefully, he put them down then retreated off to other tables.

Sensing wariness from him, Odif asked, "How long was he standing there?"

Jeni followed him with her eyes as he wound his way back to another table to pick up the used dishes. "I don't know for sure, but I bet there are going to be more rumors around town shortly."

Odif picked a grape from the mix of sliced fruit. It wasn't the freshest she had ever seen, but it was edible. She popped it into her mouth. "How many more professed seers are in this city?"

"Quite a few, though not one has turned out to be the real thing yet."

"Very few are. I've only met one. Tayan took me to this guy in Krundle who was a fortuneteller." A smirk crossed her face. "He told us we were very close, but combative towards each other. He said it was a bond that could not be broken. If we only knew..."

Quietly, Jeni asked, "Did you and Tayan...you know..."

"Have sex?" Odif asked. Jeni nodded slightly, looking to see if anyone else was listening. Leaning closer, Odif had a gleam in her eye.

"We sure did. Tayan is the best lover I've ever had." Picking pieces of fruit up, she started eating them one by one as she talked. "He is a hot, passionate man. He got me so excited I lost my voice--I mean, it was like we were animals! No words, just moaning, grunting, yelps and screams. Whenever we weren't fighting something, or each other, we were wrapped tight together trying our best to make a baby."

All Jeni could do was gape at her. This was her own brother she was talking about! Sisters weren't supposed to love their brothers, not like that. Blushing, Jeni put a hand up to hide her face from the table nearest them. "Do you have to be so graphic?"

"That's how it was." Pausing a second, she asked, "I think sex is great, don't you?"

Jeni gave a half-nod. Quietly, she said, "Yes, but we don't talk about things like that."

“Why not?” Right after she said it, she remembered her talk with Ali. “Oh, I understand. Discussing life’s functions is considered barbaric here.”

Jeni was frustrated with her. Odif didn’t seem to purposely make it sound like she was talking down to people. By the way she acted--suckling Erica, standing up for Art--and with her open way of speaking about anything, Jeni was starting to feel that she should have been doing these things all along. In short, Odif made her feel inadequate.

“You are free to do as you wish. You don’t have to worry about what people think or stay within what society determines acceptable.” Looking at her pleadingly, she said, “I wish I had the time to suckle my own baby. Many times, I wish I could just smack someone who desperately deserves it! I can’t do as I please; people depend on me to do certain things and act certain ways. Can you understand that?”

Clasping her hands together, Odif rested her chin on her knuckles. Regarding Jeni for a moment, she sighed. “Jeni, what is the most important thing in your life?”

“Erica,” she said without hesitation.

“As it should be.” Sliding her hands down to cross them in front of her, she said, “The most important person in my life is Tayan. I know it’s not right; but for over a year, I was really mad at Lucinthia for dying on him. I thought she was a snob, but Tayan thought the world of her. I would do anything for him, even die for him without thinking twice. Lucinthia did die for him--I guess that’s part of the reason I was mad at her.”

“You really love Tayan, don’t you?” Jeni asked softly.

“My point is,” Odif continued, “that no matter what, the most important thing in your life should be just that. Everything else is secondary. I love being a druid, I love my Goddess, I look upon the creatures of nature as my children; but if Tayan needs me, he comes first. If you know that suckling your own child is the right thing to do then don’t let anything stop you from doing it.”

Jeni tried to imagine going into a meeting nursing Erica and maintaining control. Even if no one said anything to her, she’d turn every shade of red. How did one talk business while having a baby at your breast?

“I meet with all kinds of people every day. I can’t take her into meetings or when I go on visits.”

Odif shrugged. “All I can tell you is goat’s milk is a poor substitute for yours. She will sleep better and be healthier if she has your milk.”

Again she felt criticized, like Odif was telling her she wasn’t doing enough for her child. Looking away, she saw the waiter coming with their lunch. At the moment, he looked like a troop of knights coming to rescue her. “Ahh, here come our steaks.”

After lunch, they went to the mid-city coach depot. She was hoping Odif would at least be glad the horses were well taken care of. Odif only shrugged and noted that a few of the harnesses were too loose, chafing the animals’ hides. Leaving Odif to the horses, she went inside to talk to the head dispatcher.

The rest of the day, they rode through the city, stopping at another “seer” and visiting the other two city depots. Besides there not being enough coaches to fill the demand for the Krundle route and a list of coaches to go for repairs at the wainwright’s, business was going well. She put in an order for five new

coaches along with the repair orders then tried one last time to find a seer in the northern part of the city.

Night was falling as their coach rolled up to the gates that marked home. By this time, Jeni was sure that every seer was a fake, and there was nothing she could ever do to gain Odif's approval. Coming home was not a relief, for they had no more than walked in the door when Penelopy, Erica's nanny, found her.

Penny's face was screwed up as she wrung her hands. "Mrs. Redman, I have tried to give Erica her bottle when she woke up, but she refuses to eat. I've tried sugar in it, warming it, everything! She drinks only a few swallows when she gets very hungry, but not enough to last. I am at wit's end as to what to do."

When Jeni quit nursing, she had gone through a week of hell getting Erica used to a bottle. Now, she was going to have to go through that all over again. She glared at Odif, wishing she had stayed in the damn woods.

"Perhaps you will stay and be her wet nurse?"

Calmly, Odif said, "I would love to, but I can't. Erica needs her mother."

After all day with this woman, Jeni snapped. "Are you sure I will be able to do it?" she yelled. "You really should stay in case I don't get that right either!" Stomping off a few steps, she turned and laid into her again. "I have no idea why what you think means anything to me, I really don't!" Tears welled up in her eyes. "I do the best I can, Mom and Dad help me; but most of it I do *by myself*!" Wrapping her arms around herself, she burst into tears.

Odif handed her staff and the bent armor to Penny and walked up to her. Enfolding Jeni in her arms, she gently said, "I know you do. From what I see, you do the work of three people, and do very well. You can't be but--what, fifty? A pretty young elf to have such a heavy load. If Eric could see you now I'm sure he'd be very proud of you."

The kind words threw her off-guard. They also swelled her anger. Jeni pulled back and raised a fist. Swinging it hesitantly back and forth a few times, she finally popped out one finger at her. "You...are impossible!" She wiped her face with the palms of her hands. It was easy to see why Tayan fought with her--she couldn't imagine anyone living near Odif and not want to dash her brains out from time to time.

"Some women in Capetown wear nursing bibs to conceal what they're doing." Odif offered. "They're loose, so you can slid Erica up and under comfortably."

"My milk has dried up."

"I can help you start producing again."

Jeni didn't know whether to laugh or start crying again. When Erica was first born she had delighted in nursing her. It had been her workload and pressure from her grandmother that had made her stop. Turning to Penny, she asked, "Would you find me a nursing bib?"

Penny nodded. "Yes, M'lady. Will you be needing these?" she asked, holding the staff and armor up.

Odif took her things back. Looking at Jeni, she nodded to the stairs. "Shall we go feed your daughter?"

The tone she used wasn't a demand, but close enough that Jeni felt like she was trying to order her.

Rubbing her tongue over the inside of her teeth in irritation, Jeni waved for her to follow. As she started up the stairs, she was sure Odif had put on all that muscle to keep people from beating the crap out of her.

Chapter 11

Jeni started to get used to her visitor over the following days, not that Odif made things easy. Most of their time was spent searching the city for a seer as Jeni tended her business. The only difference now was that Erica and Penny came along for the ride. The nursing bib worked well; she fed Erica as they traveled, all the while Odif snorted and complained about the city's stench. After a full day of running around the city doing business and finding more false seers, they would return home. Salinthia kept quiet about Jeni's nursing but insisted Odif join them for dinner and not eat in the garden by herself.

Jeni wasn't the only one having difficulties with Odif. The third day of her visit, Arthur and Sally got a shock when Art came walking through the main hall buck-naked. Upon their demanding what he was doing, he simply stated Odif had told him it was too hot to wear clothes. United in parental anger, they found Odif sitting on the edge of the fountain without a stitch of clothing on, soaking her feet in the water. Saurenthansia tersely explained to her that she could not walk around naked. Arthur tried to maintain his anger and keep his eyes on her face, both of which seemed difficult to do.

As for Odif, she quickly found she hated the city--and wasn't too fond of the people, either. She surrendered her normal habits and sat at a formal dinner table and even promised to keep herself covered at all times. She could not, however, bathe in the small rooms with tubs of stagnant water. Waiting until the rest of the family was asleep, she went out to the fountain and bathed properly. A couple male servants were very eager to bring her towels, and nearly all of them came by to wish her a good night.

Ali visited her twice, asking questions she should have already had the answers to by her age. Odif noted that as she explained life's facts to Ali, the girl became more at ease with herself. She no longer refused to name parts of her own body, and her manner was more self-assured. The girl was still afraid to let anyone know about their talks; and given the environment she lived in, Odif had to agree.

After the fourth day of what was becoming a routine, Odif went into one of the backyards covered in smooth, trimmed grass to do exercises. Clean sweat from exertion was the only way she found to get the smell of the streets off her. To her surprise, Sally was there, wearing only shorts and a bandeau of cloth around her chest, doing her own exercises. She was working up a sweat, practicing blocks and kicks. The elf woman moved with grace and a fair amount of speed.

"May I join you?" Odif asked, propping her staff against a low wall.

Sally straightened up, shaking her arms loose. "Yes, please do. It's been quite some time since I've had a partner." Raising a cautionary hand, she said, "Light contact only--I'm not as good as I used to be."

"City living?" Odif grinned.

“Arthur used to practice with me, but he’s not up to it anymore.” She sighed.

Bringing her arms over her head, Odif began stretching out the stiffness from sitting in the coach most of the day.

“He looks like he’s slowing down. That’s one thing I have yet to figure out.”

Bending down, she locked her knees and laid her hands on the ground in front of her. Then when she felt her legs and back free up, she grabbed her ankles and brought her face down to her shins. Staying like that for a moment, she rose back up and bent slowly backwards until she had her hands on the ground behind her.

“Arthur is human,” Sally explained, “and he’s sixty years old. He’s been aging very quickly these past few years.”

Straightening up, Odif bent to one side then the other. “That’s what I can’t figure out. I’ve studied elves and humans closely. Despite minor differences, elves live most of their potential life cycle, and humans do not. There is no reason why Arthur should not live to be at least one hundred-fifty if not two hundred years.”

Sally shook her head. “I have never met any human even close to a hundred years old.”

Sitting down, Odif brought her legs out to the sides in a full split. “You met my dad; he has to be close to two hundred, if not older.”

“He’s different.”

Odif wasn’t sure what she meant by that. “In any case, there are human villages north of the Great Lake where hundred-year-old humans are common. Why they live so long, and others don’t, is one of the mysteries I’ve been working on.”

Planting her hands in front of her, she lifted herself up and leaned forward as she straightened her legs behind her. Tilting even farther to maintain balance, she shoved herself up with her arms and flipped back to land on her feet. “I have found that in some the aging can be reversed to a point. Take me, for instance. I put myself through the ritual every ten years or so.”

Sally cocked an eyebrow. “How old are you?”

Odif looked human. If she were to guess Odif’s age, even with elven blood in her, she couldn’t be more than forty.

Odif shrugged sheepishly. “I’m not exactly sure--right around Arthur’s age.” Picking at her lip with a finger, she mused, “Let’s see--I was eighteen when I first met Tayan, and he turned seventy-five that year...” Pausing, she gave a grunt. “I’ve never kept track of what year it is very well.”

“This year is 3367.”

Odif snapped her fingers. “Yes! Tayan gave me a thirtieth birthday party a couple years before the Great War started.”

“That would put you at sixty-one.” Sally told her. For a sixty-year-old human, Odif looked incredibly

good. "How much elf do you have in you?"

"Not much, I don't think. My grandfather was short and thin, I know he was part elf. We really don't pay much attention to those things." Odif bounced lightly on her toes then settled into a defensive stance. "One-fall skirmishes?"

Sally nodded, setting her own defense. "Any time you're ready."

Odif had planned on testing her with a few feints to let Sally learn a bit of what she was in for. It only took a few seconds for her to realize the elf woman knew what she was doing. She caught two slaps in the side and nearly got her feet swept from under her. Sally got the upper hand from the start and pressed her hard with lightning-fast hands and feet. Odif had to use all her speed and skill to block the attempts. Finding an opening to counter wasn't easy--the few times Sally did leave openings, she jumped back quickly then came in again. Every counterattack Odif tried was either blocked or ducked.

In what looked like a frantic dance, Odif and Sally panted, faces set in concentration as each tried to land a blow. After what seemed forever, Sally extended too far when she thrust with a punch. Odif quickly grabbed her hand and sent her own open palm into Sally's ribs. Sally twisted with grunt, bringing her leg up for balance. Odif's hand brushed her side on its way past. Seeing Sally on one foot, Odif snapped hers out to topple her. A split second before Odif's foot contacted, Sally jumped just high enough to avoid the blow then spun low, using Odif's grip on her hand for extra leverage. Odif knew what was happening too late. She had just let go when her other foot was kicked from under her. She landed flat on her back with *anoof*.

Breathing heavily, Sally bent over, hands on her knees as she looked down at Odif. "Thanks for taking it easy with me," she said and extended her hand.

Odif took it. Getting up, she gave Sally an appreciative nod. "You are very good. I think I've been spending too much time teaching slow, muscle-bound men." She grinned.

Seeing Odif regain her stance, Sally lifted a hand. "A moment please, let me catch my breath. I haven't had a workout like that in a while."

"Me, either. Maybe I should visit from time to time...after I've gone through a renewal ritual."

Giving a light laugh, Sally told her, "You're giving me a tough enough time now." Straightening up, she shook her arms and legs out and took a few deep breaths. Settling into her stance, she motioned Odif closer. "I'm ready."

This time Odif didn't feint. She attacked Sally vigorously, using every ounce of speed she could muster. As before, Sally ducked and blocked expertly; but now she was more on the receiving end. Slowly, Odif backed her towards the house as both furiously sought a decent opening in the other's defense. This time, Sally spotted Odif's side wide open and snapped a foot up to tag her just under her shoulder. Odif twisted and slapped her hand into the foot then shot her arm straight up. Seriously off-balance, Sally attempted to flip backwards and recover. By the time she had committed to the maneuver and was dropping back to the ground, Odif was waiting. She had squatted and already sent a leg sweep to where Sally was going to land. There was nothing Sally could do--the instant her feet touched the ground Odif knocked them out from under her. Sally went down hard on her side.

Odif knelt by her, laying a hand on her shoulder. "You all right?"

Sally gave a grunt of “Fine” as she gasped for breath.

A male voice called out, “What’s going on out here?”

They had moved into view of the backyard terrace. Odif looked up to see Arthur by the railing, hands on his hips. Beside him, Jeni was holding Erica. “Just practice,” she explained.

“You were fighting,” Art yelled from farther to the right.

Sally struggled up with Odif’s help. “No, dear, we were just practicing.” Raising her arms, she said, “See, I’m not hurt, and neither is Odif.”

Art didn’t seem to believe them. “Wow, wait till I tell the guys at school my mom was fighting Odif the Druid!”

Sally put a hand to her head. If stories like that started to spread she’d never hear the end of it. “Art! We were not fighting. You’ve seen me exercise before, right?” She waited until he nodded then added, “Odif is exercising with me. We were not trying to hurt each other.”

“Sally, Salinthia’s having one of her bad spells, you better come up,” Arthur told her firmly.

Casting a worried look at Odif, she said, “I have to go.”

Odif didn’t know what a “spell” was, but it didn’t sound good. “I’ll come with you.”

Salinthia was in her bed. The first thing Odif noticed was that she was very pale and her lips were bluish. As she came closer, she noted Salinthia’s hands, which were over her chest. Her fingernails were turning blue. Her mouth was open as she tried weakly to take gasping breaths. Sally went to her side with Arthur. Odif slipped in and touched her hands--they were ice-cold. The woman was suffocating to death.

Touching Sally on the shoulder, she said, “Breathe for her.”

“What do you mean? Breathe into her mouth?”

Odif nodded. “Hold her nose shut and blow a normal breath into her. Keep doing it until her lips get some color into them.”

Sally bent to do as Odif told her. Salinthia turned her head away, shaking it weakly. Sally hesitated, not sure if she should continue.

“Do it, she doesn’t have much time.” Odif warned.

Bracing herself, Sally grabbed her mother’s nose and held her head still then put their mouths together and blew. Salinthia’s chest rose up and her hands fluttered. As the breath escaped, she cried out in a moan. Sally kept going, blowing in then letting the air come back out. Salinthia’s moans of pain became louder after a few breaths. As some strength returned, she lifted an arm to stop Sally.

“Enough,” she rasped weakly. She was breathing on her own, but her chest only made slight motions. She was taking in just enough air to stay alive. Looking like she was forcing herself, she sucked close to what was a normal breath and whispered, “Sauri, don’t do that again.”

“Mom, you were dying.”

Salinthia looked up at her through worn-out eyes. “Sauri, dear, it is...” She stopped to force down another breath. “...very painful, and I’m tired of the pain.”

Taking her hand, Sally squeezed it in hers. “You can’t give up. We need you.”

Salinthia looked for Jeni. Seeing her, she said, “Jeni, dear, take Art out, please.”

As Jeni led her brother out, Odif concentrated on Salinthia’s body where the breathing muscles divided the chest and stomach. Her diaphragm was shriveled and weak. In a large area the size of an open palm there were only strings of tissue that had long ago lost any function. “You must be in agony every time you draw a breath.”

Salinthia nodded to her. “You...tell...your father...I forgive him.”

“My father did this to you?” Even as she asked it, she noted a thick line of scar tissue that cut through the middle of the old elf’s breathing nerves. From the shape, she had been stabbed deep, directly under her sternum.

“Yes. You tell--” Her words were cut off by a gasping fit. Odif cringed as she felt the remaining torn muscles quiver as they tried to obey and bring in air. Sally bent to try to breathe for her again but flinched back as Salinthia half sat up then fell back down.

Odif was accustomed to death; she had seen it many times. Death was part of nature. When it happened to her friends she mourned their loss but accepted that it had to be. She didn’t accept the suffering this woman was going through. Planting her hands at the top of Salinthia’s belly she felt for her nerves and breathing muscles at the same time. Deadening the nerves was easy; the hard part was using her energy to make Salinthia’s body respond and breathe.

It was working. Salinthia’s face relaxed as she sighed in relief. She tried talking and only made sucking sounds as Odif drew air into her.

Odif met her eyes. “Listen closely. I’ve taken the pain, but also control of your breath. Speaking will be hard, so just blink. One time if you want me to try to heal you, two to let you go. If I lift my left hand, you will stop breathing. It will not hurt, but you will pass out and die...”

“Dear Odin,*no* !” Sally cried with horror in her eyes.

Odif glanced at her. “It’s her choice. From what I see, living is agony for her. I might be able to help her, or I can let her go if she wishes. I cannot let her suffer like this.”

“What right do you have to decide her fate?” Arthur asked harshly.

Odif explained as well as she could. “She was stabbed a long time ago. The pain from that wound is still with her, every time she takes a breath. Maybe you can ignore suffering, but I can’t.”

Sally looked at her mother sadly. “After all this time?”

Salinthia nodded. Looking at Odif, she motioned to her mouth.

“Speak only when you breathe out,” Odif told her. She worked Salinthia’s muscles to take in as deep breaths as possible.

Salinthia raised her hands to clasp Sally and Arthur’s. “I am weak...Odif may be able...to help, if she...cannot then...you must let...me go.”

Arthur dropped his head, giving a slight nod. Sally covered her mouth, tears welling in her eyes.

Reaching up to pat her daughter’s cheek, she said, “My dear Sauri...it is only...right this way.”

Sally bent down and drew her into a hug. “I love you, Mom.”

Odif appreciated their situation but continuing to make Salinthia breathe was taking its toll on her. Every second they hugged she was using valuable strength. “I can’t keep this up very long,” she reminded them.

Arthur took Sally by her shoulders and gently pulled her up. “Honey, let her do what she has to.”

He got her clear of the bed and held her tight. Sally’s arms went around him as she cried softly. He turned his attention to Odif and gave her a nod.

“When I work on your nerves, you will feel pain--there is nothing I can do about that,” she told Salinthia.

Salinthia slid a hand down to cover hers. Timing an exhale, she said, “Promise no pain...in the end...one way or the other.”

“I promise,” she mouthed then went to work.

The nerves were the problem. Fresh cuts had raw ends--the tissue was parted but easy to put back together. Salinthia’s nerves had been severed a long time ago. The ends were shriveled and pulled away from each other with thick scar tissue capping them. Not that the muscles were much better, but muscle was easier to regrow. Once nerves were destroyed it was tough bringing them back.

She began by starting on the inactive nerves attached to the muscles. Growing the tiny strings, she made them curve around the mass of scarring. It took a while to get the nerves where she wanted them. It became difficult--she was having trouble keeping up the breathing as she used more energy to grow nerves.

“Sally, breathe for her,” she said as she shifted her hands. Salinthia twitched as she started growing the main branch of nerves to meet the endings. With Sally keeping the elderly woman alive, Odif concentrated on bringing the ends to less than a hair’s-width distance. This was the part that was going to hurt.

“Brace yourself,” she said then peeled back the scar caps from the tender nerve tissue.

Salinthia’s eyes flew wide open. She gripped the sheets with her fists, arms tensed. Her exhales came out as screams. Odif tried to ignore the sound and brought the nerves together then sealed them in place. Staying focused, she noted enough nerves were now whole. Muscles that had lain dormant tried to move. The remains of the weak ones still working, flexed and spasmed as Salinthia now cried out on her own.

“You can stop,” Odif told Sally. Her energy was all but drained. All she could do with the thin membrane of muscle was to make sure it didn’t tear. The parts that were shriveled beyond hope she

solidified into scar-like tendons. Forming them into a net, she connected them to the ones still working. That done, she paused to rest. Sally watched her intently, waiting for the news. "I'm almost done. The pain should start to lessen, although she will be sore for a while."

"Thank you," Sally whispered.

Odif gave her a brief smile then began concentrating again. She grew the surviving muscles strong enough so they would not tear under the pressure of taking normal breaths. Searching Salinthia's abdomen, she saw the damage done to the rest of her body was just as bad. Organs needed air as well as blood and nourishment. The effect of insufficient air for so long had weakened her insides. Sensing every organ separately, she found that they were smaller and lacked efficiency. Despite their deterioration, however, not one had been strangled so badly it had stopped functioning.

Satisfied she had done all she could do, Odif sat up. "You'll be weak for a while yet. I would suggest staying in bed a day or two, even though you might feel better."

Salinthia smiled broadly. "I feel like jumping up!" Taking a deep breath, she blew it back out and did give a giggle. "It's been a long time since I was able to do that. I feel...tight, but no pain, none!"

Greatly relieved that her mother wasn't going to die, Sally hugged her tightly. She then turned to Odif and crushed her in her arms. "If there is anything we can do in return, let us know."

Odif considered that for a moment. "Best two out of three?" she teased.

"It's almost dinner time," Arthur pointed out.

Odif could see in his eyes he wasn't fond of the idea of her exercising with Sally. It was like he was afraid she might really hurt her. There was something else in his eyes she couldn't quite place, but it looked like sadness.

Sally got up, casting him a smile. "Arthur's right, let's go get cleaned up for dinner. We'll practice again tomorrow."

Odif put up with a stagnant bath in the tub beside Sally's. Sally seemed radiant now, like in that old painting Tayan had in that bag. She thought about mentioning it as Sally happily complained about aches and pains she would feel in the morning then decided to wait. Tayan and Amber were coming; they could show it to her.

Thinking about that got her thinking about Eric. Cupping her hand, she pushed some water up her arm and watched it run back down. "Sally, does Tayan know our father's alive?"

Sally's face dimmed a bit. She nodded. "Eric tried to keep it from him, who he was. There was a victory celebration, where Jeni was betrothed to him. Everything went well until Art blurted it out in front of everyone." She blew out a tired breath. "It was quite a scene. Tayan didn't take the news well. He stopped short of attacking Eric then left with Lucinthia. Almost every important person in the city was there. Eric felt terrible about it."

"I can imagine." She knew Tayan well enough to know he hadn't taken it well, especially with a large room full of people listening. "The bag Tayan has--Dad must have put him in it to keep him alive. That's why he hates the sight of it."

“I would say so, but no one knows what happened out there--or at least no one is willing to say.” Sally told her. “When we found out they had been attacked, Jeni knew she was pregnant but wanted to go look for him anyway. It was tough convincing her he would turn up. As time has gone on, it has become harder and harder to keep her at home.”

“Who retrieved that armor plate Jeni has?”

“A knight named Sir Parson. He’s one of the few alive that knows where Eric was last seen.”

One of the maids poked her head in. “Mrs. Cooper, dinner is ready.”

“Thank you, Nance.” Getting up, she got a towel and another for Odif. Giving her a half-smile, she said, “I don’t know if you coming here is a blessing or a curse. Jeni has been doing well, all things considered; but there’s been talk of giving her a consort. Young Lord Belenaris Tolham is spending a lot of time with her. I know he has an eye on her businesses, though he claims to be only concerned with her.”

“Young Lord Belenaris will get his ass whipped if half of what I have heard of Dad is true,” Odif told her. “And if Dad’s not available, I’ll gladly take his place.”

Sally suppressed a chuckle. Raising an eyebrow, she said, “Why do you think he hasn’t been hanging onto Jeni these past few days? He’s been nursing his pride after you belted him.” More seriously, she added, “He’s known for taking advantage of situations, and he plays our customs and laws like a harp. He can be dangerous.”

Odif said matter-of-factly, “Not as much as I can be.”

Studying her for a moment, Sally gave a slight shake of her head. “You are your father’s daughter.”

Odif smiled. “Thank you.”

At the dinner table, Salinthia was more animated than she had been in a century. The color was back in her cheeks; and even though she was still weak, she was merry and took pains to keep Odif involved in their conversations. Odif told her about the forest; and soon she was having an interesting debate on city living versus living in the wild, as all creatures were meant to do. Salinthia got Odif to concede that cities were founded on the principle of safety-in-numbers and therefore were a natural habitat for people. In turn, Odif got her to accept that mother’s milk was the best thing for babies, even working mothers who lived in the city.

The discussion slowly turned to religion. From the grimace on Odif’s face as Salinthia asked if she believed in Odin’s word, it was clear she did not.

Odif smirked as she asked, “Do you believe the world was created in a week?”

Looking at Odif sternly, Salinthia nodded. “That is what our bible tells us. You do not believe in Odin, or Leighna?”

“I know they exist.” Odif stated. “Odin and Leighna stand for all that is good. There is more than just good in the world, though. Lucifer the devil also exists as the ultimate evil. One checks the other. It is the Goddess of Nature that holds the balance.”

“What of the beginning of time?” Sally asked. “Surely you know that the years are counted from when

Odin first crafted us in his own image.”

Odif waved her fork in Sally’s direction. “The marking of years is as we, as a civilization, know it. The world is very old, much more than a few thousand years. We may never know how old it truly is.”

Salinthia gave her an irritated huff. “Then what was here before time began? There are no records, no writings that speak of any time earlier than three thousand years ago when Odin first laid down the holy laws.”

“Grandmother is right,” Jeni added. “How can you explain the creation of everything, even your plants and animals, as anything less than a divine act?”

Odif shook her head. “If there was a divine act, it was long before we were here.”

Arthur grunted. “I’d like to hear this!”

“Yes, please explain,” Sally said with an amused grin.

Folding her arms in front of her, Odif looked at Salinthia, who also gave a slight nod. Leaning forward enough to rest her bosom on her arms, Odif said, “All right. First of all, there was no ‘beginning of time,’ as you put it. Our world goes through cycles. The one we live in started roughly four thousand years ago. Before us, there was another civilization here. Our stone readers tell us that they were very advanced and covered the whole world. Before them was another--we do not yet know how far back variations of the human species goes. We do know our ancestors go back at least forty thousand years.”

Jeni let out a squeak of disbelief. “How can that be?”

“Yes, I am eager to hear this, also.” Salinthia grinned.

“You know the desert on the other side of the Elradian Mountains?” Odif asked. Without waiting for anyone to reply, she continued, “There are ruins out there of things we cannot comprehend. Buildings made of steel, others made of what appears to have been massive carved stones. Devices that seem to serve no function yet were common in every dwelling. Books and parchments made of material we have no idea what to call, strange stuff that is as flexible as cloth yet clear as glass. All these things were made by someone, very long ago. By what our stone readers have found, we think the ancient humans knew how to build flying machines.”

Salinthia’s eyes widened. “Surely you do not believe these things.”

“I have seen them,” Odif told her. “When I was given my test, I was sent to the desert for one moon to survive on my own. To help deal with the boredom I visited one of the dig sites of the stone readers. There, I saw for myself some of the relics. I made my day den under the tail of what I can only describe as a huge metal bird. It was not built as a normal bird--the surviving wing and tail were fixed in place--but from a distance you can tell what it was.”

“What’s a day den?” Art asked, eager to get his question in.

“In the desert you have to find shelter in the day because the heat of the sun can kill,” she explained.

“Wow,” Art breathed.

“What did you do for water?” Jeni asked.

“Insects and plants store their moisture. When I ate, I got my water as well.”

Jeni’s face screwed up. “You ate bugs?”

“Are they as crunchy as they look?” Art asked.

Glancing down at her plate, Sally cleared her throat. “Perhaps we should talk about that after dinner.”

“We do seem to be drifting,” Salinthia noted. “Now, what of this notion about balance. Are you saying we should not strive to be good people?”

Odif shrugged. “Some people choose to be good, others to be bad. Whichever you decide to be, both are inside you. Anger is bad, yet who can live their lives and not be angry from time to time?” Raising one finger to stress her point, she said, “That is what makes us whole. Opposites weigh against each other, but each side must be present. Anger and joy, sadness and happiness, love and hate, we feel all these things at one time or another, yet not one should rule your life. That is part of the balance.”

“But you do admit we should try to be good to each other,” Sally prodded.

“Of course.”

“As well as help each other.”

Odif tipped her head slightly. “Those we care about, as well as our own clans, yes.”

“Why shouldn’t we be good to everyone?” Salinthia asked.

Odif sighed. “Sometimes you just can’t be.”

The only one not getting heavily involved was Arthur. He was pleasant but stayed more into his own thoughts. Beside him, Sally did her best to keep him active in the conversation. Odif sensed there was something he wanted but was holding back.

Their discussions went on after the plates were empty, and the servants were taking away the dishes. Sally and Arthur drifted off by themselves as Odif and Jeni helped Salinthia to the unused harpsicord she insisted on trying to play. Not having played for a long time, she mis-struck the notes as Jeni, Art and Odif tried to sing in halting words that ended up as laughter. From Jeni’s lap, Erica waved her arms, giving supporting “goo-gas” and giggles.

About the time Erica grew cranky, Salinthia became too tired to play. Jeni bade them goodnight, and Odif walked Salinthia to her room with Art, who opened doors for them on the way.

Odif then went to the fountain and washed her clothes, as well as giving herself a good rinsing off. Her wet clothes she laid over low-hanging branches of the ash then snuggled into the bed she had hollowed out of the hedge bushes.

As she lay curled up, she sensed someone coming near. At first she paid no attention--servants came and went at all hours, and the butler and the gardener always seemed to come by to wish her goodnight. As she listened, though, she noted the steps were slow, as if whoever it was searched for something. She

reared up to see whom it was.

Arthur scanned the darkness as he walked carefully along the path. He knew Odif came out here, but it seemed she could vanish when she chose to. Glancing up at the house, he noted the bedroom was dark--Sally was still sleeping. He wasn't even sure he should be out here. What if what he thought he had heard wasn't right? What if Odif wouldn't listen to him? What if Sally caught him out here and started to think the worst?

He stopped a few yards from the ash tree. A pair of odd shapes hung from the limbs. In the dark, all he could make out were shadows, but they looked like clothes. It figured--Odif would be naked. She had no modesty and, seemingly, few morals. He decided he shouldn't be out here. He turned to go back inside, giving a quick scan around the base of the tree to see if he could make out her shape lying on the ground.

"Can I help you?"

Odif spoke just as he turned to find her standing behind him. With a startled yelp, he took a step back and tripped, falling on his behind. Years ago, such a fall was nothing. Tonight, he swore he'd broken his tailbone. He winced; his heart was racing, which was sending spears of pain through his chest. He took a few breaths to calm himself and let the aching recede.

"You scared the shit out of me!" he gasped.

"Sorry," she replied calmly. Squatting in front of him, she asked, "Are you hurt?"

In the moonlight, her outline was clear, as was the rise of her breasts and her thighs where light seemed to concentrate. Her hair looked different, as if it were a silver-coated hood that kept the features of her face in deep shadow. Her nudity somehow looked right, as if she belonged here surrounded by wild things. He knew she was human; but as he gazed at her, he was also sure she had to be a completely different species. He felt like he was intruding in her world.

Swallowing he said, "I...ahhh...I was just taking a walk."

"You want something," she stated. Resting her arms on her knees, she asked, "What is it?"

Her words surprised him. "Can you read minds?" he asked, hoping the answer was no.

The way she leaned towards him, the moonlight now cast a glow on the orb of one breast and her V-shaped torso. He had never thought that a slim, well-muscled woman could look so...desirable. He forced himself to look at the shadow where her face was and try to make out details.

Drawing a hand through her hair, she hooked it behind her ear, bringing out the shape of her face. "I sensed you have a question. Don't be afraid to ask, whatever it is. I'll answer if I can."

It was now or never, he knew that much. Drawing up his courage, he trusted she would not tell anyone about this, whether or not she could help him. "This is a tough one. I'm not used to asking favors."

"I'm listening."

"I really feel stupid." He grinned.

"I'll tell no one."

"Right." He nodded. Pulling himself into a sitting position, he forced it out. "First off, I want you to know I really love Sally. That's why I came out here, for her. I know I don't have many years left; but the ones I do, I want to make her happy." He stopped to see if she was going to comment, but she just sat on her haunches, listening. "Lately...I don't know if it's my heart or just age catching up with me, but I...ummm, can't seem to..." He was beginning to feel foolish telling troubles like this to a strange woman.

"You can't make love to her."

"I try," he said quickly. "And I really want to. Sally says she understands, but I know she's disappointed." Seeing her shift to put a hand to her mouth, he asked, "You aren't going to laugh, are you?"

She shook her head. "No, I'd never do that." Gazing at him for a moment, she said, "There is one way I can help you. It's called the ritual of renewal. It's safe--I go through it myself every so often. What it does is use shared energy to renew your strength and vitality. You won't grow younger, as such, but your body will be returned to a more youthful state."

"I'll look younger than I am?"

"You won't look much different. Your hair might start to become dark again, wrinkles will fade, and strength you've lost will be returned. That last part is what you seek, yes?"

"Yes." It certainly sounded to him like she was talking about making him younger. "What's the catch? Will I shrivel up and die in a few years?"

Odif laughed, a cute laugh that shook her frame. "No. In fact, you will probably live longer. Do you have a private place here? One where we won't be disturbed by anything for a few hours?"

The only place he knew of like that was the mineral water grotto. Pointing to the corner of the garden by the wall, he said, "The small building there has steps that lead to a small natural cavern."

"Perfect." Getting up, she offered him a hand.

He took it and groaned his way to his feet. They went to the building and started inside. It was black as pitch.

"Careful, the steps are steep. I should go get a light."

She clasped his hand. "Just stay with me.*Flammar!*"

A torch burst into fire, casting the room in an orange glow. He looked to see it wasn't a torch, but her open palm she held up. The fire was burning in her hand. He looked closer and saw the flame was being fed by nothing. Her skin was untouched despite the heat of the flame.

"Now, that's magic," he told her.

Her face was clearly visible now as she turned to give him a scowl. "I hate that term. Magic is what

wizards call it when they force the elements of nature and have no idea what they are doing. They only know words and symbols; they are clueless why the fire burns or why lightning obeys them.”

“Sorry,” he said automatically.

He led the way with Odif to one side and just behind him. To keep from being tempted to glance back and watch her walk, he concentrated on the stairs in front of him. They were most of the way down when he had to ask, “When you healed Salinthia, it wasn’t like when a priest lays his hands on someone.”

“I do not ‘lay hands’ and pray to my Goddess that it works,” she stated. “What I did was to look into her body, see what was wrong then do my best to fix it. We use power with knowledge. Unlike others, when a druid uses the power our Goddess grants we do not rely on anything but our own skills.”

“So, you’re not going to have me lie naked and dance around me chanting,” he grinned.

“Hardly.” she snorted. He looked back to see she had a crooked grin on her face.

He got to the last step and stood in a carved-out room that held benches and hooks for clothing. “The water chamber is in there,” he said, pointing to the open arch. “This room was made so you don’t get your clothes wet.”

“Good, take your clothes off then follow me.”

He laughed. “OK, so you can dance around me?”

Odif looked at him seriously. “No, so I can concentrate on you. I can’t do this with you wearing that...stuff.” She brought her hand up to light one of the torches then stepped through the arch.

He did as she asked, acutely aware he was down here alone and naked with another woman. Despite his intentions, he was sure Sally would be real upset if she ever found out.

“This better be worth it,” he breathed.

Odif had lit two other torches in the water chamber before extinguishing her palm flame. The amber light reflected off the wavelets, making sparkles on the worn rock overhead. He tried not to watch her as she had him lie down on a flat outcrop close to the water’s edge. In the soft glow of the torchlight, she looked like a goddess herself. As he lay down, she straddled him and looked him in the eye.

“Listen carefully. This is a druidic ritual. You might not feel comfortable, but you must react naturally. I am going to start at your head and slowly work my way down. Once I have covered your body, you will feel different. When I am done, you must do the same to me, concentrate on every part of me from my head to my toes. No lingering too long, and no skipping.”

Dear Odin, what had he gotten himself into?

“Skip nothing?” he asked, glancing down her body.

“Nothing. I’ll begin now; you must relax.”

His heart was thumping, but he wasn’t sure if it was fear or not. “I can’t.”

Placing both her hands gently on his head, she asked, "You are doing this for Sally, so you can make her happy, right?" He got out a nod, so she added, "Then relax, and trust me."

He thought there was no way he could relax with her on top of him. As she started to move her hands from the top of his head to the sides, he found that by just letting it happen, he was relaxing. He closed his eyes as she passed her hands over his temples and slid her fingers over his forehead. As she worked her way down his cheeks and jaws, he told himself this was for Sally; he could relax. He had convinced himself of this as she worked her way over his chest and started down his belly. The light massage she was giving him was actually starting to feel very good. His body tingled wherever she touched him. His heart was pumping strongly, but he no longer felt the chest pains that came with exertion.

As she slid her hands down his lower sides, he felt a stirring in his groin. He tried to ignore it, but it grew quickly as she brought her hands together at his belly button and slid them down.

She wouldn't! She was going to spread her hands out again onto his legs, he was sure of it. He felt his manhood pulsing, if she even touched him there, he was sure to lose control. He tensed as she slid one hand under his sack and gave it a gentle rub, circling the fingers of her other hand around his shaft. He raised his head, mouth open to tell her to stop as he felt something soft and wet around the head of his shaft. All that came out was a groan as his muscles tensed in climax. She drew the seed out of him with her mouth as she stroked him. By the power of his orgasm, he was sure he'd see the back of her head blow out.

She drained him dry then continued to concentrate on his left leg as if nothing had ever happened. Partway down his thigh, she looked up at him with a soft smile.

"Don't be embarrassed, it was a natural reaction. Just relax."

He felt dizzy; he had trouble believing what she'd just done! He didn't know if this qualified as cheating on his wife, but it sure felt like it. Consoling himself by thinking that maybe Odif was only relieving him so he wouldn't be tense, he tried to forget it. She said she put herself through this ritual--maybe it was some kind of test to make sure that it worked. It would be pointless to do this if he couldn't perform for Sally.

He was losing track of time when Odif finished by sliding her fingers off his toes. He did feel different--he felt tighter. He swore his stomach had shrunk a bit, and he could feel the bands of muscles firming up as he rose to sit.

Odif lay down beside him. "Now, do the same to me."

He looked down at her and felt another erection swelling. He wasn't sure if he could rub her and not give in to his lust. "I have to?"

"The first part is done. You must finish or the effect will not last," she explained. "Remember, concentrate and do what comes naturally."

His first petting of her hair was cautious. He tried to think of her not as a woman but as just another person. As he rubbed her forehead and cheeks, he began to concentrate on what he was doing, feeling the flesh under his fingers, watching it move as he rubbed in tiny circles. He moved down her neck and gave in to the impulse to kiss her gently at the base. By the time he had finished her arms and was rubbing the upper part of her chest, he had forgotten about everything except the woman he was with. He studied every inch of her, kissing her lightly as he moved down her body. Each hard nipple he sucked on briefly before moving on. His passion for her grew as he caressed his way down her belly. By now he was

aching to have her, burning with lust. He held back until he had covered every inch of her body. He wasn't thinking about Sally at all as he moved back up and met her lips, kissing her deeply.

Her soft moans accompanied his as she wrapped her arms and legs around him. In the first part of the ritual, she had planted the seeds for change. The body, like the mind, had a memory. Skin and organs remembered being powerful and strong. In her carrssing, she had awakened these memories in him. Concentrating on her as he touched her, he had involuntarily sparked hers as well. The whole-body excitement of sex was now needed to build and fuse the new energy into their bodies.

She felt nothing but pure animal lust as he entered her. He coupled with her at a frenzied pace, each thrust bouncing her in his grip. No more concentration was needed, only the natural energy of intimacy. He was grunting with the effort as he tried to reach ever deeper inside her. With each hard thrust, she felt her own body working towards climax. Her head was tucked in beside his neck as he slammed into her, her hands grabbing at his back as he pawed at hers. It wasn't long before she was becoming lightheaded as he neared the brink. The buildup of pleasure heightened, and the healing energy radiated like a hot flame from both their bodies. She shot her legs out and thrust up hard, attempting to get him a little bit deeper inside her as she felt the first wave of orgasm wash through her. Her loud moan was accompanied by his blasting out a cry as he filled her womb with hot seed. Her mind blurred as their combined energy peaked.

Fusion.

Even after their climax, their bodies kept up the motion for a few moments as if this hadn't been enough. Dropping down, he rolled off her, staring up at the rock overhead as he panted. Odif lay panting beside him, reveling in the glow of body and spirit.

Rolling onto her side, she laid a hand on his chest. "I think Sally will be very pleased with you," she purred.

As he looked at her, his contented smile turned into a look of shock. Turning away from her, he sat up. "We shouldn't have done it," he whispered harshly.

Sliding over to sit up beside him, she said, "Nonsense. What we did was part of the ritual."

He let out a snorting laugh. Shaking his head, he said, "It was wrong! It may not have been wrong for you, but it was wrong to do this to Sally!"

"And just what did we do to Sally?" she asked.

His mouth hung open. "Unless you missed something, I just had sex with you."

She looked at him quizzically. "So?"

"So!" He shot to his feet and faced her. "I don't love you, I love Sally!"

Confused by his behavior, she asked, "I thought that's why you wanted to do this? You want to be able to please Sally, right?"

“Do you think this will please Sally!” he roared.

Pressing a finger to her ear, she winced. “If you’re any louder, maybe she will hear you and decide for herself.”

Waving his hands at her in a “go away” gesture, he turned and walked back towards the arch. It took her a moment to realize that he was feeling guilty. It was silly--there was nothing to feel guilty about. All they had done was use the natural energy of sex to strengthen his body. She got up and followed him; maybe she could explain it to him.

She stepped into the archway, watching him as he roughly straightened his clothes. “The ritual is designed to bring out basic instincts. It doesn't mean--”

He whirled to glare at her. “Just shut up!”

In the dim light, she saw the tears in his eyes. She thought briefly about holding him here to explain. He was bringing the guilt on himself--it was a shame these people were so ignorant of how life worked. However, she knew he was beyond listening to anything she said, so she just grabbed the torch and followed him up the stairs so he wouldn’t kill himself in the dark.

They quickly ascended the stairs in silence. She had to start taking the steps two at a time to keep up with him as he went faster, as if desperate to get away from her. At the top, she doused the torch and ran to catch up with him. She was sure if he understood he wouldn’t be so upset.

“Will you please wait?” she cried.

Not breaking pace, he held up a hand to ward her back. “Leave me alone!”

She stopped, giving an irritated huff. City people were crazy.

“We’ll talk in the morning,” she called after him.

He showed no signs of hearing her as he strode back towards the house. She let him go and went back to bed. Maybe tomorrow he’d be a little more reasonable.

Chapter 12

Odif went in for breakfast hoping Arthur had spent the night thinking about the ritual. The first ones she saw at the table were Art and Jeni, with Erica in a high chair beside her. Salinthia sat with her back to her. Arthur was at the head of the table, looking sullen. Penny and the butler, Lenath, served them hot cakes and eggs.

“Morning.” She smiled at them. Everyone gave her a cheery response except Arthur. As she approached, she noticed there was only one extra plate. Since it was not next to Arthur, but one seat

down, she thought maybe Sally had rushed off somewhere.

“Sally’s sitting there,” Arthur said tonelessly as she pulled out the chair.

“Oh.” There were no other vacant places set. Not thinking too much of this, she settled in between Jeni and Art. She plucked an apple from the basket in the middle of the table and waved at Erica.

“Is she still sleeping all night?” she asked Jeni.

Jeni gave her a sideways glance. “Yes. Do you want me to say you were right?”

“No, I knew that.” she grinned.

“You look radiant this morning,” Salinthia offered.

Odif beamed her a smile. “And you are looking well, also. Any more breathing trouble?”

“None at all.” She smiled pleasantly. “I was just telling Arthur that he looks very good--don’t you think so?”

Odif saw the lines in his face weren’t nearly so deep, and the loose flesh under his jaw was all but gone. “I’d say he looks twenty years younger--and would feel like it, if he let himself.”

She stressed the last part, trying to get a rise out of him. The only thing he did was glance up at her.

Jeni studied her for a few seconds then asked, “Do you know something about Dad’s mood?”

“Jeni, I’m fine,” he stated.

Odif knew she had to be what they called “discreet” with Art sitting next to her, but now was a good a time as any. “Last night, Arthur wanted me to help make him...a little younger. I didn’t explain the details of what I was going to do to him ahead of time...” She stopped as the kitchen door slammed open, and Sally walked briskly in. Her face was an unreadable mask, though her eyes threw daggers.

She didn’t sit down but stood behind her chair and grabbed the back as if she were going to choke the life out of it.

“I do not think we will discuss it here,” she stated coolly. Watching for a moment to be sure Odif stayed quiet, she slid into her seat. The tops of her pointed ears were partially laid back, and she was so tense the tendons in her neck stood out. Although she was trying to appear somewhat calm, Odif knew the signs.

“Sally, don’t you think--”

Sally glared at her. Her mouth unconsciously curled up into a sneer. “I think you should go.”

Odif felt the short hairs on her neck stand up. She had done her best to try to fit in and make their lives a little better. What was her reward? Not thanks, but *get the hell out of our house*. She didn’t need this shit; there were much more important things to be done than to try to talk to people who wouldn’t listen.

“Fine.”

She got up, resisting the urge to just kick the chair out of her way. To Jeni, she said, "I'll bring Eric's armor back as soon as I'm done with it."

Salinthia spoke up. "Wait! Sauri, what is going on here?"

Still glaring at Odif, Sally said in a tight voice, "We will not discuss it in front of the children."

"She thinks I'm a troublemaker," Odif explained.

"I can't say what you are!" Sally spat.

With the anger mounting between them, it wasn't going to take long for someone to start swinging, and this wasn't going to be practice. Staring back at Sally, she said, "You're right, I better go."

She turned and started walking out. Arthur said something quietly, to which Sally snapped, "You're no better than she is!"

Odif couldn't take any more. Whirling around, she exploded, her voice rough and deep in her anger.

"Hey!" she barked. "You wanna hate me? *Fine!* What I did was *not* his fault!"

Everyone at the table looked up at her, gaping like fish. Pausing to take a breath and calm herself, she pointed a finger at Sally. In a more normal yet tightly controlled tone, she said, "You, all of you, speak to me about decency. Arthur came to me so he could be a better husband for you. Have the *decency* to appreciate it!" She then turned and stomped out as fast as her legs could carry her.

They sat with all eyes on the empty doorway. Two years ago, Eric had faced one of the noblemen defending Tayan using an identical tone of voice as well as those very same words. What Sally had told Odif the day before in the bathroom came back with more truth than she had ever guessed. In complete conviction, she said it again.

"She is her father's daughter."

Odif snatched up the armor and her staff as she strode out. By the gate, the coach that took them around the city was parked in its alcove. Looking for the driver, she saw him sitting on a bench, talking to two elven men who leaned on their shovels.

She walked over and tapped him on the shin with her staff. "Get up, take me to the southern part of the city, on the other side of the river."

He looked up at her then pointed back towards the house. "Mrs. Redman tells me where to drive. I can't go without her say-so."

"Do you really want to spend the rest of your life as a lizard?" she growled.

He swallowed nervously. "Sure, ma'am...I mean, no, ma'am," he quickly corrected. "I'll take you, but I have to return for Mrs. Redman."

Odif got into the coach and waited for him to climb into the driver's seat. She eyed him as he glanced in at her then mounted.

“Wait for me!” Jeni cried, running up. She sat across from Odif. Straightening her light purple dress over her knees, she looked squarely at the druid. “What happened in there is over. We are still trying to find Eric, right?”

The coach started to move. “Don’t you want to yell at me first?” Odif asked sarcastically.

Jeni frowned at her. “What you did was wrong. I have an idea what happened, and you should have explained it to Dad before you did anything. I know you tried to help, but it backfired. I just hope Mom and Dad don’t split up over this.”

“What is the problem?” she cried with a fling of her arm. “Arthur wanted to be able to make love to Sally again. I took him through the ritual; the sex was just to bond the change. It wasn’t personal. I wasn’t trying to take him away from her. Why was she so pissed off?”

With a groan, Jeni rubbed her forehead, trying to hide her face. “That was a little more than I needed to know,” she sighed. Clasping her hands in her lap, she collected her thoughts. “The problem is that sex is personal, or should be. Mom is heartbroken that Dad did that with you. Dad is feeling pretty bad, also.”

Odif shook her head. “I never meant to hurt anyone.”

“I know you didn’t. I will try to explain it to them once they’ve calmed down.” Changing the subject, she asked, “You want to try the southwest section today?”

Odif nodded. “Where’s Erica and Penny?”

“I had to run to catch you. Penny told me she can get a wet nurse for Erica today.” Looking down at herself, she mused, “I hope I don’t ruin this dress.”

Odif dug in her shorts pocket. She still had a strip of bandage she kept for emergencies. Passing it to Jeni, she said, “Here, fold this over your nipples to catch any leaking.”

Jeni did, patting it flat so it was barely visible. Looking at the bent armor, she asked, “Think we’ll have any luck today?”

Odif noted the cloud cover was just enough to keep the sun from shining. She was hoping it would rain--this city needed a good cleansing. The way things were going so far, it would probably turn sunny and hot. “If we have any, it’ll probably be bad.”

This day of searching found two more slick-tongued fakes and one man so bad he didn’t even fake that well. Odif was persistent by nature, but she was beginning to think she was wasting her time. Considering how long they had been searching, she could have gone back, had Duncan take a look at the armor and maybe even found him by now.

What had really kept her here was her cute little half-sister and Jeni. She wanted to get to know them and spend some time with them. She knew that was over. If today didn’t turn up a real seer, she was going back to Castle Zodiac.

Late in the afternoon, they walked into the shop of the fourth “fortuneteller.” This one called himself Wizard Chez. His “parlor” was a tent backed against the wall of a real building and had the same dark curtains, small table and large glass ball sitting atop a silver stand as just about every other one they had

visited.

It might have been wishful thinking, but Odif thought she sensed something as they went in. Chez, wearing a dark-blue robe and a white towel wrapped around his head, led them in. He waved a hand at two stools on one side of the table. His voice was silky smooth.

“Come and sit,” he invited, sliding onto his own stool. “Two silvers in exchange for knowledge.”

Odif sat down and propped her staff against the table. She was careful to keep the armor out of his sight. Jeni reached for the money, but Odif stopped her. She studied the man for a moment, not sure if the odd feeling she was getting was from him or just from the few trees trying in agony to grow across the street. Before she let Jeni spend any more money, she decided to test him.

“Who am I?” she asked.

Slowly, Wizard Chez crossed his arms in front of him, leaning on his elbows. Watching her intently, he said, “I sense you are not one to be trifled with. You are very strong, both in body and mind. You hold frustrations, the latest of which was this morning. As for your name, all I get is the meaning, I doubt you would understand it.”

The sensation she felt grew as he leaned towards her. Glancing down, she saw he was touching the ball with one finger. “Try me.”

He cast her a look of surprise, which faded quickly. “Your name means strong-as-oak.”

She gave him a slight nod. “Correct.” He didn’t have the power, but his ball did.

“I require two silvers for any more information,” he insisted sternly.

Convinced, Jeni dug in her purse and paid him his silvers. As she did, Odif gripped the armor with one hand, slapping the other on top of the ball. She concentrated on the piece of twisted steel as Chez protested her touching his crystal.

Visions flashed through her mind. She saw pilgyns fighting with elves and humans. Explosions much like those of the spears flashed around her. She felt the heat, and something was ripped off her back as she flew through the air. The vision brought back her own terrible experience. Her mind tried to take her to the woods north of Newburg, but another vision ripped into her head. In this one, she was burnt and aching, and she was charging a pilgyn.

Odif’s screams startled Jeni, who jumped up to stare at her. Odif was gripping the ball as she bucked and threw her head back. Next she stiffened then kicked out with her legs as she curled her lips back and screamed again.

“What is happening to her?” Jeni cried.

“I don’t know,” Chez breathed. “No one but me has ever touched it.”

Beside them, Odif jerked her head to one side like she had been hit then snapped it back as she growled at nothing. Under the tangled mass of hair covering her sneering face, her nose trickled blood.

“She’s living it!” Jeni gasped. Grabbing Chez by the arm, she quickly explained. “We wanted to know

what happened to my husband--that's his armor she has. She's reliving what he went through!"

Chez saw the twisted metal. "That was armor?" He summed up the situation. The man wearing that armor could not be alive. If she was living through what he had then she had a very good chance of dying. "I've got to stop her."

Intent on pulling her hand off the crystal, he grabbed her quivering wrist. He hauled up, but she was pressing down too hard to move her. He laid his other hand on the crystal to get more leverage and something happened. His body wracked with pain as if lightning had hit him. There was no longer a woman at his table, but a large man. His dark red hair was long and shaggy; his face was covered in small cuts and bruises and bore a madness to it. He wore armor, but it hung on him as if someone had tried to tear it off. He was covered in streaks of blood. Chez saw this in an instant. He also saw the man snap his head up to glare malevolently at him. His voice was deep and hollow.

"Back off!"

Chez let go, recoiling halfway across the tent. He tripped and fell as he backpedaled up against the curtains.

"Who in the abyss was that?" he squeaked.

Jeni shifted her gaze from Odif, who was now only quivering as she stared at nothing, to Chez, who was shaking in fear. Deciding that Odif was in no mortal danger for the moment, she turned to Chez. "What did you see?"

"Big man, red hair, covered in blood," he quavered. "He looked like he was mad."

"Eric," Jeni breathed. Putting a hand to her mouth, she watched Odif, gathering the nerve to put her hands on the crystal. She started to move towards it, wanting to know what had happened and fearing to at the same time. The ache to see her love again moved her to slowly reach out, one hand for the crystal, the other for Odif's hand, just as Chez had done. She braced herself for what was sure to be a horrid sight. Just as she was about to touch, Chez grabbed her wrists and pulled her back.

"No, I can't let you!"

Jeni's face was stricken. "He's my husband, I have to know!"

Holding her tight, he said, "He's in a battle, he's hurt bad. If the lady lives, let her tell you."

The last thing Jeni wanted was to see Odif die in front of her. "And if she dies?"

"Then he did, too."

"He can't die!" she snapped. Jerking loose, she took a step towards Odif then stopped. "Can we talk to her?"

Chez shrugged. "If you can break into the vision. Whatever you do, don't touch her."

Leaning to put her mouth by Odif's ear, she said, "Odif, tell me what is happening. Please, I have to know what's happening!"

He ran along a ridge to intercept a vlak. The running was agony, every part of his body hurt. He had been close to two explosions and was burned. Through the knives of pain from wounds and burns, he focused on one thing--protect Tayan.

Odif heard Jeni's plea. Her mouth worked a few seconds then she tried to relay what she was seeing.

"Following a vlak, it's after Tayan and Lucinthia. The pain, it hurts to move, it hurts so much!" Tears began running down her cheeks. "Have to keep going, can't let it kill Tayan," she intoned. She heard Lucinthia's piercing scream for Eric as the vlak crested the hill it was climbing. She followed in time to see it kill an elf, shaking the life out of him. Tayan waved his sword over his head to get the vlak's attention. Directly below, Lucinthia and Glenarin hid behind a pile of rocks.

The vlak turned its attention to Tayan. He ran.

Odif/Eric shook her head, "No...not my son!" she blubbered, echoing Eric's words. She cried openly as Eric threw the explosive ball and missed the vlak. Grabbing his battleaxe, he charged it. She stiffened to stand, both hands gripping the globe as he ran, hacking wildly in a vain attempt to stop it. She let out a long scream as she fought it with him. Her body arched forward, head flung back as he took the blow from its tail.

She fell over the table as Eric fell limp. She dropped to her knees, twitching in spasms as electric pain filled her. Through all this, she kept a death grip on the crystal.

"So...much...pain..." she whimpered, tears leaking between her squeezed-shut eyes. "Have to get up...can't get up...*have to get up!*" she ended in a screech.

Jeni sobbed as she watched. She knew what Eric could do but never understood how much pain he lived with to do it. She understood one thing well--Eric had gone though hell in this battle.

Odif lethargically crawled to her feet, crying. Suddenly, she blasted out a scream, "*Diiiiie!*"

He was on his feet, screaming in agony as he chopped into the vlak's leg. The vlak fell. On a warning from Tayan, he looked to see the tail coming. He met it with the battleaxe, connecting solidly. The end of the tail was cut off, but he was on the ground again. Twice more the tail slammed down, crushing his ribs.

Odif convulsed the first time, and the second; her ribs depressed and blood shot from her mouth as the tail crushed him.

"Dear Odin!" Jeni cried as she watched the blood spray across the table. She was going to be sick--never had she witnessed such a thing!

Odif lay limp. Only her weight was keeping her from slipping to the floor. Still her hands stuck tight to the crystal.

Jeni grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her. "Break free! You have to stop this now!" she cried.

Odif's muscles began to spasm. She sucked in a small breath then a larger one. "Can't...stop...now. Still alive." She then shook her head, pleading, "Oh, Goddess, don't get up, not again!" Even as she pleaded, she rose up from the table.

Chez's eyes went round. "He got up after that?"

"Not again." Odif cried, shaking her head.

Jeni shook her. "Tell me, what is happening!"

Odif/Eric staggered towards the vlak by the rock pile. "No more, please, stop," she whined. Seeing something sprawled on the ground, he did stop. It was Tayan.

"Tayan's on the ground, his legs, his guts, they're crushed," she gasped. "That thing did this." Her voice became harder and deeper. "That thing did this!" Odif stopped shaking and crying. Her mouth curled back into a snarl, her eyes became hard, touched with madness. Deep in her chest, a whining growl started. Low at first, it increased in volume with every breath until she was screaming at the top of her lungs.

Jeni was afraid to touch her as she twitched and screamed. Seeing the look on her face, Chez had retreated a safe distance away. It looked like she was going to start ripping at anything within reach. For the next few moments, all she did was flex her muscles and scream.

Once Odif calmed down and sat heavily on the chair, Jeni sat gingerly beside her. "What's happening now?"

Her gaze was loosely fixed on the orb as she said. "Killed the vlak, going back to Tayan. Got to save him...somehow." She shut her eyes, face screwed up in thought. "Got to keep him from getting worse...preserve him..." Her eyes snapped open. "The bag! He put him in the bag to save his life." Odif regained her feet. "Getting up...got Parson by the shirt." Her face became hard again. "You get my son to a priest, get him healed or I will find you!"

"Sir Parson?" Chez asked. He knew of the knight--he was considered very brave and was very highly respected. "Who is this we're seeing?" he asked Jeni.

"My husband," she said harshly. Calmer, she added, "His name is Eric Redman."

"Redman?" he asked, blowing out an excited breath. "The Red Man? I saw *the* Red Man?"

"Yes, now be quiet!"

Odif was standing stock-still now, as if she were studying something in front of her. The vision totally consumed her. She faced a dark shape. Around it, everyone was lying on the ground. They didn't look dead but more like they were asleep. Odif struggled to get as close to her father's mind as she

could--brawn alone was not going to defeat this thing. His thoughts became hers.

Standing a few paces away was the thing that had attacked him in Old Castle. It looked mostly like a black-haired human woman. That was its shape, but it also had a large pair of leathery wings on its back and long, sharp horns curving back on its forehead. The details of its features were hard to make out; its hands were resting on its hips as it regarded him.

Its voice was strangely pleasant as it said, "I thought I had killed you. The rumors I received I had thought just hoarc superstition. I watched you fight my pilgyns and kill my pets. It does seem you will not stay dead, so I suppose it is pointless to kill you again."

She waved finger at him. "As I watched you kill my vlak, I knew the only way to keep you from coming back is to chop you in little bits then seal each in a jar. I also realized you'd be of much more use to me alive."

This was the one behind the evil, this was the demon--he knew it in his bones. This thing trying to look like a woman had caused the lies he had believed. It had tried to kill Tayan.

"I want you dead," he grated.

Tipping her head slightly, she beamed a smile at him. "So sad, you cannot kill me. Although, unless you do as I ask, I will pull your son out of that bag and tear him apart before your eyes."

"No!" he choked.

Her eyebrows rose as if she were remembering something. "And how about your lovely Jeni? I delivered your letter, in the guise of a messenger boy, of course." Batting her eyes sweetly, she giggled, "She even gave me a hug."

"Leave Jeni alone!" he wailed. He had to do something, but he couldn't move a muscle! He was powerless against it. Odif tried to think to him. She sensed it had used most of its power--if he fought it hard enough, he could break free.

The creature's smile dimmed into a sneer. "You want to see what will happen to your Jeni if you do not do as I ask?" Extending her arm towards the group of elves, she spat, "Watch!"

Lucinthia drifted up out of the grass. Her body rotated upright as she floated towards them. "I can appear as anyone, anywhere," the demon told him. It stopped the elfmaid just out of reach and lowered her to stand on one leg. It said something in a low, strange tongue, and Lucinthia's eyes flew open. Suddenly, it was Tayan standing where the demon had been.

"Honey!" the demon cried happily, extending its arms out towards her.

Lucinthia's face broke into a wide grin.

"Tayan!" she cried as she ran to the demon. The leg that was amputated at the knee seemed to hold her up as well as her whole one.

Odif had a bad feeling about this. "Do something! Attack it!" she cried.

Eric tried to scream a warning, but his throat would not obey. The demon hugged her as it grinned evilly

at him. One of its arms was around her shoulders. The other hand came up on her neck and wrapped its fingers tight. Melting back into its own shape, the demon gripped her neck hard. Lucinthia's eyes widened as it twisted her head and pulled. Her arms shot out, fingers splayed wide as her head was torn from her body with a crack and a sickening wet ripping sound. Her face was frozen in shock as the demon showed it to him before tossing the head over its shoulder as if it was a common stone. It flung her lifeless body to one side.

Eric was in shock as he watched the body fall. It had just killed Lucinthia! This was not any sort of battle but cold-blooded murder. It had just murdered her for no reason at all. His son's caring wife was now lying dead by the hand of this thing. His own face turned into a sneer.

"I will kill you!" he growled. Odif echoed his feeling, adding, "Break free, kill it!"

"You will do as I say, or I will tear Jeni's lovely head from her cute little body just as I did with this one!" it growled back. "Both your son and your girl, the only ones you care for, will be dead because of you!"

Tears clouding his vision, Eric let out a wailing scream. He tried to think. This thing was powerful in magic; there was nothing he could do against magic.

"Fight *me* !" he blubbered. "Don't kill my Jeni!"

"You want Jeni and Tayan to live?"

"Yes!"

"You will do anything to let them live?"

"Yes!" he cried again.

"Then make a pact with me! Be my slave and I shall let them live!" Looking at him mischievously, it said in a softer tone, "You do not deserve to have such a fine lady as Jeni. You do not want to ruin her life. No matter what you do, it will always be in the back of her mind that you slaughtered her people. No matter what she says, she will be holding on to you to keep you from doing it again. It will be her sacrifice, to keep other elves safe. You are an agent of evil; it is only fitting that you become my slave."

"It's lying!" Odif snapped then screamed herself hoarse, "Fight it *fight it* !"

Slave--the word sounded permanent. He knew it spoke true--he had done evil. He had wondered why such a beautiful girl would want him. The explanation left a foul taste in his mouth, but he felt the demon was right. His anger drained away, defeat filling in the void. This was the only way to save his son, to save Jeni from this thing and from him.

Calming himself, he looked the thing in the eye. "You promise you will make sure Tayan is healed and swear never to hurt either Tayan or Jeni, ever?"

Odif shook her head wildly. "*No*! Don't do it! You can't give up!"

Smiling triumphantly, the demon asked, "Is that your side of the pact?"

He swallowed hard. Something was terribly wrong with making a pact with this thing; but if it could just show up and rip people's heads off, there was nothing else he could do to save Jeni from it. "It is."

Walking up to him, it said, "Mine is this: you will come with me and not harm any of my minions, ever. Beware--if a pact is broken, the one breaking it suffers greatly."

This was the only way, he knew it. Still, something in him was screaming for him to deny this thing, to say no to it. To say no was to allow it to kill Jeni and Tayan. No matter how much he didn't want to become this thing's slave, he didn't want Tayan or Jeni hurt even more. He knew he had to do something to make up for what he had done to his son. The word tried to catch in his throat, but he forced it out.

"Agreed."

As the word left his mouth, he felt something very unpleasant wash over him. He had never felt anything like it. It felt dirty, as if the stench of the grave had just inundated him.

The demon smiled evilly. "The pact is sealed." Grabbing him on the sides of his head, it pulled him to it and kissed him. Eric squeezed his eyes shut, his lips felt numb. The numbness started to spread down through him until he felt the shocks run through his body. The current ran up and out of his mouth and into the demon. He passed out, hoping he really would die.

Odif was thrown out of the vision. Looking down at the crystal, she gave a tortured cry. Using all her concentration, she focused on the last thing she had witnessed.

The crystal turned black. A pair of glowing red eyes staring out at her.

"Who are you!" it snapped.

Jeni recoiled in horror. The wizard Chez fled the tent.

Odif's face screwed up in rage. Tensing every muscle in her body, she picked up the crystal to throw it out of the open flap behind her. The crystal stayed in place--what was flung was the black thing. It bounced and came to a stop just outside the tent.

It had just started to register with Jeni that the thing had wings when Odif shot her arms out at it.

"Caz-gizat!"

Lightning flashed from the sky, engulfing the thing. As Jeni snapped her head away from the brilliant light, the air split by the lightning came back together in a thunderclap that knocked her into the tent wall. Blinded and ears ringing, she barely heard Odif.

"Caz-gizat!"

Heart in her throat, Jeni was sure she was struck by the second bolt. The light penetrated her shut eyelids; and the concussion of the thunder shook the tent, which was now burning by the entrance.

The afterimage of the lightning bolts dominating her vision, Jeni could barely make out Odif's shape as the flames started to consume the tent. She was dazed, but instinct told her to move. Clambering to her feet, she grabbed Odif and shoved her outside. They took a few stumbling steps over the pile of carbon that lay at the entrance then fell outside.

Jeni blinked, trying to clear her sight. The dual white bars in her vision faded but very slowly. Between them, she saw Odif lying on her side. She wasn't sure, but it looked like the druid's whole front had been burned. Her hair was singed, she could smell that; and Odif's shirt and shorts looked ripped into charred pieces.

Muffled voices got her attention; she looked up to see her coachman. She thought he was asking if she was all right. Nodding, she pointed to Odif.

"Help her," she said, stressing each word. Her voice sounded hollow.

The scene was chaos. Jeni heard the far-off yells through the ringing in her ears. Guardsmen rallied bystanders for a bucket brigade while the coachman helped her back to the coach. Two men tried to carry Odif there as well. When someone tried to put a blanket around her, she twisted and shook it off along with the remains of her clothes. Jeni caught a glimpse of her face, twisted in agony. It looked like she had no eyebrows.

They placed Odif on the back seat. Her skin was bright red and blistering from her head to her feet. A peasant woman climbed in and showed Odif a jar then started to gingerly apply honey to her burnt skin and pick off the pieces of gravel stuck to her. Eyes fluttering, she cried out and clenched her fists, but let the woman cover her with the sticky amber goop. When she was done, the woman put a white linen cloth over her.

Outside, the tent was a rumpled mass, burning. Most of the water being thrown went on the building behind it to keep the fire from spreading. Jeni caught sight of Wizard Chez being led away by the guardsmen. He was yelling and motioning to the remains of his tent as they prodded him down the street. Someone brought Odif's staff and the battered armor. When the coachman asked where she wanted to go, she could think of only one place.

"Home."

They were most of the way there when Odif became coherent enough to speak. Looking at Jeni through half-closed eyes, she said, "I'm sorry."

Jeni gave her a weak smile. "At least you killed whatever that was."

Odif shook her head. "No, I destroyed its body, but its spirit fled. It killed Lucinthia. It ripped her head off and made Eric watch."

She then told Jeni everything she had seen. Jeni was crying in wracking sobs by the time she finished. She didn't even hear Odif's last words.

"I know its soul, and when I find it, it will pay." Her lips curled back, splitting the blisters. "It will pay."

The agony of the vision, however, and the more present pain of her burns were too much to bear. Hurting and exhausted, she let herself slip into unconsciousness.

Odif awoke to see a ceiling of polished wood. She was in bed, a thin linen covering her hot, aching body. She sniffed at a sweet smell. Honey. She remembered a woman had put honey over her. The

woman had been smart--honey was the best treatment for bad burns. She thanked her Goddess for the intelligent peasant woman then looked to see whom it was she sensed nearby.

A young woman in a maid's dress was sitting by the bed reading a book. Odif didn't recognize her. "Where am I?"

The woman glanced at her. "Lady Salinthia's estate." Creasing a page, she closed the book and folded her hands in her lap. "Mrs. Redman brought you here."

"Where is she?"

"She is in her own room, with her family. I was asked to relay a message to you. The family has decided to let you stay until you recover. I am to see to your needs. As soon as you are able then you are to leave and never return."

She stood up and straightened her dress. In a harsher tone, she suddenly added, "I saw Jeni come back with you. She was burnt and terrified so badly she could hardly walk! All she could do was cry, but none of us understood anything she was trying to say. How could you do that to such a nice lady?"

It figured. Sally and Arthur were pissed at her, the demon she had fried was probably coming after her once it got its strength back; and now Salinthia had shunned her. She had been around here long enough to know that a message from "the family" meant it was from Salinthia. She gazed off into space, not sure if she should be angry or just heartbroken.

"Tell them I'll be gone before morning."

"You do not need to rush--"

"Tell them!" she barked.

The woman drew herself up. "Very well then." she said coolly, and walked out.

She was not going to be upset over this; she had to concentrate. Closing her eyes, she felt her skin and began working to repair the damage. Usually, such a thing was easy, but this time she was distracted and had to keep shifting her focus back to what she was doing. Thoughts of Jeni, who had tried so hard, broke her concentration. Next, her mind drifted to cute little Erica. Then it was Arthur then Sally.

Every time she caught her mind wandering, she forced her concentration back on what she was doing. Was she so bad these people couldn't at least learn to put up with her? After all, she had tried to do everything she could for them. She remembered Tayan's telling her she was a pain to live with, and she had replied he wasn't so easy either. Living with anyone, you had to learn to deal with them.

Not being able to concentrate, she looked around the room. By some standards, it was a nice place. It had finely polished wood, and the stonework was smooth, each block perfectly cut. Designs were etched in the walls and ceiling, breaking up the monotony of the large surfaces. A pair of paintings on the wall depicted brightly colored flowers in a vain attempt to bring life to this hollow, dead room. No trees would creak as their branches swayed in the wind. No chirping crickets would lull her to sleep, nor singing birds herald the morning. She didn't belong here. Once she knew this, it was easy to concentrate on healing her burns.

Odif decided not to try and talk to any of them again. When the maid returned, she stressed once again

that Tayan must be told he had to be at the city on the plains. When she was sure the woman had the message, she made her leave. Going to the window, she opened it wide and changed into an eagle.

The eagle gave the room one last look then flapped off into the night.

Chapter 13

Two weeks after the attack by the interfering druid, Aliana finally regained enough strength to form another body. This one looked the same as the other but was pure black. To give it the semblance of life, she had to visit her food slave; but even after she drained his life force, she was still weak. She absorbed the lives of ten other slaves; then when her food slave regained consciousness, she drained him again. Only after this large injection of essence was she able to properly animate her body and began to feel like herself.

Normally, if she had been caught unawares, she would have flown into a rage of torturing and killing. The one who had pulled her through the crystal, however, was not some common being to be destroyed so easily. She had seen who it was, and she knew Odif the Druid as one of Zodiac's minion--the druid bitch had somehow found her. She had not thought anyone capable of tapping into her crystals. Odif not only called her, she had done the impossible and pulled her through. The druid whore would die, but she had to deal with this threat intelligently. A mistake next time might mean more than a charred body.

Fearing to use her crystals, she ordered her wizards to bring her spies together. Through various forms of magic, they assembled in the throne room of her city palace on the surface. Once they were gathered, she made her entrance. All dropped to one knee, bowing their heads. She was wearing her human form as she settled into her dark red throne.

The first thing she did was take reports. In Elrad, King Alderlan was convinced the real danger was to the south. The bulk of the elven army was gathering near Capetown and along the lower parts of Longforest. Hans was running through the north, meeting very little in the way of effective resistance. At the pace he was going, he would be at the capital city in a month.

News in the human lands was equally good. Zayton and Krundle were not becoming involved in any way. Tolina's elves were organizing to help their homeland, but Spring Valley was poised to make sure they never got there. Even in Paladnia, another thorn in her side, the holy knights were readying themselves for war but weren't moving from around the city. From the news, all was going according to plan.

There was only one thing out of place.

Duke Toma was bracketed by two of her gray-cloaked scouts. Behind him, his escort was also shadowed by her own men. Raising an eyebrow at this, she called him to her. He knelt in front of the dais.

"Tell me how Spring Valley fares," she asked pleasantly.

He kept his head bowed, speaking as confidently as he could. "We are doing well, Master. We have plenty of men and weapons, the food stores are at optimum and I have secured the confidence of the church. I am still allowing normal travel to the east and west, though the barricades and troops are poised to seal off the road at a moment's notice."

"Well done." She nodded. "I do not see Lord Tayan here. Have you had him put in my dungeon already?"

Toma stiffened. Swallowing hard, he said, "He escaped. I'm sorry, Master."

She tipped her head. "How did this happen?" she asked coldly.

Toma took a heavy breath. "A woman help him. We searched, but could not find either of them."

She got up smoothly then reached down and dragged him to his feet. Glaring at him, she growled, "You let one woman effect his escape?"

Faced with her anger, he whimpered, "She was nothing like we'd ever seen. She disguised herself as a priestess then as a dancer. We were taken by surprise. We chased them, but they vanished! Not even the bloodhounds could find a trail."

"And did you get a look at her?" she prompted.

He nodded vigorously. "Light hair, well built--one of my men heard what Tayan called her. I think her name is Odif."

Alianna's eyes shot fire. "Odif!" she screeched. "Her name was Odif!"

She lost control of the illusion. Her large black wings spread out as she melted into demon form. Toma shook in terror and wet himself.

Wailing a terrible scream, she hoisted him up high then slammed him to the floor. "That bitch!" she spat.

Huddled on the floor, Toma lifted his head but was careful not to look at her. In a weak voice, he offered, "I'm sorry. Master. I will never fail you again."

Her face smoothed over into a dangerous calm. She helped him to his feet and held the quivering man by one shoulder. Wiping the blood off his brow, she cooed, "You had him in your hands then let him get away. I can't have failure."

"I'll never fail again," he repeated, shaking badly.

She smiled gently at him. "That's right." Grabbing his chin, she twisted his head and broke his neck. Pushing the body away before it fell, she turned to the men who had come with him. Only one did not reek with fear; he stood impassively as the nerves in Toma's leg twitched in final spasms.

She pointed to him. "You, what is your name?"

"Judd Kahn, Master." the stocky man in studded leather said.

"Well, Judd Kahn, you are now Duke Kahn. Have you a clue how Spring Valley is prepared?"

“Yes, Master, six companies of one hundred each are within the castle. Four more are deployed, one in town, one to the south, one east and one west. They have proper weapons but no spears. All the power spears are in the castle, as well as all the crossbows that shoot them. At the moment, the population does not know we are gearing up for war.”

“And you think this adequate?” she asked.

“No, Master. We are undermanned and have no effective defense. The barricades will be easy outflanked, and if we lose the castle we will lose all the spears. There is no wall around the town, and the ancient roadways to the north are undefended.”

“You know about the ancient roads?”

“Yes, Master, they are straight and flat for miles. If the elves, or anyone else, gains access we could be overrun before we knew they were there.”

Alianna grinned in satisfaction. “Make your city ready, Duke Kahn. Be careful not to arouse suspicion. You must act in secret until I order otherwise.”

He bowed briskly. “Yes, Master. Can I depend upon you for pilgyns or vlaks when the time comes?”

“I will send you all the help you need. Until then, build your army. Under no circumstances must the elves in Tolina be allowed to get to Elrad.”

“Understood, Master. How many can I expect?”

“Not more than ten thousand,” she said, watching him closely.

He didn’t flinch. “I will need help to hold back that many. I assure you they will not reach their destination, whatever happens in Spring Valley.”

Kahn was emotionless, thoughtful and fairly intelligent. She left the meeting feeling good about her new Duke. It seemed she had only two obstacles left that could trip her up. Odif she would find and kill, once she worked out a plan. The other one, Tayan, was not so easy. She could not harm him, and all other attempts to stop him had failed. He was a hero to her enemy; and with him leading them, those damn elves would run headlong into certain death. There was only one way she could be rid of him.

She had to make her food slave break the pact.

Once again the tiny world of his underground cell was invaded by the thing. He had given up trying to raise himself from hanging by his arms. It seemed a lifetime ago when he used to stand on his feet and yank at the chains in a vain attempt to free himself. Locked as he was in an existence of twilight and pain, somehow standing didn’t seem important anymore. The arms that held him just high enough so he couldn’t sit had become no more than extensions of the chains.

He knew its feet; it never wore shoes. He looked up to see it had taken the form of a dark-haired woman. It didn’t have horns. Instead, thick, curly locks adorned its forehead. It smiled at him, wearing an angelic face. He knew he couldn’t fight it. It was going to force its lips over his then the pain would begin.

More to himself than it, he groaned, “No...not again.”

“Not this time,” it said pleasantly.

He felt one arm drop then fell to sit as it released the other manacle. Curling his arms up to his chest, he vaguely remembered another time it had come to him acting nice. Everything it did was a trick and ended in pain.

“I ain’t gonna cuddle,” he said hoarsely.

He flinched as the demon squatted down by him. Its smile was bright as it said, “I have made a terrible mistake holding you like this. You are not my enemy. I want to make it up to you.”

He didn’t know what trick this was, but he didn’t want anything to do with it. “Then leave me alone.”

Slowly, it held out a hand that looked as soft and smooth as a real woman’s. “Take my hand; let me show you what I want to give you.”

He didn’t move, so it gently laid its hand on his shoulder. When he flinched again, the wall was no longer there. Brightness filled his eyes as he fell on his back. Shielding them with one arm, he squeezed them shut, bracing himself for the pain that was sure to come.

It didn’t. Slowly, he opened one eye a crack. At first he thought the world had turned white. As his pupils adjusted, he saw a low wall with pillars rising from it. Beyond the pillars was a void. In time he remembered what the pale blueness was called. He was looking at sky. Lifting his arm, he saw figures standing a short distance away to his right.

The thing was beside three women. He was sure he wasn’t seeing right--the women looked greenish to him. Their short shirts and skirts were light gray.

Waving a hand at the women, the demon said, “These will be your servants. They will clean you up and get you decent clothes, as well as anything else you want. I will leave you to them for now. We will talk after you have been cared for.”

Giving him a parting smile, it turned and left.

The women approached him. He didn’t move until they tried to help him up. Pulling out of their grasp, he looked to see if the demon was watching.

“Please, sir, we have to clean you up,” one woman said.

“If we don’t, we’ll be punished,” another added.

He looked up at her. “Punished?”

She nodded. Flicking her eyes at the door the demon had left through, she said, “Master will torture us if we don’t obey.”

He knew about the torture it could inflict. He nodded and tried to get up. His legs were too weak to hold him. The three gathered around and helped him to a large iron tub full of hot water. He let them remove the remains of armor and clothes.

He watched as one laid a battleaxe carefully on the floor. He had forgotten he had it. The blade and handle were covered with dark streaks--he had fought something with it...a long time ago. In a few of the nightmares he remembered, he had fought a giant, bone-covered beast. Had it been more than a nightmare?

As he pondered this, the women coaxed him into the tub and washed him. He sat stiffly as they combed his red hair and untangled his beard. He waited to be hurt by one of them, but they were gentle with him. While they worked, men and women, most of whom were green-skinned, brought in a table and chair, followed by a large tray containing a pitcher, a mug and food. A neatly folded pile of clothes was set next to the tub.

When they were done, the women dried him off and dressed him in a fresh shirt and breeches. The bright white shirt was very smooth to the touch. The dark-blue breeches were also soft, like well-worn flannel. The women helped him over to the chair and filled the mug for him.

The food in front of him smelled wonderful. It was only roasted ham, potatoes and carrots but looked like a king's feast. He could not remember the last time he had eaten. The mug held water that tasted grand. Despite his caution, he dug in, wolfing down everything in front of him. He ate until his stomach hurt.

He had no more than taken the last bite he could when the demon came back in. It waved to the slaves to remove the leftovers, which they did with haste. Another chair appeared on the other side of the table. It slid smoothly to sit, elbows on the table as it clasped its hands.

"You look much better," Aliana said sweetly. "This, and more, can be yours if you wish. Wouldn't you like to be free?"

He looked down, ready for it to do something to him. "You're gonna leave me alone?" he asked cautiously.

"Better than that. If you want a castle, it's yours. Servants? Just ask how many. Gold, women, land, your own kingdom? Anything you want. All you have to do is say a few small words."

The offer seemed genuine, which heightened his suspicion. "What do you want?"

"Just tell me you want to break our pact. You do this, and I will grant you anything you desire."

"My pact?" he asked. "What pact?"

"The pact you made with me. That is how I held you. You allowed me to."

"I asked for...that?" He could not imagine asking to be tortured and killed over and over again. "Why did I do that?"

Its smile became forced as it said, "That was your side of the pact, to be my slave. I no longer need you, so as soon as you tell me you break your pact, you are free."

He nodded slowly. If he had agreed to such a thing, there had to be a reason. "What was your side to this pact?"

The corner of its mouth twitched. It looked at him for a few seconds; then a crafty smile etched its face. "I agreed to keep your woman and child safe. Your woman has a cute baby girl. I promise I will do nothing to harm them if you agree to break your pact."

He didn't know what it was, but something wasn't right. "If you already agreed to it, why promise again?" Shifting in his chair, he said, "I don't understand."

"What's not to understand?"

"You tell me to break a pact, but then promise to keep your side even though I give mine up." He shook his head. "It don't sound right."

"It doesn't sound right to be freed? That's all I want to do." A tinge of anger crept through the sweet voice.

"Then let me go."

"I can't!" it snapped, causing him to recoil. Slapping its hands down, it growled, "Try to understand! I can't let you go unless you break your side of the pact!"

The offer was very tempting. All he had to do was say yes, and it would let him go. Still it had to be hiding something. He didn't believe it would just let him go for no reason. If he had agreed to this living nightmare, there had to be something important it wasn't telling him.

"Well?" it asked with a sneer, "Will you prefer living free in light, with your woman and child, or in the dark, in pain?"

He was right; this was some kind of trick. He had the feeling that, no matter what, he'd end up in pain anyway. If he did have a woman and a kid then the demon couldn't hurt them as long as he didn't break his pact. He braced himself, knowing that it was going to hurt him badly.

"I ain't breakin' nothin'," he whispered.

"Would you like to see your precious woman torn in half?" it growled.

"If what you say is true, you can't touch her." He looked up to see it giving him a cold stare. "If you don't like the pact you say we made, you break it."

In a flash of motion, it swung a hand and slapped him so hard he fell backwards, chair and all. Throwing the table to one side, it grabbed his shirt, hauling him up. It glared at him malevolently. "Break the pact or you will know pain without end!"

His fear faded. The demon could torture him, it could kill him; but he wasn't giving in. "No," he sneered back.

Suddenly, he was back in his dark cell. Aliana tossed him against the wall and vanished. He sat up, noting the chains hanging empty on the wall. Briefly, he entertained the thought of trying to force the demon into those chains. He was fooling himself, of course. He couldn't even stand on his own two feet, let alone win a struggle against that monster.

Aliana did return, this time in her true form. She didn't come alone, either. The demon brought along four

upright lizardcreatures with small knives. She tossed his battleaxe to clatter on the floor in front of him.

“Let me tell you your whole side of the pact. You vowed to be my slave and never harm any of my minions. These hoarcs are my minions. You will not be chained, but you will be stabbed repeatedly. Sooner or later, you will lash out and hurt one of them. When you do, the pact will be broken! This is your last chance to save your wife and child. If you refuse; then once you do break the pact, I will slowly rip their skin off and cook them alive in front of you!”

He watched the demon quiver in rage--the things behind it looked eager to start stabbing him. He knew it would not be going through all this trouble unless his pact was protecting something very important. He had endured pain; he had endured death. The lives of his family were at stake. No matter what, he could not break the pact.

“I ain’t breakin nothin’,” he growled.

Turning to the lizards, the demon pointed at him. “Do as you wish to him, and make him suffer!” It then disappeared.

The knives the things held were laughably small, the blades no more than half a finger’s length. As they gathered around him, he quickly learned why this was. They started stabbing him, but not one did him serious damage. He screamed and tried to crawl away. A couple knives dug into his legs, pulling him back within their range. It wasn’t long before the pain was unbearable. Pain and anger fueled his strength as he tried again to free himself.

Spying the battleaxe, he grabbed it and struggled clear. He swung, missing as his target ducked away. Rising to his feet in panic and rage, he cocked back to kill one of the cursed things, only to remember at the last instant what the demon had told him. He couldn’t hurt his tormentors, but there was something he could do to escape this punishment. Dropping the ax between his legs, he swung up as hard as he could and buried it in his own forehead.

Aliana wasn’t pleased to hear her food slave had killed himself. Instead of letting him do it again, she chained him and told the hoarcs to cut him until he broke his pact. After a while, all humans succumbed to torture; he would break eventually. She could not, however, wait for him. He might hold out for weeks, and Tayan had to be stopped before he could gather an army. Her plans were going well; she had no intention of letting him upset her hard work. The Great War had been a failure as far as conquest went, but it had taught her valuable lessons.

Sitting down to her lunch, the stuffed and baked torso of a slave, she thought how to best handle him. Simply making Tayan disappear would not stop the elves in Tolina. It might even stiffen their resolve. Once “High Lord” Tayan was safely in her custody, replacing him with a duplicate seemed the best answer. Under the leadership of her “Lord Tayan,” delaying the elves and even guiding them into traps would be easy. She decided to recall Grief and let him take on the task of capturing and replacing Tayan.

In the meantime, she needed more forces to protect her city. The druid whose Odif had found her, and she was sure to lead anyone who would follow. Hans had weakened Longforest on his way through, but she knew better than to underestimate those damn tree huggers.

Besides these threats, many other things needed to be done. There were pilgyns to breed, vlaks to collect from the Jude and hoarcs to conjure up. Her lovely Lura would be the best at collecting the vlaks,

and she had plenty of wizards on hand to conjure up hoards.

As she pondered these thoughts, she decided to track her daughter down and bring her back, too. Even if her rebellious offspring didn't accept Lucifer's power and become one of them, she could use the little abomination as a sacrifice. The offering of one's own children weighed heavily in gaining Lucifer's favor. She knew it was the only way to bring servant demons into this world. Before this war was over, she just might need those demons.

The day was sunny as Sam hobbled along on the crutch she had made from the fork of a tree branch. The ankle one of the priests had smashed was useful only in sending pain up her leg from time to time. Burying the dead priests had been a long, hard task on one leg, but it was either that or move to another part of the wilderness to build a new home.

They had beaten her badly. Most of her bruises were gone now, and once again she could see out of both eyes. She had tried to splint her small wings and managed to get them straight enough so she could lie down at night; but the bones of her ankle had fused together with her foot forced down and in.

Walking was as much of a chore as living now. She sometimes wondered why she bothered to keep going through her routine. Her traps caught few animals--most of her diet consisted of the tubers she grew and these daily trips to gather what she could find. The most comfort she got was the few times she slept deeply and dreamlessly. The pain was forgotten, as well as fear of someone else happening upon her isolated hut.

Hobbling over to the raspberry bushes alongside the overgrown road, she scanned the bushes for edibles out of habit. She picked only the dark-red berries, the juiciest ones. Her thoughts were not of berries, though; she was pondering the point of her existence. As far as she could see, there wasn't one. She had no one to call friend, but the entire world to call her enemy. The pains in her body were a constant dull ache. The long sleep known as death seemed to be her only release. She had even figured out how to do it painlessly. All it would take was to be sure she had plenty of coals in the fireplace then close the damper before she went to bed.

Her mother used to kill people like that, only she would tell them exactly what was going to happen then tie them down and watch them wait to suffocate as the low fire slowly tainted the air. Sometimes it took hours for the air to get bad. The victims had time to become afraid, to try and stay awake, to struggle to keep from slipping into the sleep they never awakened from.

As the days marched past, such a sleep was tempting. Just go to sleep and never wake up. Two nights ago, she had sat with the damper handle in her hand ready to shut it tight before she turned in. She still wasn't sure why she didn't. In a remote corner of her brain, hope held out like a fairy tale, a dream that would never come to pass. It was from wanting to believe this last spark of hope that she hadn't pulled the handle shut.

She knew her hope was just wishful thinking--logic told her that she didn't belong. In her own mother's words, she was an abomination, a mistake that shouldn't have happened. No one would miss her, and the few that even knew she lived would be happy she was gone. That little bit of hope she harbored was the same thing as putting her bad foot down every now and then to see if it would hold her up. It wasn't real hope she held on to, only the memory of something she had once thought possible.

She decided that she would do it tonight.

The day seemed a bit brighter now that she knew for certain what she would do. Picking berries stopped being a chore. She only had to gather what she wanted to eat today, for there would be no tomorrow. She got her berries and took in the scenery around her as she hobbled towards her next stop. She was glad to be outside, to see the trees and sky before her life was over. There were many in her mother's realm that only saw cold, dead rock before they were killed. Running away hadn't saved her the way she thought it would, but she took comfort in the beauty she found on the surface world. It was a small thing, but it was a victory. Tonight when she went to bed, she would dream of the trees and the large oceans of grass she had seen. Maybe if she dreamed about them hard enough, her spirit would stay on the surface and not be drawn down into the abyss, as her mother promised would happen. The only thing she hoped now was that souls remembered beauty.

Movement in the trees got her attention. The tall shape took form as one of her mother's soldiers, the ones she called pilgyns. The pig-faced giant hadn't seen her yet; it was only trying to keep the branches out of its face. Out of instinct, she searched its mind for what it was doing. What she saw made her eyes grow wide and her heart thump in fear. Another got her attention, walking behind the first. To one side, she saw yet a third. All of them were on the same task.

She hobbled back towards her hut, trying to mask her presence from the large creatures. They were simple-minded brutes, and their few wits were fixed on one thing. Find her and taking her back to Aliana.

Scorpio walked with one hand up to keep the branches off his face as they waded through heavy brush. He had the visor on his helmet down to stop the bits of leaf and twigs from poking his eyes out. Ahead of him, Odif seemed to just flow through the tangle, barely disturbing a twig. The people behind him had it a bit easier once he caught the larger branches and broke them back. He didn't complain, fearing Odif might send him to the back of the line. The way she had been acting since she came back from Tolina, he was afraid to let her out of his sight.

From the moment she returned, Odif had acted very strangely. She barely said hello to him before she started working on a peculiar weapon. He wondered why she was carving a piece of wood into the shape of a dagger. Very intent on her work, she refused to let anyone touch it. That was bad enough, but as soon as she had it shaped the way she wanted it, he found her covering her newly carved wooden knife with her own blood. She healed the wound in her hand then made a fire and charred the blade until the outside was black. Next she sat down and drew it through the dirt as if sharpening it. That night, she stood with the abused object over her head in a thunderstorm. He didn't see where the first lightning bolt hit, but he saw her get struck by the second. The lightning struck the wooden dagger she was holding, and her whole body glowed briefly before she collapsed.

Horried, he had gone to help her, and she almost wrenched his arm out of the socket when he tried to get that damn thing out of her hands. The end came when she went to her morning ritual. She didn't have the knife when she returned, but now she sported a wide gash under her ribs on the right side. She refused to heal herself, and wouldn't let Mother Frieda touch her. Although the rip in her hide didn't bleed, he did get her to put a bandage on it. He decided right then he was going to stay tight by her side.

As if hurting herself wasn't enough, she insisted she had to go fight the demon she had finally told him about alone. According to her, she was one of the hammers the wizards had seen. Everyone tried to talk sense into her; but once Odif made up her mind, trying to sway her was like trying to move one of those large oak trees she loved so much. Zodiac couldn't talk her out of it, and she became furious when Scorpio stated he was going with her. Then Mother Frieda decided she had to go, counting on holy

presence to tip the scales. Shilo wouldn't be left behind, which got Theo and Hutch to add themselves to the group. Jo-Jo said she would need his magic, at which Gloredaniel stated two wizards were better than one. Entaurus decided to go, and Porthalen, one of the elf sergeants, committed his squad to defend Gloredaniel.

By the time Odif left, she had most of the original Company with her. Zodiac was beside himself as he watched his friends march off on a fool's journey.

In the weeks of travel since they left the main force, Scorpio had begun to think Odif had lost her mind. She didn't look for the easiest route but tramped straight through whatever they came across. They slogged through marshes, fought their way through brambles and climbed up and down steep slopes through the wilderness. It seemed she was doing her best to discourage anyone from following her. Animals they came across seemed to give them "what-in-the-abyss-are-you-doing-here?" looks.

Still, neither he nor the others gave up. They all knew Odif was going to need help. Besides, in the past week or so, no one dared to go off on their own--only Odif knew where they were.

Bumping into her brought him out of his thoughts. She turned to glare at him then raised a finger to her mouth as he was about to offer an apology.

"Get down," she hissed, as she waved for the others to drop.

He knelt, watching her as she peered off into the trees ahead.

"What is it?" he whispered.

She turned to face them, speaking just above a whisper. "Pilgyns about a hundred yards ahead of us--I'm not sure how many. Porthalen, take two of the elves and scout ahead."

"Won't they see us?" the elf asked.

Odif shook her head. "They're heading to the left, like they're searching for something. Stay behind them and find out how many there are. We'll wait here."

"Want me to fly over them?" Shilo asked.

"No." Odif signaled to Porthalen to move. He indicated for one elf to go with him, and two others to check to the right. In a rustling of brush they were gone.

They squatted for what seemed to be an hour until there was new movement in the brush. One of the elves appeared in front of Odif wearing a satisfied grin. He gestured as he told her what they found.

"Off to the right we caught a wizard with the pilgyns. We shot him, and they didn't even know he died. All the pilgyns are moving off that way, towards a field, it looks like. They're coming together."

"Did you see any of those explosive spears?" Odif asked.

He shook his head. "Sarge says a couple have globes, but if we sneak up on them we can set the damn things off on their belts."

Odif considered doing just that. "Where is Porthalen?"

“About one hundred-fifty yards that way,” he said, pointing a little to the left of their track. “A little farther ahead is a stone wall; he told me he’ll wait there.”

Odif turned and stood up. “JoJo, Gloredaniel, take the elves and go meet up with Porthalen. Do nothing until I send out the insects then hit them with everything you got. Scorpio and Mother Frieda, stay with me; we’ll get ready to the left of them. Entaurus, Theo and Hutch, you get to the left of us. Shilo, go with them. Once they’re set, fly over me. After we attack, do what you can to keep the pilgyns confused.”

Shilo grinned and rubbed his hands together. “All right!”

“Do we dare spread ourselves so thin?” JoJo asked.

“By the time they figure out where we are, they should be dead,” Odif told him then started out.

Following Odif when she was careful was not easy. Following her when she ran through the brush was nearly impossible. Scorpio had to use his shield to keep the whipping branches off his face. They hadn’t gone far when the brush lightened into woods. Ahead, he saw the stone wall; and the three elves kneeling behind it. He followed Odif as she bore left, getting down below the wall just out of sight of the elves.

He got his crossbow cocked and loaded a bolt as he watched the field. There looked to be twenty pilgyns surrounding a small log hut. They started jabbing at it and grunting as they gathered.

“What’s with that?” he asked quietly.

Odif shrugged and watched the sky. “As long as it keeps them busy, who cares?”

One pilgyn smashed down on the roof, caving part of it in. From inside, a woman screamed. Supporting his crossbow on the stone wall, Scorpio aimed at the back of one who was starting to tear down the chimney.

“Wanna hurry up with those bugs?”

A pilgyn reached into the hole in the roof then jerked his arm out, sporting a cut on his hand. They began to rip the hut apart. Inside, the scream became a wail.

Fearing for the woman in the hut, Scorpio became anxious. Looking up, he saw Shilo banking out over the field. The low humming of thousands of tiny wings grew as the cloud of insects flew over his head. Watching the pilgyns tearing apart the hut in earnest now, he settled his sights on one about to pull a wall down. The bolt sailed out to strike the giant in the back of his neck. It fell dead without a sound. A few seconds later, the swarm descended on the pilgyns, covering their faces.

No longer concerned with the hut, the pilgyns swatted and dug at their faces, trying to escape the tiny attackers. A forked lightning bolt from the right dropped two, and another from the left downed a third. Shilo dove into the confusion to crack one on the head, and then a spear of fire hit one that had staggered away from the hut. This one had purple globes hanging from its belt.

The detonation engulfed the pilgyn in a fireball that ripped it into burning bits and sent a shockwave to flatten the grass as it raced away from the explosion. Pilgyns were knocked off their feet--two fell into the hut, shifting the logs to a crazy angle as the remains of the roof were shredded by the blast. Three lay on the ground engulfed in fire, screaming and thrashing as they tried to put themselves out.

A figure ran limping from the ruined doorway. Her face was contorted with terror. Scorpio dropped another bolt into his crossbow and drew down on a pilgyn that had spotted the woman and was reaching for her. He hit it square in the forehead. It fell, and so did the woman as she tripped on something.

The explosion not only flattened the pilgyns; the air around the hut was full of falling bugs, also stunned by the blast. It didn't take him long to figure out that soon the remaining pilgyns would be on this poor woman. She got up to run again and fell flat a second time. He left his crossbow as he drew his sword and vaulted over the wall.

"Scorpio, no!" Odif called, but he was already running towards the figure crawling for her life.

Another lightning bolt split the air then a bright white bar flashed by him. He dimly caught sight of Shilo diving down to hit another creature, as he focused on the woman. He closed on her, and she caught sight of him and turned to crawl away with a crying scream.

"No! This way!" he called to her. Seeing that she was headed towards a puffy-faced pilgyn who was squinting out of one good eye, he raced ahead of her and got between them. She hit him in the back of his legs in her blind flight. Not knowing what else to do, he pushed her to the ground. "Stay down!"

He moved to the side and set himself as the pilgyn charged. It was then he realized that he was alone out here, and too many creatures were still standing. A few were blinded by the insects, but too many saw him as something to fight back against. Another bright white bar lashed out, beheading a pair who stood close together. Unfortunately, neither of them were ones who could see. "Aww, shit," he mumbled. There was no way he could get back himself, let alone take the woman with him.

He blocked the pilgyn's axe with his shield, or rather he got it up in time to meet the blade. The impact tore it from his arm and knocked him down. The giant lifted its weapon and struck again. He rolled to the side, the blade ticking against his armor as it sank in the ground. He jumped up and stabbed under the thigh plate on the giant's leg. It dropped its weapon with a loud roar then grabbed him and threw him, leaving his sword stuck in its flesh.

Scorpio hit the ground on his back, driving the wind from him. He couldn't breathe and could barely move as the pilgyn picked up its axe and raised it high to kill him.

A shape flashed by the creature, leaving one of the long-handled halberds buried in its throat. It fell, clawing at the spurting wound as it kicked its legs. Above it, Shilo banked hard and dove down to grab the handle and yank it out. Blood poured out in a fountain and the kicks settled down into spasms as it died.

Scorpio managed to roll on his side as he struggled to suck in air. A short ways away, the woman looked at him from under a hood that was skewed partway over her face, showing a tangle of dark hair. He motioned to her and gasped, "Stay down!"

An explosion sounded behind him. He looked to see bits of tree cartwheeling through the air at the edge of the woods. That had been where JoJo and the elves were. Another globe sailed over his head. As he watched, Shilo flew up behind it and plucked it out of the air. He banked around and yelled, "Duck!"

Searching for the remaining pilgyns, Scorpio saw three were left. The one only thirty feet away was cocking back with another globe to throw. He knew what Shilo was going to do. Scrambling over to the dazed woman, he pushed her head to the ground and pressed himself as flat as he could. He felt the heat

of the detonation; then the wind tried to lift him up and turn him over. He slid a few feet forward, which put the woman's head under him. Dazed, he felt her pounding on his armor, attempting to get him to move. He had just enough energy left to hoist himself up and off. Lying on his back, he flopped his head over to see no more pilgyns standing.

Chapter 14

Sam sucked in a breath then coughed out the grass that had stuck in her throat. She was beyond understanding what was happening. Being chased by pilgyns was bad enough, but now she was in the middle of a battle straight from the abyss. Magic flowed heavily through the air, not only the kind her mother did but also a new energy she'd never felt before. She was familiar with the explosive globes and spears, as well as the cast magic from wizards. This new energy was different; it seemed to permeate the area.

The man who lay in front of her moaned and tried to get up then flopped back in place. She peeked up to see where the pilgyns would come from next; her jaw dropped when she saw not one was left alive. Her mother's powerful soldiers were scattered amid the smoking grass and the remains of her hut. Whoever was here had just killed all of them.

A winged man flew down and pulled a sword from the leg of a dead pilgyn. Walking over to the man in front of her, he slid the weapon into the man's scabbard and frowned at him.

"I think you just might be the perfect match for Odif. Both of you are nuts." Looking at Sam, he beamed her a smile. "Hey, lady, you're safe now, I'm here."

She knew demons, but this man had feathered wings. "What are you?"

He gave a snort, as if she'd insulted him. "I'm Shilo, What else do you need to know?" Patting the chest of the man on the ground, he added, "And this crazy fool is Scorpio."

Looking at the other man, Shilo curled his lips in around his teeth to sound like an old man. "The boy don't got a lick o' sense in him."

"Shut up!" Scorpio groaned. "That pilgyn was after her."

"Yeah, and I had to come save both your asses." Pointing up, he added, "I was watching her, and I had a better view than you did."

Whoever these people were, she knew she had to get away from them as quickly as she could before one of them found out what she was. She moved to sit up, and pain shot from her bad ankle. Letting out a cry, she gripped her leg in an attempt to choke off the sharp pain.

"Whoa!" Shilo exclaimed. Stepping over Scorpio, he helped her sit up and examined her.

Her ankle was turned out and broken; a piece of bone sticking out sported bits of dirt and grass. There

was no way she was going anywhere on that.

“It’s bad, but Odif can fix it,” Shilo assured her then gave her a stiff pat on the back. His show of affection shattered the partially healed wing. She arched back and cried out anew.

“Oh, shit! I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” he said, his face turning red.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to keep her head low enough to hide her forehead. “You just scared me,” she gritted through her teeth.

“Hang on, I’ll get help.”

Sam’s mind spun. What was she going to do now? She saw people coming out from behind the stone fence at the edge of the field. A pair of short, dark men walked beside a wizard in a blue robe. A heavy-set woman who wore the same brown robes as the priests who attacked her ran toward another wizard who was calling for help in the shattered section of trees. She sensed power from them--that’s how she knew the men were wizards. The woman held the opposite power from what her mother had.

The strongest energy, however, was not from any of them, but from the slim, hard woman striding towards her looking very angry. This one not only existed in herself, but in all the living things around her. She was the source of the insects that had attacked. Even though she looked human, all Sam could think of as she watched her approach was “wolf.”

Shilo stopped and pointed back towards Sam as he told Odif, “Help that kid, she’s got broken wings. I know that hurts like hell.”

As she looked at the wolf-woman, terror gripped her anew. The priests had hurt her badly, and they didn’t even have any power. The one she locked eyes with now was powerful enough to destroy a troop of pilgyns. The woman would crush her like an insect. With a howl of terror, she stumbled up, arms flailing for balance as she tried to escape. She didn’t feel the pain in her ankle as she tried to flee. What she did feel was the unfamiliar power flood over her. She tripped and hit the ground. Grass wrapped her tightly in place as the power surged through it.

“I didn’t do anything!” she cried. Death was coming for her, and nothing would stop it. She quieted as she realized she had intended to die tonight anyway. This way wasn’t going to be painless, but maybe they would show her enough mercy to kill her quickly.

For some reason, she found the movement of a single blade of grass very entrancing as it lifted up off her arm and returned to sway in the gentle breeze. The people gathering near her didn’t reach her attention. She focused on the grass, for as long as she watched that single blade it would not hurt when she died. Someone pulled her hood back. As she expected, a sword scraped quickly out of its sheath to the sound of “She’s got horns!”

Above her, the one they called Odif growled, “Put that thing away before I shove it up your ass!”

Someone let out a sarcastic laugh. “First he wants to save her, now he wants to kill her!”

Sam didn’t resist as one arm was pulled back and taken out of the sleeve then the other. She winced as the cloth scraped against her broken wings, but she was no longer afraid. The dead didn’t need to hide. She felt Odif grip the base of one wing, and the pain in that wing vanished. She imagined that the woman had vaporized it. After a moment, Odif let it go and gripped the other one, relieving the pain there, also.

“See anything like that before?” Shilo asked.

“What do you think she is?” a man asked.

“Got to be part demon, or maybe part bat,” Shilo said lightly.

Odif shifted in place. “Could you go over there and argue? I’m trying to concentrate here.”

“We aren’t arguing, we’re discussing,” Shilo pronounced.

“Well, go over there and do it!”

It occurred to Sam they were talking about her, but not of killing her. A twitch told her she still had both her stubby wings. As she pondered what was taking them so long to kill her, Odif shook her shoulder.

The woman’s face bent down to hers. “Hey! I said sit up.”

She obeyed, wondering why she wasn’t being killed. She watched blankly as Odif grabbed her shin above the ruined ankle. The power flooded down through her foot, taking the pain away. Odif cleaned off the bone sticking out then pulled and moved her foot around, looking very intently at it until it was in its proper place. The swelling and discoloring faded. The hole in her ankle smoothed over with fresh skin.

As she was doing this, Sam came up with a color for the power she used. She had always thought of her mother’s power as black, like the abyss. The woman in the brown robes held the opposite--white power. Magic she generally thought of as red. This power felt like the grass around her. She decided it was green power.

Once Odif was done, she released Sam’s ankle and stood up then grabbed her hand. “Come on, on your feet,” she said as she pulled her up.

Sam was sure she was going to feel pain. What she felt was a wonderful lack of it. Her ankle looked and felt as if nothing had ever happened. She put her weight on it then shifted back and forth to verify she could now walk.

“Thank you,” she whispered, astonished that someone had helped her once they knew what she was. She could feel apprehension from most of them, but no hatred. Still, she kept herself open to their minds.

“No one is going to hurt you,” Odif soothed. “What’s your name?”

“Sam.”

The dark men grinned.

“Is that short for something?” the one she knew was called Theo asked.

Sam shook her head. “My mother has a cruel sense of humor.”

The other dark man, Hutch, spoke up. “Hey, bat lady, where’d you come from?”

Meekly, she said, “The underworld, but I didn’t like it. That was why I escaped.”

“How did you get out?” Odif demanded.

Sam looked at her and discovered Odif was sensing her mind as easily as she was sensing theirs. In the time it took to blink an eye, she and Odif transferred thoughts. Odif knew that her mother was the demon she was after, and Sam knew that Odif was intent on going down to send Aliana back to the abyss, no matter what it took. Sam sensed something else. Beneath the kind, reasoning soul, a wild beast lay waiting to strike. She didn’t know if it was a wolf like she imagined, but this part of Odif lay just under the surface, tensed to rip the throat out of its prey. Quickly, she blocked any thoughts about her escape from the underworld.

Her mouth hung open. “I can’t lead you down there, she’ll kill you!”

Odif eyed her sternly. “I cannot let anything live that wants to destroy everything I hold dear. I helped you, now you will help me.”

The beast was stirring, maybe from the thought of getting to Aliana, or maybe tensing to strike out at her. She did owe something, and she was going to repay kindness with kindness.

“I will help you the best way I know how,” she said sincerely. “I will not tell you.”

“We dare trust her?” the one they called Entaurus asked.

Odif ignored his question. Her eyes never left Sam’s. “I will find the way down. The less warning she has, the better chance I have.”

Sam began to understand how badly the beast wanted to kill Aliana. She sensed that its life, and the lives of its friends were nothing but a means to get just that much closer to the demon’s throat. Odif was planning to drag her out of this world, if that’s what it took to get rid of her.

“You’re crazy,” she gasped.

“Well, she’s a smart bat lady!” Theo grinned.

“Pretty and smart,” Hutch agreed.

“Pretty smart.” Shilo grinned.

“Enough!” Odif snapped at them. Turning back to Sam, she asked, “Well?”

She took a step back, fearing for a moment that Odif might loosen the beast on her. Somehow, though, she knew Odif would not do that to her. Just to see someone who was willing to talk to her was a dream come true. Odif was not only talking to her, she was holding the others back from harming her. No one would lift a finger against her unless Odif told them to. She felt this as strongly as she felt a new feeling welling up. Before she could stop herself, she blurted out her thoughts.

“Listen to me! She is down there,” she stated, stabbing a finger at the ground. “We are up here. I feel we can be good friends--why do you insist on going down there to die, or worse?”

Odif gazed at her for a moment then gave her a slight nod. “May nature guide you, Sam. I wish you the best.” She turned and pointed at Scorpio. In an angry tone, she said, “You, over there!”

Sam stared in wonder as the woman walked away. That was it? No coercion, no threats? She knew Odif had the power to force her to tell, if she really wanted to; but there was no yelling or any force, only a few parting words. She watched Odif lead Scorpio by the arm towards the group gathered by the trees where the globe had landed. As she thought about how kind Odif had been to her, she started to follow them. In the few short moments she had known Odif, she had found what she never thought possible, someone who might be her friend. She couldn't let go of such a miracle so easily.

"Do those things work?" Shilo asked from beside her.

She turned her head at the unexpected voice and automatically moved a few steps to the side. It was a silly action—she didn't have anything to fear from him.

He frowned at her and planted his hands on his hips. "Don't like my company, huh?"

"Sorry, I'm just not used to people." She deliberately moved closer to him as she walked towards Odif, who had stopped and was pointing out the destruction to Scorpio. The single biggest thing she sensed from Shilo was curiosity. "I can't fly, if that's what you mean."

Ahead of her, Odif had a confusing mix of feelings boiling around in her. She was yelling at Scorpio, very angry and fearful for him at the same time.

"Your stunt got three people killed!" she barked as she glared at him. "The whole point of staying in the woods was so they wouldn't know where we were!"

Scorpio shifted in place. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry is not good enough!" Odif yelled. Glancing at Sam, she pointed at her. "She needs to get somewhere safe. You will take her and go back to Longforest."

Scorpio turned pale. "I'll never do that again, I promise."

"You won't be here to do it again!" Odif snapped.

From Scorpio Sam got a clear vision of someone who had done something similar not too long ago. He wanted desperately to tell this to Odif but feared to get her any angrier.

Sam walked up and told her what he wanted to say. "Odif, you gave your brother another chance. That is all he is asking for now."

Odif turned her glare on her. "How do you know?"

Tipping her head to Scorpio, she said, "He was thinking it."

Scorpio gaped at her. "You can read minds?"

"Tayan didn't get three people killed," Odif stated.

"Maybe it was my fault," Sam told her. "If I had run the other way, the pilgyns wouldn't have seen any of you."

“She’s got a point,” Shilo agreed. “Can’t say he was being real smart, but I don’t think that was his fault.” He indicated the blasted area. “Maybe it was mine for not catching that other globe.”

Odif gave them all a hard look. To Sam, she felt disappointed she couldn’t run Scorpio off as easily as she would have liked. “Fine, we’ll put it to a vote once we take care of the dead. That’s the best I can do.”

She turned and stomped off towards the group of elves and the brown-robed woman.

Scorpio cast a wary look at Sam. “Why did you do that?”

She gave him a shrug. “I can sense you care about each other. I don’t know everything that is going on, but if I had someone I wanted to be near that badly, I know I would appreciate some help.”

He started after Odif, pausing long enough to say, “Thanks.”

Sam helped gather wood for a funeral pyre, making sure she stayed near Odif. Of the four elves left, three were male warriors and one was a female wizard. Sam didn’t sense anything from her but sorrow for her lost friends. The male elves were like most of the others, giving off a mixture of curiosity and caution. Mother Frieda, on the other hand, kept her mind hidden and eyed Sam suspiciously. The whole time they built up the stack of wood then laid the bodies on top, Mother Frieda didn’t say anything to her, just watched her very carefully.

The pyre set, they gathered. Each one of them stepped up to the dead and said goodbye. Odif lit the pyre with a spurt of flame. Mother Frieda said a prayer for the souls of the departed as the fire engulfed the bodies. A few prayed with her, and all of them seemed to share the loss as well as the comfort of being together. It was the first time Sam had ever felt anything like this. Caught up in the moment, she silently watched the flames rise.

The fire was raging high when Mother Frieda turned around to face her. Sam was drawn to meet her eyes and saw Frieda was holding the talisman she wore to her chest. Sam then felt white energy flow towards her.

Fearing she was being attacked, she let out a squeal and tried to hide behind Odif.

Odif grabbed her, holding her firmly in place. “Calm down,” she commanded.

Heart in her throat, Sam felt the white power flow over her. She looked into Odif’s eyes, waiting to be hurt. She didn’t feel pain, though--or anything, for that matter. The power stayed around her for a moment then slipped away. After it did, she let out the breath she didn’t know she was holding.

Mother Frieda lowered her talisman, looking curiously at her. “I sense evil, as I suspected. I also sense good in her.”

Odif snorted. “Some help you are. Everyone has both inside them.”

“Not like this.” Mother Frieda told her. “In her, it is like two sides of a coin. Both are present, but each is distinct.”

Releasing Sam, Odif frowned at her. "They're opposites. How else would you see them?"

"Think of it this way," Mother Frieda explained as she pointed at Gloredaniel. "Her skin is as white as any I've seen. Theo, on the other hand, is about the darkest man I ever saw..."

"Which means I'm more handsome." Theo beamed at Hutch. Hutch only frowned back at him.

"In any case!" Mother Frieda snapped. "Only the most holy people have an aura of pure good, and only the most vile, evil ones radiate nothing but evil. If you think of it as skin color, most people are tanned, like you are. They do show both, but at varying amounts." Pointing to Sam, she said, "In our guest, what I see is like if one were to fuse one-half of Theo to one-half of Gloredaniel."

"Ouch." Theo winced. The group didn't hear him; they were focusing on what Mother Frieda was saying.

Odif looked at Sam then back to Mother Frieda. "You're saying she can be really good, or really bad, right?"

"I am not evil." Sam said quickly. "I have seen what it means to be evil; I don't do things like that!"

"I never said you did," Mother Frieda assured her. "I only know that you are capable." Her gaze hardened as she asked, "Aren't you?"

Under her scrutiny, Sam bowed her head. "If I have to be. I don't like hurting or killing anyone. That's why I ran away. That's why I live out here, so I don't have to be like that."

Odif picked up on her memory of the priests. "When people see you, they assume you're evil, so they hurt you."

She looked at Odif and nodded. Tears began to form in her eyes. "All I ever wanted was to belong somewhere, to not be hated."

"I don't hate you," Odif told her.

"That's why I don't want you to go down there," she stressed. "The best thing that could happen to you is if you die. You might end up being tortured for a very long time. All of you!" she finished, searching for someone in the group to understand.

"I will be killed," Odif said as if it meant nothing to her. "So might everyone who goes with me." Placing a hand on Sam's shoulder, she said in a gentle tone, "Go to Longforest with Scorpio; he'll show you a place where you can live in peace."

Maybe it was the kindness Odif showed her or the strength Odif radiated, but as Sam looked at her what she saw was a solid rock, a safe haven jutting out of a boiling sea of loneliness and hate. Somewhere in the backs of their minds, the others saw this, too, for they were each tied to her in their own way. Sam wanted to throw her arms around Odif and hold on as tightly as she could. She wanted even more to keep her away from Aliana. She had no idea which one was more powerful and shuddered at the thought of two such colossal forces crashing together. No matter the consequences, she could not leave Odif.

She cleared her throat and told her with her voice and mind, "I am staying with you."

“You will probably die,” Odif pointed out, hoping to scare her into changing her mind.

“I had planned on dying tonight,” she replied. “You saved me. I would rather live only a few days, with ones who could be my friends, than spend any more years alone.”

Odif nodded slightly. “What can you do? We’re heading for a fight, not to walk hand-in-hand in the sunshine.”

Clearly, she saw the pitched battles Odif was thinking about. Battles not only of steel weapons, but with the spears and magic that left hardened warriors broken and crying. She stiffened herself to wade into such chaos with her new friend. “I have a sword, and I know some magic.”

“We’ll see.” Motioning to Gloredaniel, Odif said, “Gloredaniel will test you and find out what you can do with magic. Scorpio, you’ll help her with swordsmanship. I’ll work with her mind.”

“Before you fill her head with magical mumbo-jumbo,” Mother Frieda stated as she took Sam by the arm, “I need to set her soul right.” Locking her eyes with Sam’s, she asked, “You wish to avoid the abyss, correct?”

Sam nodded, so Frieda continued. “I’m sure you already know about Lucifer, so I will tell you about Leighna and Odin, they are the ones who can save you...”

Sam listened to Mother Frieda, who told her about Leighna, the Goddess of Light and Home, as if she intended to save her whether she wanted to be saved or not. The only break she got was when Odif called for a vote on sending Scorpio back. Much to the druid’s dismay, no one in the group wanted him to go, so she settled on threatening to break his legs and leave him if he ever disobeyed her again.

Theo and Shilo dug Sam’s sword out of the ruins of her hut. She had some armor she had stolen, but Mother Frieda pronounced it evil and made them leave it. The only other thing they took from the remains of the cabin was some food. Sam left the field of destruction with her new friends, ready to do her best to stand with them.

The next days proved to be the toughest in her life. Odif promised she would be tested. Grilled and pushed until she couldn’t move or think was more like it. She quickly found out there was much more to handling a sword than being able to chop at someone. Like her swordsmanship, she found out she knew next to nothing about magic.

Her daily routine was harsh. Before breakfast, Scorpio worked with her using wooden sticks for practice. He explained moves and made her go through them and ended each session with a brisk match. Each time, he quickly disarmed her or gave her a smack on the bottom. Not once was she able to touch him with her own weapon.

Breakfast was followed by the march, during which Mother Frieda gave her lessons on Leighna and deeds of prophets and saints as they walked along. Gloredaniel took her turn at the midday break, first making her read and comprehend spell scrolls then prodding her to use bits of magic. The afternoon hike she spent repeating back everything she had read. Then, as everyone else was making camp and getting settled, Odif took a turn to work her mind.

Normally, it was easy for her to figure out what other people were thinking. After a full day on her feet, arms sore from her bouts with Scorpio and her mind sore from tiny shocks when she didn't repeat the magic words right, it was taxing just to tell Odif what she was thinking. She also found out Odif could mask her thoughts. The third night, she spent an hour probing Odif's mind only to find out she was wondering why her right eyebrow had a tiny break in it.

Now and then Sam felt her anger start to rise as Scorpio would dance out of her way, Gloredaniel would scold her for not making a larger flash of light or Odif would press her mind so hard she wanted to scream. Each time she shoved it back down, for no matter how roughly they treated her all she felt from them was the desire for her to be able to defend herself. Each night, Odif would give her a pat on the back or a gentle squeeze on her shoulder and tell her how well she did that day. Many times, that little bit of affection kept her from crying herself to sleep.

As the days went by, Scorpio enlisted the help of Theo, Hutch and Shilo in their morning practice. Her teammate, Shilo, would make a show of falling down and yelling if she didn't stay close enough to cover his back. Worse yet, he would smack her on the bottom every time she lost track of him. Mother Frieda's lessons became more thought-provoking. Instead of just telling her how Leighna expected her to act, she gave Sam a scenario and asked how she would handle it. Gloredaniel took to shooting bits of magic at her, forcing her to think of and cast a proper defense before she was stung. Odif's lessons didn't hurt but did push her to reach out farther and focus more with her mind than she ever thought she could.

One day things changed. Sam went through her sword practice with Scorpio, this time with the emphasis on using her feet as an additional weapon. She fell a few times but got the idea. As they marched, JoJo took over to show her a few of his favorite spells then she sat with Theo and Hutch during the break to just talk about the islands they came from. The afternoon walk was fairly quiet, neither Odif nor Mother Frieda talked much. She was glad for the rest, to just walk along and not have to think.

By the time they made camp, though, she was starting to think they were giving up on her. Many days she would just listen to Mother Frieda, too tired to show much enthusiasm. She went over to help Frieda as she placed the rocks for the evening's fire.

Bringing a rock to her, Sam squatted down. "Leighna says that forgiveness helps to cleanse the soul, correct?" she asked.

Mother Frieda turned a blank look to her. "That's right," she said as she took the rock. "No lessons tonight, get some rest."

"But I do listen, even though I might not look like it."

Mother Frieda gave her brief grin. "I know, child. Why don't you go see if Odif has anything for you to do."

She didn't know what had Mother Frieda so preoccupied but decided against trying to see into her mind to find out. You didn't do that to friends. "Anything I can help with?"

Mother Frieda gave a sigh. "Just collect some firewood."

"Yes, Mother," she said, knowing the woman liked to be called that. Her words got her another attempt at a grin, which satisfied her.

She found Odif just standing still and watching the horizon. Walking up beside her, she notice something in the brush a short distance in front of them. "I think I can tell you where that snake is," she offered, hoping to get Odif's attention.

Odif gave her a grin almost exactly as Frieda had done. "Get some rest, Sam. I think you've earned it."

She noted Odif was more than preoccupied, she felt...tense, like something was about to happen. "What's wrong?"

Shrugging one shoulder, Odif stated, "Probably nothing. I'll let you know if there is."

The way she stood, as if watching for something, and the firm grip she had on her staff made Sam nervous. She reached out and tried to sense something in the direction Odif was facing. As she did, she got a vague sense of being watched. There was nothing she could identify as being wrong, and no creatures that looked the least bit threatening.

"What can I do?"

Still watching the horizon, Odif asked, "Remember the day we found you?"

"I'll never forget it."

"Good. If one of us tells you to do something, do it quickly and do not get caught out by yourself."

She looked up at Odif's face, which was set in thought. This time she didn't suppress the urge and hugged her tightly. Odif's arm went around her shoulders and hugged her back. Never had she felt better than she did at this moment. She could die right now and be happy for all eternity.

"Thank you for being my friend."

Odif's grip tightened slightly then she let her go. "You're welcome. In case this is something, you need your rest."

"Right after dinner," she promised then went to collect firewood for Mother Frieda.

Night fell with Odif and Mother Frieda still wary. The others seemed oblivious to this. Scorpio offered to take a stroll with Odif, who refused. By the way the others grinned and suggested there was something wrong with Odif, she got the idea that "a stroll" had nothing to do with walking, and that Odif never refused. Sam got into her bed, noting the area was carpeted with green power and Frieda was aglow in her white. Although she thought she was too anxious to get any sleep, the next thing she experienced was waking up.

Something was now very close. It was no longer a feeling of being watched--she felt darkness, like a giant black cloud rushing at her. Fear gripped her heart; she knew the source of the darkness. She hadn't thought this was possible!

She popped her eyes open to see forms moving in the dark. Mother Frieda and Porthalen were waking everyone up. As Sam got up, she cried, "My mother's coming!" which got everyone moving a bit faster.

Mother Frieda barked out orders in a firm but quiet voice. "Sam, take my hand. Theo, take Shilo's...Hutch! Grab Porthalen's hand, it won't kill you to be separated from Theo! Now, Gloredaniel,

grab Sam's hand and close the circle. JoJo, you and Entaurus keep Odif down, no matter what happens."

As they closed to form the circle, Sam noticed Odif was still sleeping. By the way JoJo was kneeling over her, he was keeping her asleep by magical means.

The blackness was now right behind her. She felt her mother's presence race at her as she grabbed Frieda's hand. Heart thumped wildly, she trusted that Mother Frieda was somehow going to protect her.

Mother Frieda started her chanting prayer. White power enveloped the circle, flooding Sam with a feeling of peace and joy as the blackness dashed harmlessly against the white barrier.

From behind her, a chilling wail accompanied the wash of evil. "What is this?" Aliana raged. "Who dares keep my daughter from me?"

Sam held on to the peace as Aliana took on physical form and moved directly behind Frieda. "So, you fat sow, do you think you can keep my own child away from me?" Her voice lowered to a growl. "Release her, or I will eat your soul then feed your carcass to the rats."

Ignoring her, Mother Frieda kept up her chant of "Leighna, our light and life, protect us from evil" over and over again.

Sam felt cold against the back of her neck as Aliana moved to stand behind her.

"Do you think these bags of blood and bones will keep you from me?" she snarled. "They will weaken. You know I am stronger than they are. I give you one chance to save them. Let go of the sow's hand and come with me. You do this, and I will spare them."

The peace started to waver. Mother Frieda gripped her hand tightly and kept up her chant in a firm voice. Odif was stirring.

"Refuse, and you will watch each one be picked apart before I roast them," Aliana continued in a growl. "You know I will do it!"

Sam did know. She felt her mother's will press against the white barrier with increasing force. She desperately held on to Frieda's hand as the peace slowly eroded.

Her mother's voice became calmer. "Why do you fight me? What possesses you to resist when you know I will win?"

Sam felt her mother's will start to creep into her mind. Odif had taught her that a single image, if thought about hard enough, would stop such intrusions. She focused on the first thing she thought of, the memory she would cherish forever. She concentrated on the first time she hugged Odif in friendship.

Aliana's piercing screech went all the way to her bones. "That...druid...bitch!" she screamed in three separate breaths.

In front of her, JoJo collapsed. At first, she thought her mother had somehow breeched the circle, but then a kick from Odif sent Entaurus flying back to land against Shilo, who fell and broke the circle. Odif shot to her feet, teeth bared in rage. A low growl came from deep within her chest.

The beast was loose.

Waves of power came at Sam from front and back as Odif charged. Frieda jerked her out of the path as Odif and Aliana met, each wailing out their hatred in a terrifying scream. She stumbled back to fall on her behind as the circle broke apart.

For all the training Odif had given her, for all the power and craftiness she knew her mother possessed, neither combatant showed any refined skill. Using power in its raw form they tore at each other like a pair of mad wildcats.

The battle on their feet was very brief. In a flurry of motion, Odif thrust her staff into Aliana's chest as Aliana clawed at her in a sweeping motion, tearing the skin off her forehead and breaking the staff in two. Odif smashed one of the horns off the demon's forehead as Aliana stabbed a hand into her stomach. She jerked back with a scream; and Odif swung hard again, this time removing her lower jaw with a loud crack as the remaining part of the staff shattered. Aliana dove on Odif; and they rolled on the ground, pieces of flesh and cloth flying away as they fought furiously with nothing but their hands, teeth and raw energy.

Aliana got over Odif and clamped a hand around her throat to choke the life out of her. Lightning flashed down from the sky to vaporize her arm and Odif threw her off then quickly lunged onto her as she pulled a dark dagger from nowhere. Aliana kicked her leg, which broke with a sickening crack. Odif didn't notice. She had put all her energy into driving the dagger into Aliana.

Locked in a temporary stalemate, Odif used every ounce of power in her mind and body to stab Aliana with the dagger. Under her, Aliana used her one arm and her power to try to keep from being stabbed. Sam knew this wasn't going to last long--Odif was leaking blood in a steady flow from her side, her leg where the bone was now showing and from the flap of skin that was hanging over one eye.

Doing the only thing she had presence of mind to, Sam focused on her mother and lashed out with her will--not to destroy, but to distract.

"Look at me!" she cried with her mind and voice.

Aliana snapped her head around to glare at her. As she did, Odif forced her arm down, driving the dagger towards her stomach. Aliana's eyes went wide, and she did the only thing she could to save herself.

She vanished.

Odif slammed the dagger into the ground in triumph. A second later, she realized that her foe was no longer under her. Kneeling on her good knee, she looked around wildly, flinging blood as she cried out, "Where are you! *I'm not done with you!*"

Dropping down to all fours, she began pounding the ground, wailing out one word every time her first hit. "I...had...her...I...had...her...I...had...her!" She then fell prone and began crying.

Stunned by the vicious fight, the group approached her slowly. Sam grabbed Mother Frieda by the arm and dragged her over to Odif, who was sobbing from her failure. She had to prod others with her mind to get them moving and help Odif before she bled to death.

As Mother Frieda prayed for healing, Scorpio wrapped his arms around Odif's chest and steadied her

as Theo pulled on her leg so Hutch could set the break. Sam got her forehead skin back in place and wrapped her head with a bandage. When she tried to cover the gaping wound in the druid's side, Odif stopped her.

Picking up the burnt-looking dagger, Odif tipped it so the point was in the wound then shoved it into her body so it went up under her ribs. She pushed until it was completely embedded in her flesh.

Aghast at her action, Sam cried, "Why did you do that!"

"That was the stick, wasn't it?" Scorpio said accusingly.

Mother Frieda eyed the wound then looked at Odif. "What is that thing?"

Breathing heavily, her face covered in rivulets of sweat, blood and tears, Odif explained. "It's a soul barb. If I can get it into her, her soul is attached to mine. She will go where I take her, and there isn't a damn thing she can do about it. I'm going to drag that demon bitch back to the abyss."

"Dear Leighna," Mother Frieda whispered.

"You'll end up there, too!" Scorpio cried.

Odif winced and shifted in his arms. "So what? She'll be gone for good."

Sam had known Odif was willing to die to remove Aliana from the world. But she was not only willing to die, but to damn herself to keep her world safe.

"I can't let you do that."

Odif eyed her. "Just try and stop me."

Aliana appeared at the base of her altar--or, rather, three feet above the floor in front of it. Having to escape quickly, she hadn't pinpointed her destination, other than to be beside Lucifer's power. The fall didn't do her shattered body any further damage, but it did bruise her ego just a bit more. Flailing to her feet, she lashed out at the air with her one arm and made guttural noises that were suppose to be curses and things she would do to Odif once she got her hands on her again.

In her screaming and stomping fit, fear mixed into her rage. That whore had laid a trap for her with her own daughter! How in the abyss did she know where and when to set her trap? She didn't know what that dagger was, but it looked to be part of the druid herself. When she drove her hand into Odif to gut the bitch, she brushed against that damn dagger. It wasn't pain she felt--more like the dagger had started to draw her essence towards it. If it had been the tip instead of the handle she brushed, she was sure it would have fused itself into her somehow. Spying her own ceremonial dagger, she grabbed it and threw it with a hollow cry meant to be a wail.

"What a temper," someone sighed.

She spun to tear apart the owner of the voice. Beside the altar stood a tall man with tightly cropped black hair and a goatee. He leaned on his gem-encrusted gold scepter as he eyed her. Upon seeing him, she fell to her knees and tried to beg for power without a lower jaw.

Lucifer glared down at her. "Use your mind, or what is left of it!"

Aliana held up her hand to him as she spoke with her mind. "The druid whore taunts me! She has taken my child, the child I was to give to you! Help me crush her, I beg of you!"

Lucifer inspected his long fingernails thoughtfully. "I have no direct power in this world. You were supposed to change that." Shifting his eyes to her, he sent her a mental picture. Before his throne, Odif stood as if to do battle. Aliana lay crumpled by Odif's side. Odif's fingers were long and thin, reaching into Aliana's skull.

"If she brings you back to the abyss on a leash, who do you think will gain my favor?"

"I will kill that whore!" she announced, resolving that she would not make another mistake in dealing with that witch.

Lucifer tipped his head, amused by her rage. "She has bested you twice. I think another meeting will send you back to face me. Do you want to be the one to feed my guardians?"

She had seen what happened to souls who failed. Lucifer's personal guardians had eaten the soul of the demon she had replaced. Then, she had enjoyed the sight as the sharp teeth tore the demon into bits of agony. Each bit lived inside the guardians, withering in the pain of being digested forever. The pieces of souls inside the guardians wailed in a chorus of agony that Lucifer himself loved to hear. If she failed then her soul would be adding to this music.

"Where is your cunning?" Lucifer asked. "Once, you were the most devious creature I ever saw. That is why I picked you to take this world." He snorted at her. "A guardian can fight better than you!"

He was right. She didn't get to be one of his favorites by trying to muscle other demons about. She got here through her talents. Seduction, trickery and backstabbing were the things she was expert in. To face the druid alone was a farce, she should have known better. It ate away at her that her daughter was now bonded to that vile bitch, but if she wanted to get her daughter back she would have to use her skills.

So far, Odif was the one to take the initiative and set traps for her. She had to set her own trap and not get drawn into attacking the druid directly. She had to lure them where she wanted them then wear them down until they were helpless.

"That's my prize concubine," Lucifer said with an evil grin. He touched the hole where her missing horn was and another appeared. "You are so close to pleasing me--don't let the powers of hatred and chaos work against you now." His grin faded into a stern look that penetrated her soul. "I will have this world. If you want to be the one to take it for me then do two things: kill your food slave, and forget the druid! Now go put yourself back together and finish what you started."

He vanished, leaving Aliana alone in the dark temple.

She pondered his words. Kill her food slave? If she truly destroyed him then she could no longer have the endless energy he provided her. Without him, she could not get spears to Hans so quickly or use her power whenever she liked. Destroying him was as impossible as letting Odif go.

She stayed in her temple as she used magic to reform her lost body parts. Once she was done, she went to her chambers and drained one of her personal slaves to get some energy back. Feeling a little more

like herself, she sat and thought about how best to get rid of that cursed druid.

Chapter 15

In the weeks after Odif's departure, Jeni dove into the task of raising an army for Tayan. Arthur and Belenaris took over most of her business affairs while she cared for Erica and went to meeting after meeting with her grandmother to get the whole district involved.

At the more formal dinner meetings, her mother and father would go together. Other than that, the only time they were within sight of each other was when they had to be. Her mother was always busy with something, and her father was watching after the quarries and keeping an eye on Belenaris and Redman Coachline. After many flowers and apologies on bent knee, Sally said she forgave Arthur, but not once had Jeni seen them hug or even hold hands. When they went to the Duke to help raise support, she cornered her mother in the coach and explained what had happened with Odif, how she was really trying to help. Her mother only gave her a sad smile and said she understood then changed the subject.

Jeni got a rapid response to her pleas for help. Cries of "Save the homeland" quickly spread in the district. Lord Parnal and Elder Lord Tolham started gathering men and supplies and promised to finance the Army of Elrad East. Through speeches and monetary help for poorer elven families, they drew large numbers of recruits.

At the Tolham estate, the grounds that once held gaming fields now contained obstacle courses, archery targets and racks of practice weapons. Where girls and women used to stand on the sides and cheer their team on, now they practiced applying splints and bandaging wounds. Farther down the field, knights taught groups of men the arts of war. Salinthia's estate was the site of cavalry training and small group attack methods, as well as a staging area for the swelling herds of horses. It seemed every elf, and quite a few humans, had answered the call.

The response to her call to send men into the plains, however, was dead silence. She knew what was there--she had seen the hideous thing. For all her explanations, all she got in return was hard looks. Many told her the war was in Elrad, and some even suggested she was trying to make trouble with the north. No one cared what was on the plains, and they didn't want to waste time on anything but helping Elrad. Even her grandmother wanted her to keep quiet about sending people to the plains.

Jeni's only positive response came from a visiting knight from Krundle. He told her about how General Cooper wanted to test his battlewagons and thought he might be willing to help her. Jeni didn't know much about war, so having a real general to lead men onto the plains would be very useful. When General Cooper arrived at the mid-eastern coach depot, she asked her father to go with her to see one of the steam wagons.

The thing they looked at reminded her of a junk pile on wheels. It was big--longer than a horse and wagon--and made completely of iron and steel. The back was squared off, with windows, sitting atop man-sized back wheels. The main body was a long, thick barrel shape with pipes running all over the surface of it. The front, waist-high wheels had the same thick spokes and wide, slatted contact surface the back ones did. Two small turrets sat on top like large bug eyes. Near the front of the heavy steel

barrel, a round chimney billowed dark smoke. She saw the tracks it made coming into the coach yard, but it was hard to believe it could be moved, let alone move under its own power. There had to be tons of steel in this thing.

“This moves by itself?”

“That is correct, M’lady,” General Cooper said from beside her. He wore the red-and-gold uniform of Krundle. Puffing his chest up, he said, “We get a full head of steam, and we can outrun horses.”

Arthur waved a hand at the monstrosity before them. “Can you explain just how it does that?”

“Be glad to.” Walking over to it, he slapped the cylindrical body. “This is the water chamber--it stores water--and towards the back, there, is the boiling chamber. The water is heated into pressurized steam, which runs through the pipes, here, to the wheel cylinders.” Pointing to the large, outhouse-like box, he said, “The driver sits in the top so he can see where he’s going. Below him, the engineers feed the firebox and control steam pressure. The wood wagon connects to the back and has a hitch so it can pull other wagons behind it.”

“What are those?” Jeni asked, pointing to the front turrets.

“Those are for defense. Each has a steam blaster the man in it can use. This wagon was made to pull other wagons behind it. It can be used for battle, but that is not its primary function.”

“So, this isn’t a battlewagon?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, M’lady, they are much bigger and have two boilers as well as steam cannons.”

Arthur stared at him. “What in the abyss is a steam cannon?”

Waving for them to follow, Cooper went to the front and climbed a ladder between the turrets. Opening a door panel in one, he stepped in. “Come up, let me show you.”

Arthur and Jeni looked at each other. “You first,” he said.

Inside the turret, a thick rod came from the floor. Attached to this was a tube with a lever on top. There was just enough room for her to squeeze in across from General Cooper, with Arthur standing on the ladder poking his head in.

“This is a firing tube,” Cooper explained. Reaching into a bin fixed to the wall, he pulled out a fist-sized rock. The cylindrical rock was wrapped with a thin cloth. “This is what the tube shoots. The cloth makes sure the rock seals in the tube. A rock this size will kill just about anything at close range and will penetrate four-inch-thick wood. Armor is smashed flat by the impact. At mid-range, say just beyond bowshot, it is still powerful. It might not kill a vlak, but it would get its attention.” Holding his hands to form a circle about the size of a head, he added, “The rocks shot by steam cannons are this big around. One rock can smash holes in gates and most rock walls. We also have buckets of smaller rock that spread out when shot, for use against cavalry and infantry.”

“You do all this with water?” Arthur asked.

Cooper nodded. “Heated under pressure, steam is a very powerful force.”

“Can we see it work?” Jeni asked.

Cooper thought for a moment. “Not in the city. The first battlewagons will arrive in two days. I’ll set up a demonstration just east of town. Anyone who is interested can come watch.”

“We’ll be there,” Jeni assured him. “You mentioned in your letter that you’ll need funds for this mission?”

He nodded. Leaning on the tube, he looked at her seriously. “These machines are expensive to operate. Besides the cost of the smiths, fitters and engineers, we use a lot of steel; and breakdowns are always a concern. I will send these wagons wherever you want us to go, but I need twelve thousand gold up front and five hundred each month we are in your service.”

Jeni gaped at him, while Arthur let out a loud snort.

“You’re insane!” he spat. “How can you expect us to come up with that kind of money?”

Cooper shrugged. “Craftsmen and soldiers need to get paid. Our duke will no longer finance my project without proof these wagons work in battle. I need to win a few battles, but I can’t do that without hard gold.”

Taking a deep breath, Jeni nodded slightly. “If you are willing to work something out with me, I will give you the gold.”

“Jeni, no!” Arthur snapped. Reaching in to hold her hand, he looked at her sternly. “You are going to be ruined if you try that. Think, girl! You have a long life ahead of you; don’t go broke now. Once you’ve lost everything, it is very hard to recover.”

Turning to squat in front of him, she gave him one of her looks of determination. “Dad, everything I have is also Eric’s. Don’t you think I should do everything I can to find him?”

Arthur spoke slowly, trying to drive home his point. “Jeni, I think Eric would not want you to destitute yourself and Erica, no matter what. Honey, from what you told me, he gave his soul so you would be safe. He wanted you to have a good life.”

“He *wants* me to have a good life,” she corrected. “And to have a good life, I need him back.”

Arthur shook his head sadly. “Honey, sometimes we can’t have what we want.”

Her face hardened. “We will see.”

Arthur knew talking to her at the moment was useless. By her own admission, whatever it was Odif had pulled through the crystal had eaten Eric. She was refusing to believe he was dead. She was convinced that somehow he was going to come back to her. Belenaris had talked to him before about getting Jeni a consort to help handle her affairs and not let her do anything to hurt herself. He hated to admit it, but it looked like Belenaris was right. Since he already knew how her businesses worked, Arthur had to begrudgingly admit the elf lord was the best choice. He knew Belenaris would siphon some of Jeni’s money into his own coffers, but losing bits here and there was better than watching all of her hard work go down the well. He also knew that Belenaris would take care of Jeni.

Diverting his eyes to the ground, he said, “Let’s get out of this thing, we still have a day’s work ahead of us.”

He hung around the coach yard long enough to see the steam wagon depart, chugging loudly and blowing smoke. It creaked and squeaked, but the thing did leave under its own power. As transportation, it might have a chance at success if General Cooper could bring the cost down, but a deaf man could hear that thing coming miles away. In battle, the smoke and noise would give away their position. He had the feeling those behemoths would be more of a liability than any real help. He could not let Jeni ruin everything she had built for a useless cause.

Once Jeni had gone about her routine, he went into his office and sent a message to the young Lord Tolham. The message was simple: if he got Salinthia's approval, they would go before the council and have Jeni given a consort. He felt bad doing this to her; but left on her own, she might destroy not only her life but Erica's as well. He only hoped that, in time, she would forgive him.

He was getting ready to leave when a coachman rapped on the open doorframe. "Arthur Cooper?"

"That's me."

Looking back into the hallway, the man said, "In here, lady."

A green-skinned Slavonic girl came in and stood across the desk from him. She wore the simple light-gray shirt and skirt of a slave. He didn't agree with slavery, but he did know there were laws about harboring runaways. He already had to contend with Sally's anger and Jeni's foolishness; he didn't want to add the possibility of going to prison to his list of problems.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her.

The girl gave him a benevolent smile. "I have been given to you."

He cocked his head. "You what?"

"I am yours."

He was just starting to get back into Sally's good graces after the catastrophe of that druid woman's visit. The last thing he needed was for her to think he was buying slave women. "I don't want you."

She moved closer to the desk, and her smile turned nervous. "Please, it is very important that you take me home."

"What part of 'I don't want you' don't you understand?" he growled.

"Can I have her?" the coachman asked. "Being Slavonic, she'll go for at least three hundred gold." Seeing Arthur shoot him a glare, he added, "Or so I've heard." He shrugged.

Arthur turned his attention to the girl. He decided to get to the bottom of this nonsense. "Okay, lady, who sent you?"

"My Master."

"And who is that?"

Wringing her hands, she glanced at the coachman. "Please, take me home then I will explain."

Arthur nodded. "Fine, where do you live?"

"Wherever you live."

"Where are you from?"

"My last Master lived in Spring Valley."

"And who is he?"

"Duke Toma."

"Good," he said and pointed to the door. "Get in a coach, and go back to Spring Valley where you belong."

"I don't belong there anymore! My Master gave me specific instructions--I must obey!" she pleaded.

"Duke Toma," Arthur stated.

"No!" She stomped a foot in frustration. Squeezing her hands together, she bounced them up and down as she spoke. "I was to come here and explain to you what happened, only to you! My Master said you would know what to do. I found your wife, and she only said she is eager for an explanation, also."

He stared at her for a few seconds as what she said sank in. "Ohhh, no," he breathed, dropping his head. "And what did you tell her?"

"What I was supposed to. I belong to Arthur Cooper, who lives in Tolina."

He shot to his feet, red-faced. Walking briskly around the desk, he grabbed her arm and gave her a shove towards the door. "Get back to the coach!" To the coachman, he barked, "Drive me home, now!"

Sally walked around the table in the small study, making sure there were no wrinkles in the blue tablecloth. She had set the table herself, using their finest silver and crystal tableware. The gold-colored candles matched the real gold candlesticks, and the curtains half-covered the windows for a shadowed effect on the room.

There was nothing on the table that required adjusting, so she smoothed out her black silk gown once more. Close fitting on her torso, it blossomed out full from her hips to the floor. She shifted the low-cut neckline one way then the other, making sure the V rested exactly on the center of her chest. Only a slight hint of breast showed on each side. As she looked down at herself, it occurred to her that compared to the slave girl who had showed up and--defiantly--to Odif, her breasts were, indeed, small. Was that why he had bought that wench? Blocking out that thought, she went to the mirror.

She checked her silver necklace and teardrop earrings then scrutinized her hair for any strays. As she looked at herself, she tried to see what it was that was driving her husband away from her. Pulling a few strands down to cover the tips of her ears, she tried to make them look more rounded. That only ruined the look of her hair. Frustrated, she pushed it back in place and stared into her own eyes. She knew it wasn't the size of her chest, the width of her hips or the shape of her ears that was causing Arthur to look

to other women.

It was her. When he came back to her that night, she smelled the sex on him. Right from the start, he had apologized with tears in his eyes. At the time, she was so hurt she didn't care about anything except for how she felt. Even when she accepted his apology just to shut him up, she still wanted him to suffer like she was. She had done her best to make him feel dirty and low. In time, she would have eased up and started to make amends. It wasn't until today, when that green-skinned slave showed up, that she began to think she was really losing him. This wasn't some druid seducing him with magic. He had gone out and bought the affection she was denying him.

She forgot sometimes that Arthur was human. He was just Arthur, her husband. He was also a man who wouldn't live as long as she would, one who had to pack all his emotions and desires into a few short decades. She could afford to wait ten years to make up and get on with their lives, he couldn't. He had worked very hard to make their home, and even when all that work was burned to the ground he kept trying. Not once had he complained about what they had lost but instead kept reminding her of what they had. No matter how bad things got, he always put her first and treated Pern and Jeni like they were his own. Even when she would have one of her occasional bittersweet memories of Verhan, he would hold her and coax her into talking about him. It didn't bother him that she still loved her first husband--or, if it did, he didn't let it show.

Aware her eyes were clouding, she grabbed a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes, trying not to ruin her makeup. She had to keep everything perfect. If he could beg for weeks for her to forgive him, she could make her one attempt worthy of the man she loved.

The door slammed open, making her jump and spin around, nearly knocking the mirror on the floor. Arthur shoved the slave girl in before him. The girl stumbled, only just managing to keep her feet. She backed against the wall, eyeing him fearfully.

Jabbing a finger at her, Arthur growled, "You tell Sally what you told me."

Looking at him then Sally, she said, "I...was given to Arthur."

"No!" he barked. "Who told you to say that?"

Shrinking back from him, she cried, "My Master."

"And who is he?"

She stared at him for a few seconds then her face became stricken. "I forgot his name!"

Eyeing her, his voice became dangerously calm. "You what?"

"I forgot his name!" she cried again, holding her head. "I know what he looks like, but I was only his slave for a short time, and that was weeks ago!"

Arthur ignored her. Walking over to Sally, he jerked a thumb back at the cowering girl. His voice was stern. "I never knew about her before today. Whether this is a bad joke or she is really a runaway, I've never seen her before. I have not, nor will I ever, stooped to buying women. I love you, even if you don't love me any more."

His anger vented, he began to notice the room and the way Sally was dressed. Looking at the toes of his

boots, he tipped his head towards the door. "I'll let you get back to your...meeting."

As he turned to leave, Sally grabbed his arm. "Wait." Turning him back, she hugged him tightly. She couldn't stop the tears as she cried "I'm sorry" over and over.

His arms enfolded her as he nuzzled her ear. "I'm sorry, too, sweetheart," he whispered. They locked lips in a warm, deep kiss, breaking it only to hug each other tighter.

The girl watched them, waiting patiently until they noticed her again. Arthur was the first to look over at her.

"You still here?" he asked harshly.

She gave a half-smile. "I have to tell you what happened. Master said you would know what to do."

"What is your name, child?" Sally asked.

"Ellie."

Releasing Arthur except for a firm grip on his hand, Sally wiped her cheeks. "Where is this Master of yours?"

"He's with me," she replied, patting the waistband of her skirt. "The woman he was with is with me, too."

"They are with you?" Arthur asked with a raised eyebrow.

She nodded and pulled a black bag from under her skirt. Showing it to him, she said, "He made her jump in here then jumped in himself."

Arthur and Sally looked at each other. Arthur inspected it then showed it to Sally. "This is the bag I gave Eric."

Her eyes widened as she looked at Ellie. "Tell me about your Master, what does he look like?"

Ellie tried hard to think and tell them everything she knew. "Long red hair and beard. He had women guarding him because he killed all the men. He's kinda odd, he makes me confused. He's mean to people, even to the woman he tried to escape with. She was dancing, but then just after he told me to go they started beating people up. When they ran, I tried to keep up; and she hit me hard," she explained, touching her ribs. "I couldn't breathe, it hurt so bad. Anyway, he yelled at her and carried me to the storeroom. He was looking for a way out and she made the pain go away. He came back and they started yelling at each other again. Then he made her get in the bag and got in himself before Duke Toma could break the door down."

"Can't you remember a name?" Sally asked.

Screwing her face up in thought, Ellie shook her head. "I can't."

Although she hated the sound of it, Sally voiced the only name she knew of a woman who could hurt then heal so quickly. "Odif?"

Ellie looked at her and nodded. "Might be...yes, he did call her Odif."

Sally felt her pulse quicken. "Do you remember the name Eric?" she asked anxiously.

"No."

Arthur gave a heavy sigh. "Let's take a look."

"I looked, but I didn't see them in there," Ellie explained.

Taking the bag from her, he laid it down and had Sally hold the bottom. He reached in then pulled his arm back out. "Eric's not in there."

Sally looked up at Ellie. "You said he was escaping. Was he being kept a prisoner?"

Ellie nodded. "Yes, Duke Toma had to keep him locked up but couldn't do anything to hurt him."

"Was he ordered to do that...or he really couldn't hurt him?" Arthur asked.

"Duke Toma ordered that no one was to hurt him, no matter what," Ellie explained.

Sally hung her head in thought then told Arthur, "Try Tayan."

As Arthur reached in, Ellie cried, "Yes/His name is Tayan!"

"Got him," Arthur said and reached in with the other hand. He pulled Tayan out by the arms. As soon as he was free of the bag, Tayan shot to his feet and frantically looked around, poised to fight.

"Whoa!" Arthur said, hands up. "You're in Tolina."

Tayan looked at him for a second as if to bring him into focus then shook his head.

"That was weird," he mumbled.

Ellie smiled broadly at him. "I did as you said, Master, I went from Spring Valley to here, all by myself!"

He looked at her and gave her a half-grin. "Good job, but don't call me Master."

Pointing to the bag, Arthur asked, "Odif's not in there, is she?"

Tayan shook his head. "No, Sister Amber. I thought she was Odif at first because..." He decided not to finish that explanation. "She will need some clothes, or a robe."

Sally gaped at him. "You have *another* sister?"

"She's a priestess," he explained then cocked his head slightly. "What do you mean 'another sister?'"

"Odif was here, and Jeni has a baby. Her name is Erica," Sally explained.

Hearing Odif mentioned so much, Arthur decided to leave. "I'll get the robe."

Tayan nodded in thought as Arthur left. “Why did Odif come here?”

She clenched a fist as she thought about that harlot. “She came looking for Eric. Before she left, she turned the whole house upside-down.”

By the look on her face, Tayan didn’t need to be told the specifics. Why Odif came looking for his father, he didn’t know. He just hoped she wasn’t going to try to force them together. He had seen all of Eric he ever cared to.

“Odif can be tough to live with. She’ll do something totally selfless then follow it with something to really ruffle your feathers,” he grinned. “Try to explain it to her, and she just doesn’t get it. You don’t know whether to hug her or choke her.”

“That’s an understatement,” Sally snorted. “She did tell us you would be coming. Mother and Jeni have gotten the nobles to raise an army for you. Lord Parnal is out on the grounds today with the horsemen. Elder Lord Tolham is training the infantry at his estate.”

Odif was infuriating, but her heart was in the right place; he couldn’t be too angry with her. “Did she say when Zodiac wants us to move?”

“No, only that you must be at the city on the plains, even if all you have is a bent stick to defend yourself with.”

“I think I’ll have more than a bent stick.” As he said it, he realized that, just like on the road to Paladnia, he was once again without anything but the clothes on his back. The white shirt and black pants were fine for now, but he had to get some supplies. Looking down at himself, he saw the formal black shoes. He didn’t even have proper boots. At least here he could send for money at Old Castle; he had accumulated a sizable account in the vaults there.

Noticing Ellie watching him, he thought briefly about asking her to find a messenger service. She looked thinner, and a bit ragged, as if she had been sleeping outside. He didn’t really want to send her. Anyway, there was one thing he had to explain to her.

“Sally, would you be kind enough to find me a messenger?”

“I can do it...Tayan,” Ellie piped up and started for the door.

“Ellie, I want you here.”

“Yes, Tayan,” she replied obediently.

“May I suggest you get some rest?” Sally said. “Once people know you’re here, you’ll have a small army near you day and night.”

Tayan knew what that was like. His short time with the company as Tayan the Warrior was over, and it was back to being Lord Tayan. He began to realize how much he was going to miss being with his friends. Strangely, even fighting their way up through Longforest seemed like a vacation.

“You’re right. Give us the rest of the day before you tell anyone we’re here?”

“I’ll send word around that you will receive visitors tomorrow morning. To avoid people today, stay on

the second floor in the west wing.” Glancing at Ellie, she said, “I’ll have three rooms readied for you.”

The door opened and Arthur came in with a white bathrobe. “Will this do?” he asked, holding it out.

Tayan took it and passed it to Ellie. “When I pull her out, put it around her.”

“Yes, Tayan,” she said and squatted down, holding the robe open.

Thinking of Amber, he got a mental picture of her standing in the dim room, wearing only the brief shorts. Once again, the sight of her pillowy breasts dominated his mind. He stopped himself from reaching into the bag, afraid of what he might be grabbing, and concentrated on her hands. As soon as he reached in, he felt her fingers. He glanced at Ellie to be sure she was ready then pulled Amber out.

Ellie tried to wrap the robe around her. As with Tayan, for her the dark storeroom was only seconds ago, not weeks. With a squeak of fear, she twisted around in Tayan’s hands and kicked at the robe as she broke free. She shot to her feet poised to fight, only to see Tayan and another man with their backs to her. The green girl had dropped the robe and backed off, gazing at her nervously.

The elf woman picked up the robe and handed it to her. “You are in Tolina. That is my husband, Arthur. I am Saurenthansia--you may call me Sally.”

Quickly donning the robe, Amber looked at the room. She was greatly relieved there were only a few people here and not the whole Company standing around. Mother Frieda would have her hide, and the ribbing she would get from the others would be endless! She was grateful to be away from that horrid place and in one piece.

Tayan had made it to one of his primary destinations. Before she went to see the duke with him, she had business of her own to attend to.

“Is there a church nearby?” she asked Sally.

“Five blocks down then two right,” Sally told her. “It is a church of Odin, will that do?”

“I would prefer Leighna’s church...” Feeling an itch, she reached up and picked a lumpy bit of makeup off her cheek. Looking at it, she added, “Once I get this stuff off me.”

Sally looked like she wanted to ask why a priestess was wearing heavy makeup and no clothes. Instead she only said, “We should be able to find something to fit you. I’ll have Lenath show you to your rooms so you can clean up.” Going over to a thick cloth rope hanging by the wall she pulled on it.

Lenath guided the three out. As Arthur went to leave, Sally stopped him. She shut the doors and turned the lock.

“I thought you were having company?” he asked.

Leaning her back against the door, she gave him a soft smile. “I just want a quiet date with my husband, to make up with him.”

He touched her cheek then gathered her into a hug. Their lips stayed locked in passion as he slowly led her over to the couch and laid her down. When he broke the kiss, he stroked her forehead lightly with his fingertips.

“Relax, my love,” he whispered. “I want to do this right.”

She didn't know what he wanted to do and didn't much care. She was with her husband, and that was all that mattered. He caressed her softly on her cheeks then traced the lines of her nose and lips. She held onto his shoulders as he rolled her dress off her shoulders then continued down her neck. By the time he started exploring her chest, she was in heaven. With his methodical kissing and caressing, she hoped he would linger in the right places.

He did, and lingered a wonderfully long time.

CHAPTER 16

The church of Odin was one of the few wooden buildings in the elven district. Although it wasn't a grand structure, the sanctuary was adorned with stained maple and polished to a soft glow. Amber walked between the pews, looking for whoever might be here. The cream-colored blouse and long brown skirt she had gotten from Penny were a bit too snug. She had a thin shawl around her neck, draped to hide the fact her breasts were pushing against her blouse hard enough to threaten popping the clasps. She had foregone shoes, opting for plain sandals. At least her feet spoke of humility.

Passing through the small door at the base of the pulpit, she found a Brother washing the floor. He didn't know where a church of Leighna was, but directed her to the Father's office. On her way, she saw a Sister coming down the hall towards her.

The elf woman looked at her benevolently and smiled. “May I help you?”

“I was looking for a church of Leighna, I need to speak to your Mother.”

“Perhaps I can help you?”

Amber shook her head. “The matter is...complicated, I really need to talk to a Mother.”

The Sister pointed back the way she had come. “Mother Catherine is not in. She will be back shortly if you wish to wait. May I ask what this is about?”

Amber's first impulse was to say it was persona--what she had done was very embarrassing to admit to anyone. She was talking to a Sister, though; pride could have no place here. Her cheeks reddened as she said, “I wish to pay penance for my deeds. There is also a grave matter I need to discuss with the Mother.”

Giving her an understanding nod, the Sister asked, “Who should I tell Mother Catherine is calling?”

Amber braced herself. “Sister Amber Tanner of Capetown.”

The Sister's jaw dropped. “You are a Sister?”

Amber's lip twitched. "That remains to be seen. As I said, it is very complicated."

Forgetting her formality, the woman gasped, "What happened to you?"

Amber took a deep breath. "I have just come from Spring Valley. To make a long story short, I was de-frocked by Father Wright. I had to dance...with hardly any clothes on...to free Lord Tayan of Elrad from Duke Toma's castle. To get in, I had to consort with ladies of...pleasure." She stopped, not wanting the gaping woman to faint in front of her. "As I said, it is very complicated."

The woman just stared at her.

"You understand why I have to see Mother Catherine?"

"Lord Tayan is here?" the Sister asked in a faint voice.

Amber nodded. "He arrived with me," She cracked a partial grin. "I have disgraced myself, but I did get him here."

"Come with me," the Sister said and grabbed her hand. Leading her in a fast walk down the corridor, she deposited Amber in a small library then vanished.

Amber took a seat at the only table as she waited. Fidgeting, she looked at the image of her Goddess. Would she be able to be reinstated? With any luck at all, she might suffer through a year of penance and be barred from ever becoming a Mother. She knew women who had lived their whole lives as Sisters--such a restriction would not be too hard to cope with. At least she would still be part of the church.

She also knew that such light punishment was wishful thinking. She might just end up in a secluded convent as an altar girl.

Excited voices came up the hall. Amber couldn't hear well, but she did catch the Mother's name several times. The door opened as a raspy voice barked for the others to be quiet. An elderly elf woman slipped in, shutting the door on the group of Sisters outside.

Mother Catherine turned, not looking at Amber as she shuffled over to sit on the other side of the table. The sleeves of her dark-brown robe were frayed at the seams and cuff edges. Her face was deeply lined; even her ears had creases near the tops, making the sharp ends tip out slightly. Bone thin, she looked to be a shadow of a woman. She gazed at Amber with cloudy eyes. Her voice was a dry rasp, sounding like crinkling parchment.

"I understand you are a Sister. Where are your robes?" she asked.

Amber swallowed. She knew she had to confess, but sitting in front of a Mother brought home the fact she was going to be judged. This was not an irate priest who worked for an evil duke, this was a real Mother. "I no longer have my robes, Mother."

"And why not?"

Amber clasped her talisman tighter. "They were taken by Father Wright, in Spring Valley. He defrocked me for consorting with druids and accusing Duke Toma of being evil."

“Are these things true?”

“No! I mean, yes, Mother, but Duke Toma was holding Lord Tayan, I found out, and--” She stopped as Mother Catherine held up a frail hand.

“Who is your Mother, child?”

“Mother Frieda--we are with Zodiac’s Company.”

The corner of Catherine’s mouth curled up in a grin. “Frieda, I remember her. Did you discuss your course of action with Mother Frieda?”

Amber shook her head. “I was alone. All I had were Leighna’s words to guide me. I refused to believe that our Goddess would forsake me.” Tears clouded her vision. She wiped them away and continued. “I had to free Tayan; but to get to him, I had to disgrace myself and dance...with no clothes...in front of men.”

Clasping her hands together in front of her, Mother Catherine raised an eyebrow. “Sister, perhaps you should start at the beginning. Why were you traveling?”

“Lord Zodiac has found the source of evil, on the plains. Tayan was sent to gather arms to help destroy it. I was sent to help Tayan and watch over him. Mother, you have to believe I had to dance like that, there was no other way to get into that castle!”

Mother Catherine tapped the table with her finger. “Tell me details. Start from when you first arrived at Spring Valley and leave nothing out--what you did, or why.”

Haltingly, Amber told her everything. She tried to hurry through the more embarrassing parts, but Mother Catherine would stop her and make her fill in every sordid bit of information. In Spring Valley, she had convinced herself there was no other way. Now, as she explained it, she realized how much like a common harlot she had acted. By the time she was done, Amber was ready to crawl under her chair.

Mother Catherine took a few moments to sit and digest what she had heard. Amber was on pins and needles, waiting for her to say something. Despite how rough it had been to confess her sins, waiting for judgment was even worse.

“Mother, I am ashamed,” she offered. “I freely accept penance and punishment.”

Taking in a deep breath and blowing out a sigh, Mother Catherine said, “No amount of penance is appropriate for your deeds.”

Amber felt her heart drop out of her chest. “I am cast out,” she breathed.

Tears welled up in her eyes. Why had Leighna turned her back on her?

Mother Catherine frowned at her. “That is not what I said!” As Amber looked up at her with teary eyes, she asked, “Why did you go into that castle?”

“To free Tayan.”

“Why?”

“Because he has a holy mission to fulfill.”

“Is that the only reason? You could have continued on without him.”

“I couldn’t leave him there.”

“Why not?”

Amber leaned forward, raising her voice. “I told you, Duke Toma is evil. I could not let Tayan stay there as a prisoner.”

“Why not?”

Amber’s brow furrowed in anger. “Because I love him!”

Right after she said it, her mouth hung open. She had felt it many times, but this was the first time she had ever voiced her feelings.

Mother Catherine nodded in satisfaction. “There is your true test, Sister. You are standing at the junction; soon you must choose your path. The decision will not be easy, and once you start down the road, Leighna will expect you to complete your journey. No one can help you decide--that is between you and Leighna.”

Amber didn’t understand. “I thought every Sister’s goal was to become a Mother. Leighna’s bible says that once Sisterhood is granted, Motherhood is the only path for the faithful.”

“Every woman who follows Leighna must at some point choose a path--Motherhood to Leighna’s children or motherhood to her own. If you have your own children, care for them and raise them to know Leighna’s light; that is just as important as if you gathered and ministered to a flock,” Mother Catherine explained. Pushing herself to her feet, she wagged a finger at Amber. “Now, before we discuss anything else, go see Sister Leytanitha for some proper robes. I will not have a Sister dressed in commoner’s clothes in this church!”

She couldn’t believe that was it. There had to be some punishment for what she had done. “What about...my actions?”

Frowning, the lines in the Mother’s face became bottomless. “If you think for one second that you might be relieved of your holy duties as a Sister, think again. Leighna will not let you off that easily!”

Relief flooded through her. “Thank you, Mother,” she sighed. Prodded by a wave from Mother Catherine, Amber ran to find the Sister. She had to resist the urge to jump with joy.

Mother Catherine shuffled out to find Sister Nalani waiting anxiously by the door. The good Sister had only one fault--gossip. Trying to sound forlorn, she asked, “Has any Sister ever been so bold? Perhaps we should pray for her.”

Mother Catherine nodded. “It is always proper to pray for your fellow Sisters. Now, to your duties!” She gave a whisk of her hand. She knew the answer to the good Sister’s question. In the history of the church, only two other sisters had stiffened themselves to face the seemingly impossible. Sister Frieda

had given up the chance at a family with the man she loved dearly to give Leighna's light to heathen druids. Her converts were not many, but she did get the druids to acknowledge Leighna as Goddess of the home and family, as well as bring a formal marriage ceremony into their world. For these deeds, she had been raised to Motherhood. The other Sister had nearly been defrocked numerous times and had the audacity to demand, even of kings, that they follow Leighna's word. It wasn't until after her death that Maria had been raised to the most holy recognition as Prophet.

The mounted elf charged the target, face set in concentration as he tried to keep the lance even with the dummy's chest. As he closed on his objective, the thundering gallop of the horse bounced the tip in circles despite the elf's attempt to keep it level. He met the target, striking the hard brace of the sawhorse the dummy was mounted on. The lance flexed and catapulted him through the air as his horse ran on.

Watching from his second-floor balcony, Tayan grinned as the elf got up and hobbled after his horse. At least this one had made it to the target and not launched himself earlier or tripped up his own mount. He had never before seen elven cavalry with lances, and he was beginning to see why.

"Tayan, is there anything I can get you?"

He turned to see Ellie standing in the doorway, hair still wet from her bath. "I thought you were going to rest."

"I am fine, Tayan," she assured him with a smile. "One of the servants told me the kitchen is ready if you would like something to eat."

"Ellie, come sit down," he said, waving toward the chair by him.

Scurrying over, she squatted down by his chair, looking at him expectantly.

"Sit in the chair," he sighed.

Casting a nervous glance to see if anyone was watching, she asked, "In the chair?"

"Yes."

She got up and slid slowly onto the seat bolt upright, ready to drop back to the floor at any second. Once again, she flicked her eyes towards the door.

"You can relax," he told her.

"It this going to be confusing again?" she asked nervously.

He nodded. Sliding his chair so he was facing her, he leaned his elbows on his knees. "The trip you made from Spring Valley must have been very hard."

"Oh, yes!" she breathed. "Other men thought I was alone, and one tried to steal me. I got away, and after that I stayed in the coach. The driver told me it was safe to go get a room, but I knew it wasn't. He was kind enough to bring me food and lock the doors at night so no one could get to me while I was sleeping."

Although her tone made it sound like it was no big deal, he figured she had spent weeks of hell getting him here. He had to free her anyway but making it look like her freedom was earned would give her pride.

Sincerely, he told her, "Ellie, what you did was very brave. I can say that you have, indeed, done your part to save not only Elrad, but quite possibly the world as we know it. To say you did very well is an understatement."

"Thank you, Master!" she beamed.

He smiled back at her. "And for how well you served, I am going to give you anything you want. Don't tell me now what it is--I want you to think about it. Take the night and come up with the one thing you want more than anything else in the world."

Ellie's face was pure rapture. "Anything at all?"

"Anything."

With a squeal of delight, she dove into him, wrapping her arms tightly around him. Half a heartbeat later, she released him and stepped back, hand over her mouth trying to hide her grin. "I'm sorry, I just..."

"I know, you're happy."

She nodded vigorously. "I knew that if I was a good slave I would be rewarded! I have done my very best to serve well."

To see her smiling so broadly made him feel good. He had the idea that, on her own, she would do very well.

"And you have served very well. Now, run back to your room. Relax and think about it. I don't want to see you for the rest of the day."

Bouncing in place, she gave him a departing "Yes, Master." She ran back through his room, leaping over a footstool with a shout of glee on her way out.

Pleased with himself, he turned back to watch a pair of elves charging the dummy. One lance went wide and tripped the horse of the elf beside him. The other elf jerked back, trying to keep from being rolled on by his horse and barely missed impaling the first one as he went down. Tayan winced as they crashed to the ground in a jumble of hooves and broken pieces of lance. This was no longer funny; someone was going to get killed. Tayan decided to go down and talk to the knight in charge.

On the back terrace, he found Lord Parnal watching the display, looking quite vexed. Lord Parnal covered his face with one hand as another elf lost his lance before he got to his target.

"Not doing very well, are they?" Tayan commented as he stepped up beside him.

Lord Parnal turned to scowl at him, his face quickly melting into surprise. "Lord Tayan!" he gasped. Recovering, he composed himself and said more formally, "We have been expecting you, M'lord. As you can see, we have been...attempting to train an army to help you save Elrad."

"I have always wondered why Elradian cavalry use bows and spears," Tayan mused. "Now I know."

Lances are too long for them to control properly.”

The elf lord quickly picked up on his hint. “Excuse me for a moment, M’lord,” Signaling a nearby squire, he told him to have the practice stopped, and all knights and regiment captains gather. Once the boy had gone off on his mission, Lord Parnal returned to Tayan.

“M’lord, it would be a great honor if you would explain to our men how to form an effective cavalry force.”

Tayan gave him a brief bow. “It would be my pleasure. I understand that Lord Tolham is also training men at his estate.”

“Yes, M’lord. He is in charge of the infantry. With the thousand horsemen here, and the forty-seven-hundred foot soldiers Elder Lord Tolham has, we should prove to be of some help to King Alderlan,” he said proudly.

Tayan nodded absently as he looked over the elves, gathering in bunches that were supposed to be ranks. “The enemy we’ll be facing has new, horrible weapons. We will need to develop new tactics to deal with them.” Shifting his gaze to the elf lord, he said, “They have long-range spears that detonate on impact. The explosion has a kill diameter of about thirty feet. Beyond that, men may survive but will be badly wounded.”

Lord Parnal’s face opened up in shock. “Dear Odin! As if vlaks were not enough!”

“You can be assured we’ll be facing those, as well as dragons, hoarcs and anything else their evil minds can come up with. Before these boys are led into the abyss of battle, they need to know what they’ll be up against.”

Straightening up, Lord Parnal spoke with conviction. “We will stand firm against whatever horrors await us.”

Although it had been two years ago, Tayan could still see the large balls of fire ripping apart the caravan as men tried to flee. He hadn’t stood firm. He had grabbed Lucinthia and run for his life. “Every man who goes must know he will probably die. Whoever decides not to join our army will not have it held against them or be thought less of.”

“Understood, M’lord.”

“And every man who does go must follow his orders to the letter. Any who do not will be sent back.”

Lord Parnal shifted in place. “Yes, M’lord. You do know that your order may reduce the size of our army.”

“I know. When I crossed the fields south of Krundle with Lord Zodiac’s Company, we were only sixty-two. Working together, we drove back the entire hoarc army. It was not self-sacrifice, gallantry or the desire to become heroes that let us win. It was teamwork, each one knowing the job and watching out for their comrades. We helped each other survive the day. That is how we won then...” He waved an arm at the men on the fields. “...and that is the only way they will win now.”

“Forgive me for doubting you, M’lord,” Lord Parnal said quietly. “We will ensure only those suited will join us in battle.”

“Good, let’s get started.”

Tayan gave the first speech to the assembled leaders, stressing they each pass the word on to their men. As he expected, a few had families and asked to be relieved. He had them first go to their regiments and explain the situation before they returned to their lives. By late afternoon, the numbers on the fields had dwindled to just under six hundred.

Gathering the remaining men together, Tayan reformed them into six regiments then started running them through formation and attack drills. Not one was armed—he concentrated on group horse handling. It was dark by the time they led tired horses to the stables. They weren’t cavalry yet, but the regiment captains now had a place to start.

Heading for dinner, Tayan was beset by a mob. The first gauntlet was a group of noblemen greeting him, eager for him to know they were doing their part to help Elrad. He thanked each one, promising that King Alderlan would know their names. He had no more than gotten through them when he was faced with a dozen more, offering him aides and messengers. Making his way through this group, he now had a pack following him, eager to do his bidding. Then came Jeni and Lady Salinthia. Harried by all these people, he barely had time to digest what Jeni was telling him. He held his baby half-sister and promised he would talk to her later on about General Cooper’s wagons.

Lady Salinthia did have important news. It seemed that Duke Jordan had already asked King Gunthar about the war in Elrad. The king had refused any assistance for the beleaguered elves. Duke Jordan, knowing a large section of his population was elven, followed the King’s decree that no official help would come but added that anyone “visiting” Elrad could not leave the city unless they were heavily armed and traveled in large groups. Jeni had tried to talk to Duke Jordan about sending people to the plains, but he specifically banned anyone from going north.

Slowly, the crowd around Tayan grew. Lady Salinthia set aside the large study for his use and posted guards at the doors to help constrict the flow. By the time he’d settled behind the desk, he was already passing out stacks of reports to his aides to help him absorb the details of his army. He pored over figures of fighting men, nurses, priests, craftsmen, wagons and supplies. As the night wore on, he sent his aides away after he noticed their heads bobbing as they fell asleep sitting up.

Finally alone, he slid back in the chair and rubbed his eyes. The masses were gone for now, but as soon as the sun rose he would be plunged back into the fray. The time of rest was over; all he would have now would be a few hours of semi-peaceful sleep.

Hearing the door open, he groaned. “It can wait until morning!”

“No, Master, it can’t,” Ellie said as she brought in a tray of food. Walking over, she set it down in front of him and arranged the silverware. “I know you didn’t want to see me until tomorrow, but I had to bring you your dinner.”

He was too tired to argue. “Thanks,” he said with a small grin.

“That is my job,” she told him briskly. “I remembered you do not know how to be a good Master. I watched you outside earlier—I think I know why Duke Toma wanted to stop you,” As he opened his mouth, she raised a finger at him. “Before you speak! I must tell you a few things. First, such a powerful man as yourself must have enemies. Do not eat or drink anything unless I tell you it is safe. Second, keep me near you at all times—you never know when someone might try to assassinate you. Lastly, I thank

you for rewarding me. It is not often a slave hears such kind words from a Master. I enjoyed being in my own room, but I can no longer ignore my duties.” She took a breath and gave him a nod. “Enjoy your meal, Master.”

“Please, don’t call me Master.”

Lowering her head, she replied, “Forgive me, Tayan.”

“Will you just sit down? In the chair,” he quickly added.

She did, taking her stiff pose. “You should not treat me so kindly all the time. I might become spoiled.”

If her definition of “spoiled” was to be able to sit in a chair, he’d make sure she was spoiled rotten. The food smelled wonderful. Picking up his fork, he asked, “Have you thought about what you want?”

She smiled sheepishly. “Yes, but it may be too much to ask.”

“Believe me, it won’t be,” he told her. He started to rip a chunk off the baked chicken leg then noticed a small bite had been taken out of it. One of the carrots also had a nibble missing, as did the sweet potato. Looking at her, he asked, “Are you hungry?”

“No, Tayan, a servant brought me dinner hours ago,” Seeing he was looking at the plate funny, she added, “Don’t worry, I tasted everything, it’s safe to eat.”

“That’s how you test for poison?” If there were poison, she would be killed.

“That is the only way to be sure. If I let you die then I am disgraced,” she explained.

“At least you’ll be alive.”

She shook her head. “I could not live. I would have to die with you.”

“Ellie...” He wanted to tell her that was ridiculous. Whoever had brainwashed her into being a slave had done a thorough job. Instead of trying to convince her she didn’t have to ensure his safety, he got to the point. “So, what is it you want?”

Shrugging slightly, her cheeks turning a slightly darker green, she blushed. “You did tell me anything, but very few slaves actually earn...”

She let her voice fall off, glancing away from him. By the way she acted, she was afraid to ask for her freedom.

“I said anything, and I mean anything,” he told her in a soothing tone.

Squirming in place, she asked, “Really?”

“Yes, I give my word.”

Smiling brightly, she said tentatively, “Well, it is actually two things.”

He started eating, figuring she’d get to the point sooner or later. He ate a few mouthfuls then decided to

prod her along. "I can't give it to you unless you ask," he told her.

"Well, I like having my own room, when you don't need me..."

He was tempted to tell her she'd have her own life, but just nodded and let her finish.

She was bouncing slightly in excitement. "And I want a tattoo, nice and big."

He swallowed the meat he was chewing and stared at her. "A tattoo?"

"Yes!" Slipping her left arm from her sleeve, she brought it out the bottom of her shirt then shoved her shirt up over her shoulder. Pointing to the top of her left breast, she said, "Right here--your coat of arms, or whatever symbol you have. That marks me as yours for life. It means I am too valuable to be sold, it's what every slave wishes for."

He sat back in his seat with a groan. "Ellie! Isn't there something you want more than that?"

"What else is there?" Her face dimmed as he frowned at her. "I understand--it is too much to ask for."

All she knew was how to be a slave, so she only asked for things a slave could get. He would have to guide her into thinking differently. He put the plate to one side and clasped his hands.

"You deserve better. What you did shows you can be your own master. You can go and do as you like; you do not have to answer to anyone any longer. Ellie, I am giving you your freedom."

Her mouth hung open as her face paled. "What?"

"Don't you want to be free?"

She fidgeted, wringing her fingers as she gazed around the room at nothing. Roughly, she pulled her shirt down, leaving her arm hanging out the bottom. Tears brimmed in her eyes as she finally looked at him.

"No," she said in a small voice.

"Why not?"

Her lip quivered. "No," she said a little louder.

"Ellie, you don't understand..."

"You don't understand!" she said, pounding her thigh. Her words became shouts. "I am a slave...I am a good slave!" Her whole body was quaking now, shaking the tears from her eyes. "And...I am a good slave!"

Tayan hadn't expected this. The poor girl wanted to be tattooed as property but not freed. This was insanity at its finest.

"I am not...garbage...to be thrown away!" she shouted between her tears. "I am a good slave!"

Looking at her kindly, he tried to explain. "I'm not throwing you away. I want..."

“You tricked me!” she wailed. Shoving a fist in her mouth, she slipped to the floor and cried.

Tayan got up and went around the table to help her up. At his touch, she slapped his hands away.

“Ellie, will you please listen!”

Hugging herself, she said to the floor, “Kill me.”

Irritated at her behavior, he planted his hands on his hips. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“Then give me away!” she cried. “I am not garbage!”

“I never said you were.”

Quieter, she choked out, “I...am...a...good slave!”

He tried to get her attention again. Not succeeding, he became angry. It was too late, and he was too tired for this nonsense. Grabbing her arm, he hauled her up to face him.

“Stop it!” he barked.

She gave him a pleading look. “Please, don’t throw me away. I have seen slaves who were. I do not want to starve to death in some alley, and I deserve better than to be hunted for sport. Please, I am a good slave!”

It suddenly dawned on him that she was terrified. She had been raised as a slave; and to her, a Master meant security no matter how badly she was treated. He didn’t want to know the specifics of what she was talking about but realized she equated freedom with a slow, tortured death. Cupping her face in his hands, he said gently, “Nothing like that will happen to you.”

“But I have seen it happen!” she cried.

“Come on.” He put an arm around her and led her towards the doors. “We’ll talk in the morning. Go to your room and get some rest.”

“You aren’t going to throw me away?” she sniffed.

He shook his head. “No, you are safe. Now go get some sleep, we have a lot to do tomorrow.”

She started out then stopped in the doorway. Looking at him quizzically, she asked, “You thought I want to be...free?”

He gave a slight shrug. “I thought everyone wanted that.”

Stepping up to him, she wiped the tears off her face and gazed at him. “If you want to be good to me, really make me feel special then give me what I have asked for. I will serve you well.”

He felt sad that she could even think that life as a slave was acceptable. “I don’t believe in slavery.”

A grin came to her face. “That’s all right, I believe in you, even if you do make me very confused,” She started out the door, pausing to let out a heavy sigh. “Please don’t scare me like that again.”

He returned her grin. "Get some rest."

He shut the door behind her and went back to his meal. No stranger to problems, he knew how to sort out things as they came up. What he was going to do with Ellie, he had no idea. She wasn't going to let him free her, yet he knew that slavery was wrong.

Unfortunately, she was the least of his worries. Zodiac was counting on him to bring an army to the plains. Odif apparently had come here just to insist on it. The elven lords wanted only to save Elrad, and the duke forbade travel north, probably fearing reprisal from the plains. King Alderlan was going to need all the help he could get.

It seemed he might be riding onto the plains by himself. Although he had gone through many hard spots with Odif he knew her word was true. If she said he had to be there, she had a good reason. He just wished he knew what that reason was.

Sitting down to eat, he began to plot out his strategy. Spring Valley was going to be trouble; and he knew a long, open road awaited them, with many chances for ambush. Those damn spears could be shot without them knowing until it was too late. Old Castle was not going to be much of any help, and Paladnia was too far away. His best hope was to get help from the duke somehow.

Plans started forming in his head. Once he finished eating, he spread out a parchment and began listing the things he needed to do before leaving the city. That led to plans for how to spread out the scouting parties, and the best route for the army to take. He searched through the piles of reports on the other desks, looking for men who had been in battle before, or at least had proper training.

Morning had come when the door opened. He looked up from the stacks of parchment on his desk to see Jeni wearing a very becoming light-blue gown. Before she could start prattling on about his father, he waved her over to sit down.

"Come in, I want to talk to you about these steam wagons. You told me you saw one?"

"Yes, General Cooper showed us one of the smaller ones. It was not a battlewagon, but it was impressive," Sitting down across from him, she folded her hands in her lap formally. "I cannot pay the fee he wants to use his machines. I was hoping you would help finance my effort."

"How much does he want?"

"Twelve thousand gold up front. Five hundred more each month we use his wagons."

"These must be some wagons," he snorted. "How can you afford even part of that?"

"I have a few thousand in our vaults; and if I sell the quarries, I should be able to come up with a few thousand more. Our credit is good--I can borrow against the earnings of Redman Coachline. I can scrape together nine...maybe ten thousand."

He raised an eyebrow. "You own Redman Coachline?"

"Eric owns it. I only run it until Odif brings him back."

To expect her not to talk about Eric was asking too much, but he didn't have to keep going on about

him. He grabbed a pen and his notes. "Twelve thousand is a steep price. Did General Cooper say just what these things can do for that kind of money?"

"He claims they are fast. I have seen the armor on them--no bow will penetrate the steel coverings. He has these things called steam cannons and claims they shoot rocks at high velocities."

If these things worked like she said, they would be worth taking. It also sounded to him like this General Cooper was engaging in profiteering. Then again, with the only mobile fortress in the land, he could set his own price.

"How soon can I meet this general and his wagons?"

"He is planning a demonstration for us in two days." Looking at him seriously, she added, "Right now I can give you seven thousand. That will pay for half his fee and four months of use. I will arrange transfer as soon as you decide, but do not tell anyone."

Trying to keep this meeting short, he refrained from asking her why she didn't want anyone to know.

"I will make sure King Alderlan knows of your contribution."

Frowning, she tipped her head. "You are going to the plains to help Odif, aren't you?"

Pausing, he shook his head. "I have to go to Elrad. That's why these men are here, not to get lost out on the plains."

Leaning towards him, she stressed, "Odif needs you to be there! What if she can't free Eric by herself?"

"They need no help from me," he said heavily.

Jeni's face melted in disbelief. "They are the only family you have!"

"They?" he asked. "What are you talking about?"

Standing to jab a finger at the table, she said, "Your father and your sister are out there facing this...horrid thing. You are telling me you refuse to help them?"

"Odif is not my sister."

Angered, she glared harshly at him. "Oh, yes, she is. She is Eric's daughter, that makes her your sister. She found the thing that made him a slave, and she has gone after it. You have to go help them!"

His mind whirled. Odif was his sister? That was impossible! He remembered their talk in Longforest, when it had seemed like she was trying to tell him something. She had called him "brother." He'd told her if that was true they'd been bad. They had, indeed, been very bad. Gripping the sides of his head, he planted his elbows on the table.

"Dear Odin," he breathed. He felt sick.

Jeni had brought him the most terrible news he had ever heard. First, the fine knowledge that his murdering father still lived, and now this. "Get out."

Jeni stood immobile for a few seconds. When he didn't look back up at her, she said, "If it was Eric here, he would not hesitate to rip down the gates of the abyss to free you."

Tayan's voice was a heavy growl. "I'm nothing like my father."

Tears welled in Jeni's eyes. Her lip quivered as she held back from crying in disappointment.

"That's right," she choked. "Eric submitted to torture and slavery to keep us from harm. You are nothing like your father."

Stiffly, she walked out, stopping long enough to spit her final words at him. "Go back to Elrad where you belong!"

The slam of the door echoed in his ears. Suddenly, he was very tired. He could not sit through a day of noblemen and smiling faces. Too much had happened at once, and this had been the deathblow.

"Tayan?" Ellie asked, sticking her head in.

He waved her away. "Lock the door, keep everyone out."

"Even me?" she asked cautiously.

"Especially you."

He didn't hear the soft click of the latch as Ellie did as he asked. His mind was on Lucinthia. What would she have thought of him if she knew that the woman he had a flaming-hot affair with was his own sister? He could still see Odif by the light of many campfires, the way she used to look so softly at him, how smooth her tight skin felt...

Slamming his hands on the desk, he pushed himself up and began to pace. She was his sister! He was not going to have fond memories of how they made love! How dare she do that to him!

"She had to know," he hissed. "She knew all the time!"

Running out of room, he turned and paced the other way. She probably thought it was funny, knowing her. When he caught up with her, he was going to hold her down and sew that damn thing shut!

He started to puzzle out when she had first known. When he left her at the end of the Great War, she had been angry. Then again, so was he. No matter how much he loved her, he was not going to share her with Zit. Did she know during the time he was married to Lucinthia? No, she still eyed Lucinthia with hate then. He remembered well the "private talk" they had--Lucinthia had come back with a reddened ring around her neck, tears in her eyes and was very upset. Neither would speak of what happened, but he gathered Odif had threatened her somehow. He warned Odif to stay away from her; and except for meetings with the Company, he didn't see the druid for years after that.

Lost in thought, he ran into the wall. Stumbling back, he raised a fist to hit it then decided to give it a kick instead. Then he gave it another. Turning away, he balled his fists and let out a scream. Why did it have to be him!

Motion got his attention. Amber had slipped in and was standing by the door, watching him impassively.

“Oh, great!” he spat, flinging an arm at her. “I suppose you want to be the first to lecture me! I’m beyond prayers right now, so just go ahead and give it to me.”

Amber frowned at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Jeni didn’t tell you?” he asked with a sarcastic laugh. “You know, Shilo is going to love this, Mother Frieda will never even look at me again and Zit--he’ll make a damn ballad out of it! I can try to plead innocence, but I don’t think anyone will listen.”

“Tayan, if you would just--”

“I have to lead these people in battle. How well do you think they’ll listen once they know what I did?” he asked.

“And what crime have you committed?” she asked quickly before he could interrupt.

“Incest, my dear Amber!” He put a hand on her shoulder as her jaw dropped. “You know Odif, the woman I spent quite a bit of time with before I married Lucinthia? Well, it turns out that my dear, loving Odif, is also my dear sister Odif. That’s right, we share the same father.”

Amber gaped at him. “You’re not serious.”

“Oh, yes!” he cackled. “And my dear sister is looking for our father as we speak! Who knows, maybe they’ll come to dinner some time. My fine slave can serve us!”

Amber cringed away from him. “You’re scaring me--get hold of yourself.”

He flung his arms to the sides. “You’ve nothing to fear from me--we’re not related!”

Amber slapped him in the face hard. When he turned back, he just gaped at her. The slap brought him back to reality. Amber didn’t deserve being screamed at.

Drawing herself up, she said, “I’m sorry, you were starting to rave.”

His shoulders sagged in defeat. Quietly, he asked, “Am I damned?”

Hooking her arm through his, she led him to the couch. “I hardly think so, though Odif may well be. You look exhausted.”

He was bone-tired. The thought of dealing with the nobles and the endless stream of people made him want to flop down on the floor and die. Amber help him sit on the couch then made him lie down. “I will see to it no one bothers you until this afternoon.”

“I have a duty.”

“So do I,” she stated. “I have nothing to bash your head with; but I will sing to you, if that’s what it takes.”

He didn’t move as she got up and started for the door. Before she reached it, he asked, “Was there something you wanted to see me about?”

She turned and gave him a gentle smile. "It's not important, you have enough on your mind right now."

"I will help you if I can," he told her. It was then he noticed she was back in her robes. "You got your robes back."

She gave him a gentle smile. "Get some rest."

She reached for the door handle and shivered in disgust at the thought of what he had told her.

"Amber, are you sure it can wait?"

Turning back to him, she saw a pleading look on his face. "Yes, it can," she assured him.

To his relief, she came back to the couch. Moving his head up, she slipped under him so her leg was a pillow for him.

"Now, get some sleep before I do find something to hit you with," she said sternly.

He wanted to tell her she was the best thing that had happened to him in a long time. He settled on "Thanks."

Reaching down, she stroked his hair. "You're welcome. Sleep."

Chapter 17

Tayan awoke and sat up, stretching out the kink in his neck. From the floor in front of the couch, Ellie shot to her feet and waited for him to focus on her. He looked for Amber, but she was gone. She had managed to slip a pillow under his head without waking him. He didn't feel refreshed, but the weariness was no longer so deep.

"How late is it?"

Ellie shrugged. "About halfway between lunch and dinner, I think. The sun will be going down soon."

"Why didn't someone wake me up?" he asked a little too harshly.

Tying her fingers together, Ellie explained. "I am sorry, Tayan, but Sister Amber said you gave strict orders not to let anyone disturb you."

It figured. He rubbed his face with his hands, knowing the nobles would not be pleased about being kept out for so long. "Who wants to see me?"

"The hall outside is full of people. Six claim to be assistants and messengers. Then there's Lord Tall Ham, a messenger from Lord Parnal, and one from Lady Sal-in-thea," she finished, sounding out each syllable.

“Lord Tall Ham?” he repeated with a grin.

She shrugged and scrunched her fingers even more tightly together. “I’m sorry, Tayan, these names make my tongue go numb.”

He stood and headed for his desk. “Send in Lord Tolham first then my assistants.”

“Yes, Tayan.” She nodded and went for the door.

“Just ‘yes’ will be fine,” he called to her. “And don’t sit on the floor.”

“Yes,” she said, looking a little confused.

A young elf lord dressed in all his finery came striding in. Having expected an older man, Tayan watched him sit down as straight and formal as anyone he had ever seen.

Giving a curt nod, he said, “I am Lord Belenaris Tolham. My father is leading the infantry.”

Tayan returned the nod. “I’m pleased to see you’re doing what you can to help.” He picked up a stack of scrolls he had made. “In these are the plans I made for the marching route and--”

“I did not come here for my father.”

Tayan put the scrolls down. “Then why are you here?”

“I came to discuss the Lady Jenesalinthia. As you may be aware, I am to be her consort, as soon as the council meets,” Belenaris announced.

Holding back a cruder response, Tayan asked, “Why should I be concerned with that?”

Belenaris squared his shoulders. “I have heard rumors about Lady Jenesalinthia’s being willing to give exorbitant amounts of money for you to hire this General Cooper and his follies. I wanted to let you know that any large purchases she may wish to make must go through me first.”

By the look of him, the only thing Belenaris knew was how to twist the laws to his own advantage. Tayan dropped his formality. Leaning forward on his arms, he said, “If you want to commit suicide, that’s your problem. Stop wasting my time.”

Taken aback, Belenaris stared at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“Never been in combat, have you?”

Belenaris scoffed at the idea. “I am not a peasant.”

“Right,” Tayan snorted, “And you’ve never had to kill anyone either, correct?”

Belenaris shifted his eyes away from Tayan’s hard gaze. “I fail to see how that has anything to do with the matter.”

“That you’re dumber than you look. Do you have any idea what her husband will do to you when he

finds out you've taken his wife *and* his money?"

Flushing at the insult, Belenaris eyed him along the length of his nose. "If that man ever returns, I shall ensure he knows I kept her safe and--"

He stopped as Tayan laughed.

"The man's a killer! He will rip your guts out and hang you by them," he stated. "Get out of here, I have work to do," Ignoring the young lord, he looked over to Ellie, who was standing by the door. "Send in the messenger from Lord Parnal."

"Yes..." Ellie paused, as if she were dying to say "Tayan" but was afraid to. She finally spun around and got the messenger.

"It seems your slave needs to be taught manners," Belenaris said in a caustic tone as he got up. He pretended not to see the evil looks Tayan and everyone else in the room were giving him as he left. When he passed Ellie, she only stared at the floor as her cheeks turned dark green.

The rest of the afternoon went well. Lord Parnal's messenger let him know that all the supply wagons had arrived and there was now enough armor to go around. Duke Jordan's messenger informed him of a dinner that night at his palace, with all the nobles present. The next messenger was from General Cooper, wanting to know if they could meet. Tayan eagerly agreed and set it for the next day. He sent a messenger after Amber to ask her to join him at the dinner. Ellie was even behaving herself. She went about her tasks, without once calling him Master and even sat down in chairs like he told her to.

Although he had started late, he did get a decent amount of work done by the time he had to get ready for the dinner. Ellie shadowed him; and although he managed to ban her from his bath, she was right there to help him finish dressing.

She walked around him for the tenth time, scrutinizing his clothes. She stopped to pick a piece of thread off then patted the pocket of his jacket shut.

"I look fine," he protested.

She glanced up at him before searching his pants for any flaws.

"How well you look shows how well I take care of you. I've been embarrassed enough today. When we get to the Duke's palace, you must make me follow you to the side and just behind you. When you sit, I will be right by your chair, and I will call you Master with all those important people present."

He was surprised to hear such a stern tone from her. He never thought that any slave could get angry.

"You aren't going," he told her.

She frowned at him. "I have to go!"

He was beginning to understand she took her station in life very seriously. Unless he came up with something for her to do she would be running after his coach. As he thought about it, something did come to mind, a task he had been hoping to avoid. The army did need money in case he decided to try out General Cooper's wagons, but he didn't want to face Jeni again. He laid his hands on Ellie's shoulders and spoke in a grave tone.

“Ellie, I trust you more than anyone else in the world, do you believe that?”

Her face opened up with pride. “Yes, Master,” she breathed.

“Your task is to go see Jeni Redman--you know who she is, right?” She nodded, so he continued. “You are to get what she has for me and wait in my study until I return. Do not leave until I get back, and tell no one else about this. This is very important.”

“More important than you?” she asked nervously.

“Possibly.”

Pondering the gravity of her task, she nodded slowly. “I will not let you down, Master.”

He gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. “I know you won’t. Don’t call me Master. Now get going.”

As Ellie left on her mission, he started down the hall to find Amber coming towards him. She met him with a warm greeting and hooked her arm through his.

“You got Ellie to stay here?” she asked.

He glanced back to make sure Ellie was out of earshot. “I told her to get a donation for the army and made it sound like the world depended on it. Otherwise, she’d be clinging to my leg.” He grinned.

“Have you figured out what to do with her yet?”

He gave a sigh. “I tried to free her and it was a disaster.”

“Well, if you cannot free her, the only honorable thing to do is marry her,” she said in a thoughtful tone.

He turned to glare at her and saw the twisted grin on her face. “I’ll think of something.”

Hugging his arm, she mused, “Maybe if you made other things sound vital, like keeping her own room and taking money for her service, she wouldn’t be so frightened.”

He caught on to what she was suggesting. “She would free herself without knowing it.” Clasp ing his hand over hers, he said, “You’re pretty smart.”

“You aren’t so bad yourself,” she replied with a warm smile.

They walked arm-in-arm to the courtyard where servants were following Lady Salinthia and Lord Parnal to their coach. Many of the higher-ranking officers were by the gates with their ladies, ready to go. A group of Sisters were talking off to the side across from the guardhouse. Seeing Amber, one red-haired Sister waved frantically at her.

“Sister Amber! A word, please!” she cried excitedly. Two other sisters took up the call, eager to talk to her. A trio of Brothers with them also looked pleased to see her.

Tayan gave her a nudge. “Looks like you’re becoming popular.”

“For what?” Amber asked, befuddled by her Sister’s behavior.

He leaned close to her ear. “Isn’t it obvious? You’re their hero.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Me?” she squeaked.

He nodded with a wide grin. “The Sister who battled her way through Longforest with man-eating halshaken, not to mention saving me from the clutches of evil.”

She gaped at him. “I was scared spitless in Longforest, and you know I couldn’t leave you there with Duke Toma.”

He shrugged. “We do what we must; and right now, I think you better go talk to them before one of them faints.”

She shook her head in disbelief that anyone could possibly think of her as a hero. “How do things like this get started?”

“It’s their way of saying they’re proud of you, and so am I. Don’t be too long, we don’t want to be late,” he said as he gave her a gentle push towards the pack of holy people.

Leaving Amber to her adoring fans, he walked out the gates to his coach. The footmen guided him to the one at the head. He was happy to find out that he and Amber would be the only passengers, and more so that the vehicle was all black and didn’t say “Redman” anywhere on it.

The second he stepped inside he sensed something was wrong. There were no windows, and he felt the hair on the back of his head grow stiff in warning. Before he could react, the door behind him was pushed shut and a dozen pairs of hands grabbed him and thrust him onto the seat. Heart in his throat, he punched and kicked where the people holding him should have been. He met only air. More hands grabbed him, forcing him facedown onto the seat. He heard a low chant begin.

He was being attacked with magic. There couldn’t possibly be this many people in here. He tried to struggle and let out a yell for help. Two more hands clapped over his mouth. He began to feel disoriented as the chant filled his head. Despite the adrenalin coursing through his veins, his arms and legs grew heavy. Just keeping his eyes open to try to identify his assailants was a major task. He passed out, very glad Amber had stopped to talk to her friends.

Ellie bit her fingernails as she looked both ways down the intersection of hallways. She knew Jeni had her rooms down here but forgot which way they were. Her Master was placing great trust in her, and she did not want to let him down.

For the first time in her life she was doing more than carrying drinks or pleasing men. Although he made her feel confused, Tayan was also making her feel very important. He hadn’t had anyone watch her to ensure she got from Spring Valley to here, and now he was trusting her with some great secret. No slave she ever knew of had carried so much responsibility. In fact, not many free men were allowed to act completely on their own as she was doing now. Her heady feeling of pride, however, was tempered by the seriousness of her task. With so much depending on her, she feared to make a decision that might lead to failure.

From the left, Jeni burst into the hall to come stomping toward her. She was wearing a long white silk gown and looked very angry. That B-elf came out of the room and chased her down the hall.

He grabbed her by the arm and turned her around. "Will you be reasonable!" he shouted.

Jeni flung his arm off. "Just leave me alone!"

She took three steps then stopped to glare at Ellie.

"What do you want!" she snapped. In her eyes, tears were beginning to form.

Facing her anger, Ellie began to knot her fingers up. She wasn't used to standing in front of angry people--usually she was on her knees, her head to the floor. Resisting the urge to drop down, she said softly, "Lord Tayan said you had something for him."

"I thought he didn't care," Jeni stated with a quivering lip.

Glancing at the elf lord, Ellie knew she could not talk in front of him. "He said no one can know."

Belenaris stepped up to her. "No one can know what?" he demanded.

Jeni ignored him. Her face softened as she looked at Ellie. "He is going to help them?"

She didn't know if that was right or not, but it sounded right.

"Yes, M'lady." She recoiled as the elf lord slapped her shoulder.

"Tell me what is going on, slave!" he barked.

It was all she could do to stay on her feet. She was getting up the nerve to tell him he wasn't her Master when Jeni planted her hands on his chest and gave him a shove that pushed him into the wall.

"Leave her alone!" she growled.

Belinaris became red-faced. "How dare you! I demand to know what this is about."

"Demand?" Jeni screeched. "You demand nothing from me! You are nothing to me!" She yelled at the top of her voice. Throwing an arm out to point down the hall, she accidentally bumped Ellie in the nose. "If you want to escort me to the duke's palace then go get in the damn coach. If not then just go away!"

Belenaris drew himself up with all the dignity he could muster. "My lady, you may come to regret this."

He gave Ellie a mean glare then stormed off around the corner.

Jeni took a couple of breaths to calm herself then indicated Ellie should follow her. "Come, I have the scroll Tayan needs."

Neither of them saw Belinaris poke his head back around the corner.

The night was not going very well for Amber. She had been held back by Sisters and Brothers who had somehow gotten the fantastic notion that she was connected directly to Leighna. She told them over and over that all Sisters and Brothers held equal places in Leighna's eyes, but they still looked at her like she carried holy words of wisdom. By the time she got away from them, Tayan had left without her. She had to ride with Jeni and Belenaris, which was tense, to say the least. Neither spoke at all, and by the looks of them any words just might start a fight that would end up drawing blood.

Arriving at the palace, she entered the reception hall but could not get near Tayan until after dinner. She suffered through sitting with the other holy people, watching him from across the room as he talked with the nobles, including the new duke in Spring Valley. Here, as in the courtyard at Lady Salinthia's, Brothers and Sisters eyed her with awe. It was enough to make her want to scream and rip her hair out.

During the social hour after dinner, when she finally did get next to Tayan, he acted like he barely knew her. It wasn't until a few people reminded him she had saved him that he paid her more mind than he did the servants.

She didn't like Duke Kahn one bit. Just looking at him made her skin crawl. A few times she tried to raise her talisman of Leighna and check him for evil, but each time Tayan spotted her and told her it wasn't polite. She put up with Duke Kahn's presence for what seemed like hours, until they made their way back to the coach.

Amber climbed in, still feeling her skin twitching from the duke. She settled in her seat and waited until Tayan was in and the door was shut before she voiced her opinion.

"I do not trust Duke Kahn," she stated. "If he isn't evil then I am."

Tayan eyed her from his corner of the seat. "It's a shame to say, but being evil is not against the law. Unless he does something, he has to be treated with respect."

"Do you believe he truly wants the best for this kingdom?" she asked.

"He has come to pledge his allegiance to King Gunthar and reaffirm his city's support in the kingdom. This is not an action of a hostile man," Tayan explained crisply. "He will do nothing to cause the king to doubt him, at least until he gets settled into his own city. We've nothing to fear from him."

"Don't even say you trust him," she warned.

"The only people I trust right now are in this coach," he said sternly. "I only mean that we will be on our way west before he can get his own plans in order."

He knew more about the dealings of royalty than she did, so she didn't push her point. Shifting her gaze to look out the window, she noted they were outside the gates and yet the oppressive bad feelings were still with her. She waited for him to clasp her hand or give her one of the many signs of affection he never realized he was doing. The fact he didn't showed he was more preoccupied with Duke Kahn than he was telling her. This made her angry, for she had thought by now they could share anything between them.

Amber stepped out of the coach to find the courtyard filled with people. Guards were everywhere, talking to men and women with pale faces. On the stairs, a maid sat crying miserably, another was leaning over the stone rail, vomiting. As she took this in, a Sister ran towards her, her face running with tears.

“Sister Amber,” the woman cried, “we need you inside. Lord Tayan’s slave has been attacked.”

“Ellie?” she gasped. Who would want to hurt Ellie? She ran past the crying Sister and followed the trail of fingers pointing the way.

The scene she walked in on was one straight from the abyss. Guards stationed around the room were trying to keep from looking at the group of women who’d gathered behind Tayan’s desk. The top had been swept clear, the contents scattered to the floor on one side. It looked like someone had tried to mop it with ink. Looking closer she saw it was not ink but dark blood.

On this side, a green object that looked like a tiny tree stump lay. It took her a few seconds to realize it was a hand. Parts of the missing fingers lay scattered around it. Bile rose in her throat.

She gripped her talisman and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Dear Leighna, give me strength,” she whispered then girded herself to walk behind the desk to help save the poor girl.

Being with the Company, she’d seen and healed deep wounds, bad burns and rough bite marks. She thought she knew everything that could possibly be done to a body.

She was wrong.

The girl’s swollen eyes were partially open, and blood was caked around her nose and mouth. Where bandages made of towels weren’t covering her, raw muscle showed. Half her left breast lay towards the center of her chest, and her stomach yawned in an eye-shaped wound exposing her internal organs.

Around her, crying, pale-faced women worked to try to piece her back together. One sat holding two swaths of green skin, muttering that she didn’t know where they went. It was hard to believe this mess was Ellie.

Amber disconnected herself from the scene. Feeling as if she were looking through someone else’s eyes, she knelt down and laid her talisman on Ellie’s chest as she began to pray for her life and soul. The women did what they could to put the torn up body back together and cover her in bandages. Amber kept praying, holding Leighna’s light to the girl’s chest as a stretcher was brought in and the limp, mangled body was carefully placed on it. By the time they reached the stairs, Amber felt that Leighna had done all that was possible for poor Ellie. She was still alive, but in her condition, Amber wasn’t sure if that was a blessing or not.

She stayed beside her as Ellie was taken to her room and laid on the bed. Two guards came and bracketed the door. A knight stood just inside, watching Amber as she continued to pray. At the first jerky movements from Ellie, Amber stopped to see if she was waking up or dying. Ellie opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling. Her shallow breaths came in whining rasps as she quaked in pain.

The knight came over and stood by Ellie’s head. “Slave, can you speak?”

Amber shot him a glare. “Her name is Ellie!”

In a blubbery voice, Ellie cried, “I will not betray my Master.”

They both looked at her. “Ellie,” the knight said, “who did this?”

“I will not betray my Master,” she whimpered again.

“She’s in shock,” Amber told him.

He answered with an even stare. “I can see that. Try to get her out of it--we have to find out who did this to her.”

“It’s a miracle she’s alive,” Amber protested.

“I will not betray my Master,” Ellie blubbered again. Every few seconds, she kept repeating her determination not to betray her Master.

The knight placed his helmet on the bedside table and sat down on the other side of the bed. “Sister, you have done a remarkable job keeping her alive. I am asking you to help me do my job, and find out who is responsible.” Waving a hand at Ellie, he added. “Cruelty like this is punishable by death, even if her own Master did it. I am begging you, please, help me bring those responsible to justice.”

Amber sighed and looked at Ellie, who was still muttering that she would never betray her Master. It tore her heart in half to see anyone like this.

“I do nothing. Leighna saved her, it was by her will that Ellie lives.”

“Perhaps her will may also be to let us know who the scoundrel is who did this,” he prodded.

Amber looked up at him and considered it. “I’ll do what I can.”

Sliding up to hold Ellie’s face in her hands, she silently prayed to Leighna to help her as she gazed into the blank stare.

“Ellie, it’s me, Sister Amber. You are safe now.”

“I will not betray my Master,” Ellie choked then coughed up a tooth with the blood that came out.

Focusing on her eyes, Amber kept up her smooth, soothing tone and tried to make Ellie understand she was no longer being tortured. After a while, Ellie stopped her chant and her eyes locked on Amber’s. Her mouth worked up and down a few times then she got out, “Sister, I did not betray my Master.”

“Of course, you didn’t,” Amber said gently, stroking the side of her head. “Ellie, who did this to you?”

Ellie jerked and winced in pain. She said in a breathless voice, “Two elven men came in. They wanted...” She shifted her eyes towards the knight. “...the thing I had for my Master. I hid it, and no matter what they did to me, they couldn’t make me tell where it was.”

“What was this thing you had?” the knight asked.

Tonelessly, Ellie replied, “I will not betray my Master.”

“Dear Leighna,” Amber whispered. She felt sick. Ellie had nearly been tortured to death for a lousy donation to the army. Since Tayan had told her it was vital, she had refused to tell them where it was even to save her own life. No matter how much money was involved, it wasn’t worth this agony. Her

hands went to her mouth--she was sure her dinner was coming back up.

"Ellie," the knight said firmly, "did you hear any names?"

"No."

"How about their clothes, did you see any markings? A crest or insignia perhaps?" he asked hopefully.

Her eyes started to drift shut. She forced them open with what looked to be an enormous effort. "Yes, one had one of those shield things on his shirt."

Digging into his pocket, the knight produced a piece of parchment and a lead pencil. Coaxing her along, he drew what details she remembered seeing. By the time he had sketched a nearly compete coat-of-arms, Ellie was ready to pass out.

"I think that is enough for now," Amber told him. "She needs rest."

The knight nodded in agreement. "I'll be by in a day or two to see if she remembers anything else. Keep guards on her door. If the ones who did this are still around they may try to silence her."

"We will," Amber assured him. She walked him to the door then returned to Ellie, who was still forcing herself to stay awake. Sitting down, Amber gently caressed her face. "All the questions are over. You can get some rest now."

Ellie looked at her pleadingly. "You are loyal to Master, right?"

"Yes, Ellie, get some sleep."

Ellie lifted her eyes. "Tell Master to put on his green pants in the morning, the ones with the narrow gold stripe."

"I think he can dress himself," Amber replied.

"He must put those pants on," she stressed, making an attempt to lift her head.

"I'll see to it. Rest, you're safe now."

"Promise me you will tell him."

"I promise."

Ellie went limp and shut her eyes.

Amber checked to make sure she was still breathing and had a good heartbeat. Then, thinking about Ellie's insistence on Tayan's choice of clothing, she suddenly knew where that scroll was. Before she left, she made sure one guard was in the room with Ellie and two more were stationed outside the door.

The study looked better, which was to say the floor was being cleaned and the desk had been removed. Tayan stood talking with the knight who had questioned Ellie and another one holding a parchment and pen as Amber stormed into the room.

The evil of the deed done here hit her with the exact same skin-crawling feeling she had gotten from Duke Kahn. She hadn't noticed it earlier, but then she had been preoccupied with keeping Ellie alive. She walked over to Tayan and pointed to the clothes Ellie had folded on some shelves.

"You want to see why she was tortured?" she asked heavily. Not waiting for anyone to follow, she dug into the pile and found the pants Ellie had described. Picking them up, she shook them out until a scroll fell from one leg. She threw the pants aside and brandished the scroll at Tayan.

"This!" she spat. "This donation from Jeni Redman is why Ellie was tortured. Ellie refused to tell them where it was, so they tore her skin off!"

Tayan took the scroll from her hand, which was quivering with rage. Calmly, he unrolled it and looked it over. "This is a very generous donation."

"Who knew she had it?" the knight asked Tayan.

In her fury, Amber answered for him. "Ellie was to get the donation from Jeni just to keep her busy, so she wouldn't try to come with us. The only ones who could have known she had it were Jeni Redman and Belenaris Tolham," Right after she said it, she remembered something she had observed as she was escaping from the Sisters in the courtyard. "When they came out, Belenaris stopped to talk to a couple of his men. They went inside as we were leaving."

The knight frowned at her then nodded. "Thank you, Sister," Turning back to Tayan, he asked, "Did you see this, M'Lord?"

"He was already gone by the time this happened."

The knight whirled on her. "My good Sister!" he snapped. "I understand you are very upset, but I am addressing Lord Tayan, not you. Please keep still and let Lord Tayan answer for himself."

Tayan cleared his throat. "Sir Walker, the good Sister is correct. I did not see either Mrs. Redman or Lord Tolham until after we arrived at the Duke's palace."

"And you did order your..." He was about to say "slave" but noted Amber was still fuming beside him. "...Ellie to obtain this scroll for you?"

"That is correct."

Sir Walker nodded and looked at Amber. "I will be back to talk with you more, Sister. Where may I find you?"

"She'll be at the church," Tayan said quickly.

Amber gave him a startled look. Sir Walker only nodded, his expression saying he wished that the one he was speaking to would answer him.

"Very well, M'Lord. Until we find the culprits, I suggest you keep Ellie under heavy guard. The ones who did this know they have a death penalty hanging over their heads, and she can identify them."

He turned and walked away, signaling his scribe to follow.

“You want me to leave you at a time like this?” Amber cried. “You could be next, and what about Ellie?”

He gazed at her a few seconds then said, “Sir Walker just said to keep Ellie under heavy guard. You might also want to consider that you may be next. I want both of you safely tucked away in the church. I will call for you when I am ready.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“I plan to be surrounded by guards,” he told her with a grin. “And I am not exactly helpless.”

She couldn’t believe he was sending her away. He was, and gave orders to gather a large guard to escort her and Ellie to the church. She was still working on a substantial reason to stay with him as she was led out to the center of a platoon of men, who had Ellie on her stretcher in the middle of the pack.

He was finally alone in the room. From one of the tall windows, he watched the Sister and the slave leave through the gates with their armed guard. Behind him, the door opened.

“Lord Tayan, do you need anything, perhaps an evening drink to calm your nerves?” a servant asked.

“No, thank you. I do not wish to be disturbed for the rest of the night,” he told the man pleasantly.

“As you wish. Good night, M’Lord.”

Once the door was shut, he reached into his pocket and grasped the crystal. “Master, I am inside. No one suspects anything--they believe I am who I say.”

Very good, Aliana’s voice replied in his head. You have that priestess out of the way?

“She is not a problem.”

Keep it that way, and keep me informed.

“Yes, Master.” He let go of the crystal and started leafing through the stacks of parchment to get a grasp on the size of the army he was going to destroy.

The first day in the lower chambers, Amber tended to Ellie, sure that Tayan would send word to her. The task wasn’t hard--Ellie slept the whole first day and most of the second. When Amber left to get food and pray, two of the six men in the room across the hall went with her. Weapons were not allowed in the church, but that did not include the thick walking sticks and heavy brass belt buckles that each man wore. Amber had once seen such a belt used in a fight; and although the other man had a knife, the man with the belt had beaten him to death.

The first time Ellie awoke, she stayed conscious only a few minutes. Once Amber told her that her master was fine and had his scroll, she slipped back into a deep sleep. Early in the morning on the third day she awoke again. Amber tended her wounds and tried to get her to eat. Ellie drank juice but refused to eat anything. She stayed awake until just after noon then took a long nap until dinnertime.

While she tended to Ellie, Amber tried to get news from the outside. There was nothing from Tayan or anyone else; so she ended up having John, one of Jeni's men who brought them supplies, tell her what was going on. What she found out she was sure had to be only wild rumor. The large contribution Jeni had made, the one Ellie almost gave her life for, was being used to hire scribes to post notices all over the city on the state of the army. These notices included the names of all the Lords and ranking officers, as well as a decent description of how many men they had. Tayan did hire General Cooper and had him move east of the city to perform maneuvers in farmland where angry farmers were compensated for the destruction of their crops. If she was to believe one guard who came in for his shift, he was also hiring mercenaries as military advisors.

The only thing she believed was that Belenaris Tolham was made Jeni's consort by the elven council, and he had wasted no time in moving her to his own estate. According to John, Jeni had gone only because Belenaris had threatened to put Erica into an orphanage.

The morning of the fourth day, Amber returned from her morning prayers to find Ellie awake.

"Good morning, Ellie," she said pleasantly as she came in. Going over to the girl, she lifted the covers to see if her wounds were still oozing. Thankfully, the bandages were dry.

"How much of me is left?" Ellie asked tonelessly.

"I think you will recover quite nicely," Amber told her. "Sir Walker is still looking for the men who did this to you."

"What is my Master going to do with me?" she asked with a hint of fear in her voice.

Sitting down by her head, Amber took on a more stern tone. "He has left you in my care. Until you are healed, don't worry about anything but getting better."

Ellie picked up her left arm and showed her the wrist stump. "Are you going to fix this?"

Amber gave a sigh. "Nothing can be done with it. Be glad you're still alive," She picked up the blanket and pulled it to one side. "Let's see how your other injuries are."

Ellie stayed quiet as Amber checked her over. Except for her stomach, all her wounds were sealed. Not wanting Ellie to try to sit yet, she gave her a sponge bath and got a fresh sheet around her then made her eat a few slices of pear.

The door opened and a guard came in. "Sister Amber, Sir Walker has some prisoners for Ellie to identify."

Amber turned to Ellie, who nodded.

Sir Walker came in first; then another guard led in four prisoners who shuffled along with chains on their hands and feet. The group was also connected by the collars around their necks. As the guards got them in a line at the foot of the bed, Amber propped Ellie up so she could get a good look at them.

"Head up!" a guard snapped at one who was looking at the floor. He punctuated his statement by slapping the man's chin to lift his head.

Three of the four were elven. Ellie studied their faces and pointed to two of the elves. "That one, and that one. They are the ones who tried to steal from my Master."

"These are the ones who attacked you?"

"Yes, because I would not give them my Master's property," Ellie stated.

The elf with the light-brown hair she had pointed to broke down and cried. "It was Lord Tolham who told us to do it!"

"Right," the other one said quickly. "And he said he'd kill us if we got caught."

Grabbing the sobbing elf by his hair, Sir Walker made him look at Ellie. "Lord Tolham told you to torture this girl?"

"Yes. He said do whatever you have to, but make her talk."

"So, you cut off her hand and tore her skin off!" he spat in the elf's ear.

The other elf nodded. "That's right. He said he didn't care what it took, but to get the scroll she had."

Sir Walker let go of the one elf and walked up to the other. "Explain to me in detail what his orders were."

The elf swallowed. "He told us to..."

"Who, exactly?"

"Lord Belenaris Tolham told us to get the scroll the slave had. I asked him what we should do if she refused." The elf took a deep breath. "He said to use whatever means necessary to get it." Tipping his head toward the crying elf, he said, "Halarian asked if we should hit her. Lord Tolham stood as close to him as you are to me and told him to beat her, break her bones or whatever it took to make her give up the scroll. He implied that if we failed he would kill us."

Sir Walker frowned at him. "Just what did he say, exactly?"

"His exact words were 'Get the scroll tonight, or you won't see tomorrow.'"

"And you will testify to this?" Sir Walker stated more than asked.

"It's not our fault!" Halarian cried. "If only she'd just given us the damn scroll!"

"You are the one who did this, not Lord Tolham!" Sir Walker spat.

In a firm voice, Ellie spoke up. "I will never betray my Master!" In a blast of breath, she yelled, "Never!"

Amber looked down to see she was quaking. Ellie tried to sit up, wincing in pain as she hovered with her shoulders just above the sheets. Quickly, Amber was beside her, coaxing her back down. Once she got Ellie to lie still, she looked at the knight.

“Sir Walker, I think you better leave.”

Sir Walker hustled the men and guards out of the room. Standing by the doorway, he said, “Sister, these men will be brought to justice, I promise.”

“Belenaris Tolham, also?” she asked.

“The duke will see to it personally,” he replied then closed the door on his way out.

Ellie stayed agitated the rest of the morning. The bandages on her stomach became stained with blood. Only after praying with her did Amber manage to get her calmed down and get the bleeding stopped. The rest of the day, Amber tried to take her mind off her injuries by playing games with her. As first, Ellie wanted nothing to do with games. Amber reasoned with her they would help pass the time until she got better. After considering this, Ellie gave it a try. She had never played tiles before, but once she got the hang of it, she won almost every time.

The next morning, Ellie insisted on trying to get up. Amber checked her stomach first and was quite surprised to discover the wound had healed over. Ellie sat up and got a look at herself for the first time.

Sitting naked on the edge of the bed, she gazed down at herself as she ran her hand over the latticework of scars on her body. Fingering the rough ridges of skin on her stomach, she let out a low moan. Both her thighs were also adorned with long, crisscrossed scar tissue.

“They killed me,” she breathed.

“You should be thankful to be alive,” Amber told her sternly.

Ellie turned a blank stare up to meet her eyes. “You call this alive? Tell me, what Master deserves to see this in his bed?” she choked, indicating her body.

“I do not believe Tayan has plans of bedding you.”

“Who would?” Ellie cried. “You should have put me out of my misery!” Holding up the stump of her left arm, she waved it at Amber. “I can’t serve, I am useless. Now, *I am* garbage!”

“You are not garbage!” Amber scolded.

Ellie hunched over and cried in wracking sobs. Amber let her. Once she got used to the sight of herself, she would talk her into feeling better. It did have to be a shock to find out that your once-perfect body now looked like something a blind artist had patched together. She had always thought that having pits in her face was a terrible thing. To see this girl now, she knew pits were nothing.

Ellie had quieted down by the time John arrived. Ignoring Ellie, he sat down beside her and looked at Amber. “I don’t believe it. I heard it with my own ears, and I still can’t believe it.”

Amber flicked her eyes at Ellie. “Do you mind?” she asked heavily.

John looked at Ellie and pulled a sheet up around her shoulders. Returning his attention to Amber, he said, “Sir Walker brought his evidence to Lord Tayan, who is now the acting leader of the elven council. It was up to him to set a trial date with the duke.”

Amber screwed her face up. "How did Tayan get to be head of the elven council?"

"Being an unofficial prince in Elrad, he's the senior noble," John said with a shrug. "Sir Walker was able to sentence the men who tortured Ellie, but to put a noble on trial he had to go through Lord Tayan."

"And...?" Amber prodded.

"He let him go. He said that Lord Belenaris Tolham's order to those men did not include mutilating her. He made the wimp pay five hundred in gold for ruining a good slave, but other than that the bastard went free."

Amber thought he had to have heard wrong. "That's it? He paid a fine, and it's over?"

"Five hundred is a good price," Ellie said blankly.

It may have been the news John brought or Ellie's insistence she no longer was worth anything, but the girl's statement was the last straw. Amber slapped Ellie before she knew she meant to. Glaring down at the girl, she growled, "No life can be measured in gold!"

Ellie stared back up at her defiantly. "Yes, it can. I know my worth, and five hundred is a good price."

Amber balled her fists, which made Ellie shrink back. "Anyone who can trade a life for gold is evil!"

That made Ellie straighten herself up and face Amber's anger. "My Master is not evil!"

Amber opened her mouth then caught herself before she said that he was. She thought she knew Tayan wasn't evil, but with what John told her she wasn't sure anymore. He seemed to have become a completely different man.

Collecting herself, she turned her attention to John. "Would you escort me to see Lord Tayan?"

"Take me back, too," Ellie said as she glared at Amber.

John shifted his gaze between them. "Umm, ladies, we have strict orders to keep you in the church, for your own safety. A few Brothers have found out there is something evil lurking about, but they have yet to locate it. The whole council has agreed that you two are the closest to Lord Tayan and need to stay under protection."

"My protection is Leighna," Amber stated. "Ellie will stay here, but I must go see Lord Tayan. I can go with you or sneak out a window if I have to. Either way, I am going."

"Sister, please--" John started, but Ellie spoke up.

"I must return to my Master, even if he takes my head," she stated. "I will not stay here."

John held his head and groaned. "I am going to lose my job over this."

"Better a job than a soul," Amber told him. "Although I do think Ellie should stay here for now."

Ellie stood up on shaky feet, letting the covers slip down. "If you can do nothing more for me then I must return to my Master."

Aghast, Amber quickly picked up a sheet and wrapped it around her. “Young ladies do not go around naked,” she scolded.

“I agree. Do you have clothes for me?”

“Come on!” John groaned, “Why don’t the two of you just stay here?” Turning to Ellie, he said, “You can barely stand on your feet.”

“He’s right,” Amber agreed. “You are still weak.”

Ellie’s face became a mask as she looked Amber in the eye. “I am a slave, but I am neither blind nor stupid. You feel you must return to him because something bad is happening. You love him because he stands for what is right and returns your affection. I love him because he makes me feel proud. We both know neither of us is going to stay another day in this room.”

Amber flushed. “I never said anything like that to anyone.”

“You didn’t have to,” Ellie stated. “May I have some clothes?”

Ellie searched for clothes in the bins for the poor but didn’t find anything gray. Her next selection was one of the brown robes of the Sisters, which was forbidden. Giving an irritated huff, she chose the plainest thing she could. The best they could find was a plain blue peasant’s dress.

John didn’t want to walk them back to Lady Salinthia’s estate, so he hired a coach to take them after they promised to insist he had nothing to do with their escape from the church. He let the coach get down the street and around the corner before going back to tell the other guards the women had gone.

The coach had just turned the corner before Salinthia’s gate when Amber heard a low roar that reverberated against the buildings. She was thrown back as the coach suddenly slowed and the frightened neighing of the horses accompanied yells from the street. Amber knew that roar--she’d heard it before in Paladnia when the knight had pretended to attack Tayan. She also knew they had half a breath to get out before the horses bolted. Grabbing a startled Ellie by the arm, she opened the door and dove from the coach.

They hit the ground and rolled to a stop in the street. The horses, bucking wildly, ran off with the stream of people and other horses that were fleeing whatever was up ahead. Ellie curled into a ball with her arms protecting her face as people stumbled over her in their flight. Amber managed to gain her feet and keep most of the mob off Ellie. From up the street, terrified screams and more roaring pushed the crowd to knock Amber to the side. It was all she could do to keep from being dragged along with the flow.

Spying a watering trough, she fought her way to Ellie and pulled her up to stumble behind it. Holding Ellie’s wrists, she looked at the girl’s face. The lobe of her ear was bleeding, but other than that she didn’t look hurt. “Ellie, are you all right?”

“What’s happening?” Ellie cried.

She could do nothing until the crowd was gone. Once the people had fled by her, Amber got up, her talisman gripped tightly in her fist. Sixty yards away, the now-empty street was littered with the

metal-clad bodies of city guards and a few blue-coated elven guards. One large iron gate to Salinthia's estate lay in the street, the bars twisted and broken. Although she didn't see anything moving, it sounded like something was bashing large stones together and shattering them.

"Ellie, don't move," she whispered.

Amber ran towards the destruction. As she got close, a few chunks of rock flew out of the gateway. Muffled screams increased in pitch from in the courtyard. She picked up her pace, now catching sight of the other gate, twisted inside the entrance, also off its hinges. The other thing she saw in the courtyard made her come to a halt, heart thumping with fear.

"Leighna, be with me," she mumbled.

The blockhouse that was the guards' quarters had a large hole in it. What was making the hole was something she had read about but could never imagine seeing. The beast was mottled gray, as if carved from granite. Standing man-high at the shoulder, the blocky doglike creature had wings and tore into the guardhouse with its wide front paws, yanking out stones as if they were pebbles and not two-foot-square blocks. Inside, she saw guards on the floor, cowering and screaming as the thing ripped a hole large enough to get at them.

She didn't have to check to know this thing was evil--she knew its roar. She also knew why it was here.

Raising her talisman toward the gargoyle, she cleared her throat and commanded, "By Leighna's light, be gone!"

It stopped demolishing the guardhouse and turned to look at her with red, glowing eyes. She gathered her courage, certain that Leighna would not let this thing kill any more people.

"By Leighna's light, be gone!" she commanded again.

It started towards her, head down like a wolf after prey. Her legs began quivering in fear. Her body told her to flee, to run as fast as she could to get away from this monster. She locked her muscles in place and prayed as she stared it down.

"Leighna, my light and salvation, protect us from evil. Though I stand before the shadow of death, I shall not fear, for you are with me. Your light and wisdom comfort me--"

Her words were cut off as the beast, now only a few paces away, let out a roar that knocked her off her feet and deafened her. Rolling into a ball, she found her talisman and gripped it tightly. Sure she was about to die, she took up where she had left off, or about where.

"You take us down the path of the righteousness, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive others..." She tried to think of the next line, but for some reason her mind was blank. She had memorized that prayer from childhood, and now she couldn't remember it! She lay there, desperately searching for the words and waiting for those horrid fangs to sink into her.

Slowly, she noticed that all around her there was silence. Looking up cautiously, she searched for the beast. The gates lay torn from the hinges and through the hole in the guardhouse wall, one elf was cautiously peering out, but there was no sign of the gargoyle.

By the time Amber had gotten control and stood up, a crowd of armed men spilled from the front doors

and from around the side of the palace to give battle to the thing they had heard. One of the elves in the ruined guardhouse ran out and hugged her.

“Thank you, Sister!” he cried, clinging to her.

“Thank Leighna,” she corrected him as she watched the men run across the courtyard. In the pack, she noted there were quite a few nobles. Tayan was near the center, a few rows back. He looked anything but pleased to see her.

Another elf who was looking out the hole in the wall, cried to the advancing men, “Some huge beast attacked us; Sister Amber drove it away!”

She pried the elf off her and got him to look at her. “What happened?”

Eyes wide, he motioned to where the gates were. “The city guard was after a guy who claimed to be Lord Tayan. They were arresting him and out of nowhere, this huge bleedin’ dog shows up and begins rippin’ em apart. We let a few in to try and save them, and it came for us. If you hadn’t driven it away, it would have killed us all.”

Amber glanced at Tayan, who was in the middle of the semicircle that formed around her and the elf. “This man, did the city guard hit him?”

The elf shrugged. “Some. They said he killed one of the city wizards and his daughter. Right after that, that thing attacked them.”

She looked at Tayan closely. The oppressive, skin-crawling feeling was back. She knew now that it had nothing to do with any duke or crime scene. Her hand went to her talisman and she put it against her chest to verify what she knew.

Quickly, Lord Tayan moved towards her, waving a finger in a no-no gesture. “Sister, I told you that is not polite.”

“Tayan was here, that was why the beast showed up. He is gone now,” she stated.

He stopped and glared at her. “What do you mean by that?”

“Lord Tayan Montara of Elrad is not here,” she repeated loudly. Pointing to the Tayan in front of her she stated, “This is an impostor!”

Lord Parnal, wearing his blue-and-silver-enameled chain mail stepped up to her. “Sister, you are making a serious accusation.”

“If you stick to your story, someone will be beheaded for treason,” another lord said ominously, hoping she would get the hint who.

“My head has been in danger before, I know what I know,” she told him.

The Tayan in front of her eyed her suspiciously. “Sister Amber is at the church. How convenient it would be for a wizard to drive off its own creature then make herself look like a hero.”

“How can you prove this wild claim?” Lord Parnal asked her.

She locked eyes with the fake Tayan as she said, “Get a priest, one you trust. Have him check us both. I will tell you what he’ll see. Around me is the holy light of Leighna. Around the real Tayan, the light of goodness, shadowed closely by evil. This man is pure evil, I can smell it.”

Tayan’s face turned crimson. “I’ve had enough of this! Guards, take her away!”

Not sure what to do, the men just shifted in place. Lord Parnal nodded to one of the senior officers. “Go ask Father Fisher to come here. Tell him it a matter of vital importance.” To Amber and Tayan, he said, “Both of you stay where you are. We will settle this.”

“Surely, you do not believe this wench!” Tayan yelled with a flail of his arm.

Lord Parnal replied with “Captain Delesteran, disarm Lord Tayan.”

Seeing the captain move towards him, Tayan started to slide his sword out of its sheath as if to hand it over. Halfway through the gesture, he pulled it suddenly and grabbed Amber to use her as a shield. She seized his arm, throwing her hips into him as she bent over. He tumbled over her, losing his sword as he hit the ground on his back.

Gripping her talisman, Amber commanded, “By Leighna’s light, show us your true self!”

The man’s features blurred. He wore the same clothes but was now a human man with short dark hair. Hauled to his feet by the guards, he wailed, “She’s a witch! I am the real Lord Tayan!”

“Take him away and put a close guard on him,” Lord Parnal ordered. Seeing Amber with tears in her eyes as she watched them take the man away, he said, “Sister, forgive me for doubting you. Is there anything we can do?”

Looking at the wreckage in the courtyard, she didn’t think Tayan would return for fear the gargoyle following him would wreak more havoc. He would run away to keep them safe from the thing. It was a big city, and she had no idea where to begin looking.

“Find my Tayan,” she whispered.

Ellie had stayed behind the water trough where Amber left her. Peeking over the top, she saw the Sister confront the beast but focused more on one of the peasants who was running away. Just before he disappeared out of sight, he looked up enough so she could see his face. Her mouth formed the word “master,” and she got up to follow him. The thing in the courtyard didn’t notice her limp by, nor did anyone else.

Chapter 18

In the damp cellar, stuck between half a table and the wooden shelf his head was resting on, Tayan watched the rickety staircase as he worked at the knot tying his hands together. He had no idea how much time had passed since the coach, but his hunger pangs suggested at least a few days. The muffled voices he had heard told him there were at least two wizards holding him. By the looks of this place, they had dumped him here out of necessity.

His prison was an underground version of a garbage dump. A few small casks adorned the shelves along the wall by him, and a path through the piles of forgotten pieces of furniture and boxes of clothes ran from where he was to a semicircle of clear floor by the base of the stairs.

The ones who were holding him might be wizards, but they were not very good at holding captives. His hands were tied in front of him with a length of rope binding them to his feet. Broken glass from what might have been a mirror was within reach, and so was a wad of cloth so he could pick up the glass and start sawing at the ropes without cutting himself. All he had to do was keep quiet and listen for anyone coming.

The knot parted. He untied his feet and got up slowly, cautious of any magical traps that might be sprung. Nothing happened. Wrapping the glass in the cloth, he tossed it along the path. The only thing that happened was the glass bounced against the bottom of the last step.

Something wasn't right. He didn't believe that whoever had captured him was so inept as to let him just walk out. He moved towards the stairs, keeping a close watch on the piles of refuse. Although he was fully expecting something to jump out at him, nothing moved. He scanned the floor and the stairs, looking for anything, even a simple tripwire.

He stiffened as the door latch at the top of the stairs turned.

"We'll be right back up," someone said.

The stairs were open, lacking even handrails. He slid underneath as two people started down. Luckily, he had room to squat with his back to a jumble of old chairs. He listened to them descend. One pair of legs came into view as the first one started past. As the second pair appeared, he reached out and grabbed the ankles. With a screech of surprise, the second person toppled into the first.

As the two robed figures fell into a heap at the bottom, Tayan flew around the steps. One was trying to struggle up. Tayan grabbed his head and twisted quickly, breaking his neck. The other shot to his feet with a high-pitched cry. Tayan kicked him, sending him crashing back into one of the piles of junk.

As the person landed, the hood fell back and he stared into the dazed eyes of a young woman. She looked down at the broken chair leg protruding from her chest.

Prepared to fight powerful wizards who knew what they were doing, he stood frozen in place as the girl weakly grasped the splintered wood. She looked at him pleadingly then coughed out blood. The only thing in her eyes was the fear of someone who knew she was dying. This lasted only a moment before she went limp, but her frightened look stayed with him.

He had just killed a woman.

"What is going--?"

Tayan turned to see another, light-haired woman in a peasant's dress gaping at him from the top of the

stairs. Her hand went to her mouth and her eyes grew round; then she flew from sight screaming that there was a brigand in the house.

Her voice got him moving. He took the stairs in twos and threes. Reaching the top, he saw the open front door and raced after the woman. He burst out into a crowded city street.

Ahead of him, the now-weeping woman waved down a pair of city guards. "My husband and daughter have been murdered!"

Stopping to take in his surroundings, Tayan noted the guards rushing to the woman wore Tolinic uniforms. A building beyond them had a large sign reading *Bank of South Tolina*. Apparently, he had been hidden in the city. Almost everyone in the streets was human. The woman pointed at him and the guards drew their swords.

Tayan raised his arms and waited for the guards to approach. He had one chance to explain this mess. The one not holding onto the sobbing woman pointed his sword at the wall.

Tayan turned around and put his hands on the wall as commanded. "My name is Tayan Montara. I was being held captive."

"Right. Don't move or I'll run you through," the guard growled. "Jake, go see what this is about."

The other guard nodded and led the woman inside.

"I am telling the truth. I was kidnapped by the wiz--" He stopped as the point of the sword pressed against the back of his neck.

"If you're Tayan Montara then I'm the Red Man. Shut up!" the guard snapped.

He heard the woman wailing that they weren't holding anyone. She had heard a noise in the cellar and found him over her dead husband and daughter. Tayan knew right then there would be no explaining to these men. It was fairly well known that in Tolina violent criminals were usually killed while trying to escape, even ones bound hands and feet. He was in a common section of the city--he doubted he'd ever see a jail cell.

"Nice set of clothes you stole. Too bad you won't be enjoying them," the guard snarled.

Tayan noted the man was careful not to get too close. He dropped his shoulders and kicked back. His foot met resistance as he hit the guard's hip. The instant the sword dropped away from his neck, he spun and kicked the startled guard in the face. Then he bolted and ran for his life.

The guard recovered and gave chase by the time he'd reached the end of the block. Not knowing where he was, he ducked around the corner and sped on as he tried to get his bearings. Behind him, shouts went up as the two guards called for help.

Ahead of him, the street ended in an intersection facing a large building that had *Fisherman's Guild* written across the front in large white letters. That meant he was in the southwest section.

He turned north at the intersection, now with four guards running after him and blowing on whistles. Ahead, a pair of mounted guards saw him, and their comrades in pursuit. The sidewalks were crowded with people but to stay on the street was to be run down by the horsemen. He ducked into the crowd,

pushing toward an alley between him and the horsemen. Not checking to see where it led, he burst out of the crowd to find it dead-ended in a ten-foot wall. Behind him, the guards yelled for people to clear the way.

He didn't dare slow as he ran down the alley. Seeing a stack of barrels, he quickly noted how far away from the wall they were. One lone barrel stood in front of the others, which were double-stacked. Just beyond them was a window that had a top ledge as well as a bottom one. A vision of Odif flashed in his mind, leaping from one stump to a higher one. Then they had played for practice and to see who would pleasure whom. Now, he had to use her technique for survival.

"Halt, brigand, and you might live to see trial!" one guard yelled.

The pounding of horse's hooves drove him faster. The sound closed on him as he closed on the barrels. The horse was moving up beside him as he jumped onto the first barrel. Pushing off and up, he flew towards the stack. His foot hit...and tipped the top barrel as he moved to the second one. He didn't hear the guard's curse as he catapulted even higher.

He focused on the window ledge. As he flew towards it, it didn't look as wide as when he first saw it. Jutting no more than a few inches out from the wall, it would not hold him if he pushed off straight.

He pushed out and up as he stretched his arms towards the wall. Grabbing at the top, he hit flat. The tenacious hold he had with one hand slipped, leaving him dangling by three fingers. Carefully, he reached up and got a grip with both hands then hoisted a leg up.

"Crossbows!" a guard yelled below him.

Pulling up onto the narrow edge, he saw one of the horsemen drop a bolt into his bow and take aim. Having no time to see what was on the other side, Tayan threw himself over the wall and landed on a fishmonger's cart.

The cart collapsed to the surprised cries of those around it. Amid the wreckage of wood and fish, Tayan struggled up then slipped and fell. A balding man cried for the guards as he got to his feet and took off.

In a limping run, he kept going the way he thought was north. Between hitting the wall and landing on the cart, his right leg was stiffening up. Fear kept him going as he turned down another street then turned again at the next intersection. Whistles sounded as unseen voices called out his description. In the poorer part of the city, very few had jackets laced with gold or silver threads down the sides of their pants. The guards were not going to have any trouble spotting him.

The next alley he ducked down was empty and ran all the way to the other street. Spying a ramshackle stable, he made for it. He didn't slow as he approached but grabbed the corner post and flung himself into a stack of hay just inside the opening.

Through the noise of his rasping breaths and his heart pounding in his ears, he listened for the guards. He heard a horse gallop down one street; then the sound of a whistle went by. Another horse slowed and turned into the alley. Pulling hay over himself, he lay still and tried to slow his rapid breaths.

The dry smell of hay filled his nostrils as he listened to the horse slowly pass the stable then stop. In his mind, the dead girl still gazed at him pleadingly. He tried to shut this vision out, but she wouldn't go away. He had killed her just as surely as if he had been holding the chair leg that impaled her. A small voice in his mind cried out for him to give up. Just get up out of the hay and surrender to the guards. He was guilty

of murder--he didn't even think now they were the ones who had captured him. He didn't see how a poor city wizard and his daughter could possibly arrange such a plan. He'd made a big mistake. The conditions of that cellar should have told him he wasn't dealing with professional wizards. He hated that man for getting his little girl involved and despised himself for killing her.

A voice at the end of the alley called out, "Hey, down there, I think we got him!"

This was it. Maybe it was best if he didn't make it. At least Amber wouldn't find out what he had done. He would die as a brigand, but at least the memory of him would not be tarnished with his loved ones. Ready to surrender, he lifted his head up to see the mounted guard trotting away. Where was he going? Almost disappointed at not getting caught, he stumbled out to see the rider gallop into the street.

Spying an old, wide-brimmed cattlemen's hat, he put it on then threw on a dusty old oiled cloak. His lower legs and shoes still showed, but if he kept in the crowds, they wouldn't spot him.

Mingling in one of the knots of people on the street, he saw five guards drag a man out of a building. Behind them, six other people costumed in wealthy attire spilled out, crying out the man's innocence. In their haste to capture him, the guards had raided a troop of performers. As the rest of the troop convinced the guards the man had been performing all day, Tayan crossed the street. He left the growing number of gawkers and slipped across the street to make his way to the elven district.

Moving with throngs of people, he got into the walled inner city, stopping long enough to swipe a pair of tall boots to cover the lower parts of his legs. The boots were so loose his feet slapped around inside them, but at least he could walk along without fearing discovery. At the corner of the street Lady Salinthia's estate was on, he paused to make sure no one was actively looking for him. Here and there, guards talked with elven men who wore the dark-blue-and-silver uniforms of Elrad East. By the closed gates to the courtyard, the only guards were on the other side. If he had to make a run for it, there was plenty of room. Walking out as if taking an afternoon stroll, he headed for the gates.

He didn't recognize either guard as he came to a stop.

One guard looked at him curiously. "Can we help you, sir?"

"I am Lord Tayan Montara, and I need to speak to Lord Parnal immediately."

The elf's eyes widened. "Of course!" Making a show of lifting his arm to itch an ear, he said, "Right away, M'lord. Wait right there, we'll go get him."

"Yes, just a moment," the other elf agreed, itching his ear as well.

"Could you let me in?" Tayan asked heavily. He'd had a rough day and didn't have time for foolishness.

"Who did you say you were again?" the elf asked.

Tayan grabbed the gates and shook them. "I am Tayan Montara, now let me in!"

He noted the elf was looking past him. Turning around, he saw guards had come out of the buildings across the street to make a solid line that quickly made a semicircle to surround him. As he searched for a way out, he was grabbed and pulled back against the gates.

"Lord Tayan is in his study and has been most of the day," one elf hissed.

Suddenly, it all made sense. Whoever kidnapped him had put a duplicate in his place. They'd set up that poor wizard, knowing he would get free. No one was going to see him as Lord Tayan--they would see him as a murdering impostor.

"Your Lord Tayan is a fake!" he cried.

In the tightening trap, several guards lifted loaded crossbows on him. One with a pair of silver bars on his shoulders called to the elven guards, "Thank you for your help, brave elves. We wish you luck in Elrad," To Tayan, he growled, "Try to escape, I dare you!"

This was his last chance to convince the guards holding him he was who he said. Wracking his brains for something the fake would not know, he said, "I have proof. Jeni Redman is my father's wife. Her child, my sister, is named Erica."

Behind him, the elven guards laughed as they let him go. "Everyone knows that!" one chuckled. "And you can call her Lady Redman!"

He turned to tell them that Odif was his sister, only Jeni knew that. Before he could say anything, his face was pushed into the gates and his arms pinned behind his back.

"This is what liars and murderers get!" a guard hissed, and punched him hard in his lower back.

As he slipped down with a cry of pain, a deep, loud animal roar shook him to his bones. One of the guards crashed into the gates a bloody mass. Screams filled the air as the gargoyle ripped into the guards, pitching them away with long swipes of its huge paws. He focused on it in time to see it bite the head off one guard then rake another with a claw that tore his armor off and let his guts spill out.

His mind screamed as the beast ripped apart men who were too terrified to flee. Beside him, the gate opened to let in a pair of screaming guards to save them from the beast. On the street, the guards who could run did, dropping their weapons as they fled for their lives. The gargoyle saw no one else close by to kill, so it lunged at the gates, smashing through the iron bars as if they were wooden sticks.

"*Nooo!*" Tayan screamed as he got to his hands and knees. The beast swung a claw at a guard cowering against the inside of the remaining gate. The blow crushed the man and ripped the gate off its hinges to send it flying into the street. One elf, shaking so badly his knees quivered, tried to stab the beast with his spear. The weapon didn't even penetrate the gargoyle's skin. The gargoyle slapped a paw down on him, and blood shot out from under it as the paw hit the ground. The remaining elf fled into the guardhouse and slammed the door as the gargoyle swung its paw, pieces of elf stuck to it, into the last city guardsman and killed him.

Choking back the bile in his throat, Tayan did the only thing he could to save the men cowering inside the guardhouse. He turned and fled as fast as his feet would take him.

A few streets later, he no longer heard the gargoyle. He slowed, because his vision kept clouding up as tears ran down his face. He cried for the men who were butchered, he cried for the girl whose face haunted him. He cried for the brave elves who were going to march under the banner of a fake. He dimly noted troops of guards and knights heading past him. They were rushing to face a threat they had no chance of winning against. Their only prospect for survival was for him to get away from here as fast as he could. Part of him wanted to go back and expose whoever was pretending to be him, but he knew he could never go back there--the danger to others was just too great. All it would take was for someone to

hit him and the thing would begin killing again. His only option was to disappear and pray that someone found out the truth.

His mind in a fog, he somehow got to the mid-city bridge and crossed the river. No one stopped him as he left the walled portion of the city. When he started into the poor eastern section, he found a shop where he traded his clothes for some coin and more common garments. The light-brown shirt and breeches were worn, but now no one would recognize him before he managed to leave the city. He got a whole twelve silvers for his clothes, though the man would sell them later for that much in gold once he washed the fish smell out of them.

Slowly, the buildings got a bit shabbier, and the people looked a bit plainer. By the time the sun was down and night was starting to paint the sky, he was in what had to be the worst section of the city. He was on the outskirts; ahead were the tents and lean-tos of the very poor. Searching down the last street, he found an unpainted wooden building that declared in faded letters it was an inn.

He went to the boards set on barrels that served as a bar. Behind it, a woman who was aged by poverty wiped out tin cups as she eyed him. The blouse she wore had long ago lost any color and was threadbare enough to show she didn't have a proper undergarment to conceal her pendulous breasts.

"I'd like a room, please," he sighed and laid a silver coin on one of the boards.

Eyeing it, the woman cracked a grin. "Rich fella, huh?"

"I don't want anyone to know I'm here," he told her quietly.

"Yeah, pretty boy?" she asked. "Make it two."

He set down a second coin. She waved towards the stairs. "Take the third room on the right. Ain't no locks, so either sleep against the door or wedge it shut. If anyone's in there and gives you a hard time, come on down. I'll get one of the boys to boot him."

He nodded blankly. "Got any food?"

"Yeah, got some leftovers, but the bread's all gone," Walking towards what had to be the kitchen she tapped the bar with her finger. "Bowl stays down here. Try an lift it, the boys'll bust your arm."

"Right, ma'am."

Settling down on one of the boxes that served as stools, he braced his feet so it wouldn't tip on him. A moment later, the woman came out and put a wooden bowl of colored water in front of him.

"No spoon?" he asked dryly.

The woman planted a fist on her hip. "Look, pretty boy, it's late. I told you the bread's all gone. If you're too proud to slurp down some gruel then go find somewhere else to eat."

Looking at the bowl, he figured he deserved no better. He didn't want to think about all the people who had died today, but he found himself tallying the numbers. There were sixteen men he knew of, and that girl who still stared back at him in his mind.

"This will do," he said.

The water was hot, though he was hard put to place a flavor on it. He drank his gruel then made sure she had her bowl before he went up to find his room. The hall was littered with trash and a ragged man was propped up in the far corner.

His room was empty, literally. Besides a pile of rags, a piece of a leg off something and a single shutter that covered half the open window, there was just him and his conscience. Settling down onto the rags, he stared out the window, feeling as hollow as this room. Evil had done its work on him. He didn't have an army or any influence to help King Alderlan or Lord Zodiac. He didn't even have Amber to comfort him.

As he thought about Amber, the vision of the girl impaled with the chair leg came again. Her eyes had been light blue and had radial gray lines. Those pretty eyes looked at him as if to ask him why she was dying. Why hadn't he taken the time to study his surroundings and know that she was not a powerful sorcerer? He didn't have an answer for those eyes, and he knew damn well he didn't deserve any comfort. He lay there, wondering why his leg wasn't any more painful than it was.

Morning brought an old man with no teeth poking his head into his room. "Hey!" the old man wheezed, "This is my room!"

Tayan propped himself up on one elbow. "I paid for it."

"Me, too, six coppers!" the man insisted.

He didn't look like he had a single copper to his name.

"How about if we go talk to the lady downstairs?"

"Don't need to go gettin' all proper," the man wheezed as he hobbled in. "How about this--I'll watch it for you during the day then you'll watch it for me at night?"

Tayan gave a sigh. "Why not?" He got up and motioned to the rags. "I was getting up anyway."

Sporting a toothless grin, the old man clapped a frail hand on his arm. "Just you an' me, partner."

Forcing a grin, he said, "Sure, just you and me."

Going down the stairs, he was mildly surprised to smell the pleasant aroma of freshly baked bread. The common room was full, every rickety table and every shaky stool at the bar. A graying man behind the bar helped serve, along with two other, younger men and a girl so thin Tayan thought she might be elven. Her ears and face, however, showed that she was human, only frail. Her dress was a sack with head and armholes cut in it, bound with a rope around her middle. The boys were in similar states, though each had a club tied to a rope at his waist.

The man behind the bar noticed him and pointed to the kitchen. "Go on in, Marla's got your breakfast in there."

He thanked the man and went in to what looked to be the remains of a forge. Over the fire pit, a pair of small metal boxes served as ovens. The workbench had a cloth over it and was now a table for preparing the bread. The base where the anvil had stood now had a round board over it. On the board was a large bowl of gruel and a good-sized chunk of bread.

Marla stopped kneading the dough long enough to point at the makeshift table. "You eat in here, mister. If you don't want to be seen, come down before the crowd comes in, or after they leave."

The gruel was the same colored water as the night before. Marla's bread, however, was the best he had ever tasted. He watched her as she worked. Her hair was dark but, like her face, poverty had taken away the luster, making her look older than she was. By the time he finished his humble meal, Marla had taken out another loaf with a pair of old but clean forge tongs and slid in the next batch of dough.

"You make really good bread," he told her.

She eyed him then went back to cutting the loaf into chunks with a saw-toothed dagger. "I take it you want more?"

"I was just saying it was good. Really good."

Marla gave a snort. "Look, pretty boy, we only get so much. There's lots of hungry people out there and very little coin to go buy flour." Waving her dagger at a sack of flour, she said, "There's your silver coin. That's gonna have to last a week, unless you plan on staying longer."

"What about all those people out there, don't they pay?" he asked. There had to be at least fifty people in the common room.

"However they can, yes," she told him. "More often than not they pay by bringing in soup bones, vegetables or whatever they can find that we can use. As long as they got something to trade, I won't let them go away hungry."

He noticed that the woodbox by her "ovens" was filled with various bits of furniture and a few actual small logs. "I take it flour is hard to come by."

"Can't trade with the mills, they want hard coin," she sighed. "Guys like you are what save us. I know you're on the run from something, hasn't been one of you yet who wasn't." Putting the chunks of bread on a tin tray, she grabbed a few bowls in the same motion then went over and dipped them into the iron pot to fill them. "So, how long you stayin'?"

"Not sure." If his few silvers could help feed the poor people here then he'd stay until his silver ran out. At least he'd be doing someone some good.

Marla cast a glance at the flour sack. "You're silver's good for five days; after that, it'll be two more." She put the bowls on the tray then opened the door and hollered for Betty.

Betty was the skinny serving girl. She came in with a stack of empty bowls and put them down beside the tray. He studied her dark hair, made up in pigtails. When she turned to look at him, he noted her young face was already being sapped of beauty by her environment. She eyed him long enough for Marla to come up behind her and give her a smack on her bottom.

"Betty!" Marla snapped, which made the girl jump. "Git that tray out there!"

"Yes, Mum," she said with a blush aimed at him. Turning to push the door open with her behind, she gave him a shy grin.

Marla glowered at him. "Don't you go thinkin' that my daughter's a tramp. All you git for your silver is your room and your meals."

He shrugged. "I wasn't thinking anything like that."

"Uh-huh. Breakfast is over," she stated. "If you're still here, dinner is at dusk."

Her pose also told him that this conversation was over.

"Yes, ma'am." He got up and headed for the common room.

Not sure what to do with himself, he wandered the litter-filled streets. The people around him ignored him as much as he ignored them. Not once did he run across a guardsman or anyone who looked like they were trying to keep order. Here and there, shady people made deals in alleys, and a couple times he heard a scream that was cut off abruptly. He tried not to think as he walked along; he concentrated only on putting one foot in front of the other. Common sense told him to go back to his room and rest his aching leg, but it still wasn't hurting enough.

He managed to see the worst part of the city and not get attacked by bandits or one of the tattered people begging for money or food. Once, he did see a pair of men with knives threaten the purse from a woman. The people around them turned away and tried not to see it happening. The woman gave up her purse then ran as the men split her coppers between themselves. Earlier, he was glad not to see any guards. Now, he wanted nothing more than to see how these brigands would fare against swordsmen instead of helpless women. He saw other revolting sights, such as beggars missing limbs and dirty children in torn clothing lining the streets.

By the time he returned to the inn he was tired of seeing poverty. He walked though the door, not paying any attention to the people gathered at the end of the bar. It wasn't until a man in leathers raised a sword towards him that he stopped and looked up.

The man was better kept than the other residents, which was to say his clothing was in fair condition and he was shaved. His dirty blond hair was tied back in a ponytail.

"Better move on, mister, if ya know what's good for ya," he growled.

Five other men dressed the same were with Marla and her family. One man held Betty by her hair as two others bracketed Marla and the gray-haired man. Two more held the boys at bay with swords.

"You hard of hearin'?" the man before him asked heavily.

Tayan looked the brigand in the eye. "Why rob these people? They have nothing."

The one holding Betty laughed and shook the girl's head. "They got her, and that just happens to be the price for doing business here."

"Let her go, we'll come up with silver for ya," Marla begged.

The one holding Betty grinned. "Oh, yeah? I figure this little slut will be worth about two hundred gold on the market. Got that much?"

Tayan had heard stories about families selling their children into slavery. He wondered how many of

those girls were stolen from their real families by men like this. He backed up and stepped around the man holding the sword. Stopping clear of the nearest men, he noted their positions. He could get back out the front easier than trying to go through the kitchen. "I have a better deal for you. Let her go, and I won't kill you."

The men laughed but didn't take their eyes off him. One waved his sword at Tayan and asked, "Who're you, the friggin' Red Man?"

Tayan kept his eyes on the one holding Betty. By what he saw, this one was the leader. "I'm going back outside. When you come out, don't have the girl. If you do, I promise not one of you will live."

The man doused his grin. "All right, go on out. We'll be by in a minute to slice you up. First, I want to get a taste of my new slut." He pulled Betty's head back, which made her cry out. Holding her chin, he bent to kiss her.

The nearest table still had one of Marla's bowls on it. Snatching it up, Tayan threw it, catching the leader on the ear. He backed up as he watched them. Two started his way, and he put a table between him and them and backed towards the door.

The man let Betty go and drew his sword. "No one does that to me!"

"Don't kill him, he's a payin' customer!" Marla cried. The man nearest to her slapped her.

Tayan made a beckoning gesture with both hands for them to follow him. "Let's see if you can do more than beat on women."

The table went over with a crash as one man threw it out of his way. All six came after him in a steady walk. He led them outside and seeing an alley, angled towards it. They picking up their pace. He turned and ran down the alley.

"We're gonna slice you up!" the leader roared.

Tayan ran straight for a pile of broken boards lying against the side of the inn. The thugs spread out in a line as they chased him. Grabbing a six-foot section of plank off the top of the pile, he turned and swung at the lead man. The man caught the blow in his stomach. As he bent over, Tayan kicked him in the face and took his sword. Another man made a clumsy chop at him, which he parried then sliced the man's belly open.

The alley shook with the gargoyle's roar as it appeared behind the men. The last two had time to turn and open their mouths in a silent scream before it slammed them into bloody pulp against the sides of the buildings. Tayan gored one of the remaining men through the heart then slashed the other, who had turned to gape at the gargoyle. The gargoyle killed the last one then sat down and looked at him.

Glaring at it, he told the beast, "I don't need you--leave!"

With a flap of its wings, it disappeared.

At the end of the alley, people began to gather as he picked up the swords. No one ventured in, but a decent crowd, which included Marla's two boys, watched as he collected the weapons. When he walked towards them, they parted, eyeing him in wonder and fear. He ignored them and went into the inn.

Going to the bar, he dropped the swords onto it then selected one for himself. Seeing Marla and the older man watching him intently, he said, "Give one to each of your boys and hide another behind the bar. One in the kitchen, too. You can probably sell or trade one for a few weeks worth of flour."

Eyes wide, the older man asked quietly. "You him, mister? You the Red Man?"

"He's gotta be!" one of Marla's boys said from behind him. "You should see the mess in that alley--he tore them fellas to bits!"

"Shut up, Randy," Marla breathed as she eyed Tayan cautiously.

Tayan turned his hard gaze to Randy and the crowd that followed him in. Part of his anger was for the brigands, the other part for these people thinking he was his father.

"I'm nobody," he stated.

"You ain't got a name?" Betty asked curiously and got smacked on the back of her head by Marla. As he turned back, Marla quickly offered, "Thank you for saving my Betty."

Instead of telling her it was only the right thing to do or saying something profound, he just went up to his room.

The old man was wheezing out snores as Tayan settled down against the wall opposite him and inspected his sword. It was a common straight blade that tapered down to a sharp point. The handle was wood wrapped with crisscrossed leather thong for a solid grip, and the guard was a simple strip of steel. Laying it beside him, he let his thoughts drift. It occurred to him those men had to be as evil as they came. The gargoyle hadn't hesitated--it began ripping into them just as fast as it had torn into the city guards. Father Ross had told him it was near him to protect his person. He had thought it would come only to cause mischief and attack the people he didn't want harmed. Apparently, it didn't care who it attacked.

This was something he could use. With the gargoyle near him, whatever did attack him was in for a big surprise. He could travel the plains and walk right into that damn city.

Shifting his gaze over to the piece of wood on the floor that someone had used to wedge the door shut, he noted it was bent. Picking it up, he remembered the message Odif had left.

"Well," he mused, "I guess I'm ready to go." The only thing he needed was a way to travel. He didn't have close to enough money for a horse, and banished any thoughts of attempting to return to the elven district to acquire one. Digging in his pocket, he found a couple gold and a few silvers. If he was lucky, he might be able to get back to the river and buy a rowboat. He knew some halshaken words in case he ran across any rowing his way north. Any clans that remained hidden in the Jude would know of Zodiac. If nothing else, he might be able to travel in peace. His plan was far from set, but at least now he had a direction to go in. He no longer felt so helpless.

He went down to find Randy and his brother telling what they had seen to a throng of eager ears as they ate their noon meal of bread and gruel. He slipped around the end of the stairs and made for the kitchen unnoticed, or so he thought. One cloaked figure slipped away from the crowd and followed him.

In the kitchen, Marla and Betty were baking bread. Seeing him enter, Betty gave him a broad smile. "Mister, umm, Nobody, would you like some lunch?"

“Sure.” He sat down at the round table on his rickety box. Betty was quick to bring him his gruel, which now sported a few floating pieces of vegetable. She set down a quarter of a loaf of bread in front of him. From what he had seen so far, this was a king’s feast.

“We don’t want you to think we ain’t grateful,” Marla told him as she scooped out another bowl of flour from the bag. “I’ll feed you the best I can, and I won’t pry into your affairs. Maybe you can tell us what to call you besides ‘Nobody.’”

From by the door, a female voice said, “He is Lord Tayan Montara of Elrad, and he is my Master.”

He turned to see Ellie standing just inside the door. Her hair was in disarray. She looked at him with hollow eyes, one of which bore a purple bruise.

“Who?” Marla asked breathlessly.

“Ellie, what in the abyss are you doing here?” he cried.

Walking towards him, she asked, “Did you get the scroll Jeni had for you?”

He focused on her bruised eye. “What happened to you?”

She fell to kneel beside him. “I didn’t give it up, no matter what they did to me that night.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I told Sister Amber about it, she said she gave it to you. Please tell me you got it.”

Shifting on his rickety perch, he faced her. “Ellie, I was kidnapped. I haven’t been at Lady Salinthia’s estate since you last saw me.”

Ellie swayed as she held her right hand to her face. “I failed you. I am garbage.”

He grabbed her hand and lifted her chin to look at him. “You are not garbage,” he told her gently. “How did you get here?”

“I followed you at first. Then when I lost track of you, I kept going the way you were. I thought I saw you earlier today; then when I heard the roar I knew you’d be close by.” Looking up at him with liquid eyes, she said, “You did not sentence that B-lord, and you never got the scroll, did you?”

He knew whom she meant but had no idea what she was talking about. “Ellie, start from the night I left for the duke’s place and tell me everything.”

She did, saying only that Belenaris’s men hurt her when they came for the scroll. She finished by telling him about the coach ride, and Amber’s facing down the gargoyle. When she was done, he knew the fake was doing as much damage as he could. Still he asked the most important question on his mind.

“Ellie, did that thing hurt Amber?”

“No, Master. It left before I got to the corner.”

“And how about you? Are you bruised badly?” he asked.

Sliding her left sleeve up, she showed him the stump of her wrist. “I can no longer serve well. I

understand if you want to put me out of my misery.”

“Dear Odin,” he breathed as he held the scarred end of her arm. “They did this to you?”

She looked down. “They did more,” she said quietly.

The brutality done to her staggered his mind. What was worse, she had let them do that to her only because he told her that stupid scroll was so important. Belenaris’s men might have done the torturing, but it was he who was responsible for her injuries. He pulled her into a hug and stroked her hair.

“I’m so sorry, Ellie.”

“I failed you,” she sniffed. “I am ready to die now.”

He wanted to tell her the truth, that he didn’t give a damn about that scroll. To do so would let her know that her suffering had been for nothing. Somehow, he just couldn’t bring himself to do that. Leaning to whisper in her ear, he said, “Ellie, I failed you. I am not going to kill you for a...horrible mistake I made.”

Pulling back, she looked up at him quizzically. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s best you don’t,” he assured her. “I’m going to have someone take you back to Sister Amber. She has to know the man pretending to be me is a fake.”

Ellie furrowed her brow. “No,” she replied firmly. “I will not be separated from you again. Terrible things happen when I am.”

“I can’t argue with that,” he muttered. “Have you eaten?”

Ellie frowned as she thought. “I had breakfast yesterday. At least, I think so.”

He looked up to ask Marla if she could give Ellie some bread. Marla was gaping at him. To her side, Betty wore a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

“I knew you were someone special!” the girl said triumphantly.

“Here, I am still nobody,” he told them. “Marla, could you get Ellie something to eat?” He motioned to the box beside him. “Ellie, sit up here.”

Ellie got up and perched on the box beside him. Looking at his lunch, her jaw dropped. “Slaves eat better than what you have!” she cried. Whipping her head towards Marla, she tightened her one fist. “You give my Master something decent to eat, right now!”

“Ellie!” he barked, which made her swivel her head back to him. “This is all they have. Keep quiet.”

Ellie bit her lip and looked like she was about to cry again, but did keep quiet. Marla, who was normally terse with him, wore a forlorn look. “I am very sorry we do not have more,” she apologized.

“This is fine,” he said. “Besides, you make the best bread I have ever tasted.”

A smile came to Marla’s face, making her look ten years younger. “Thank you.” She hesitated then asked, “What do we call you?”

“Bob.”

“Thank you...Bob,” Marla said tentatively, and went to get Ellie some food.

Still grinning broadly, Betty got a whole loaf of bread and set it on the table. “Here, Mr. Bob...and Ellie. Can I get you another bowl, Mr. Bob?”

“This is more than enough,” he told her. Beside him, Ellie looked ready to faint. She stared at the bread as if it had something crawling on it. The bowl of gruel Marla set in front of her she ignored until he started eating his. Only then did she suffer through drinking it and measuring out a smaller piece of bread to eat than what he had.

As they ate, Marla and Betty stood by as if they were servants waiting for orders. After a few minutes of this, he couldn’t take any more.

“Marla, I am no different than anyone else. Please don’t make a fuss.”

“I heard about you,” she told him. “You killed a dragon, and your wife is the princess of Elrad. Heard tell you’re the one who got Lord Zodiac and his Company together. I bet you even know the Red Man personal-like.”

“That’s his father,” Ellie said absently.

“You even know Odif the Druid?” Betty asked, bouncing in place.

Before he could say anything, Ellie piped up, “She’s his sister.”

“Ellie, shut up!” He had no idea when she heard those things and was not happy she was sharing them so freely. “Here, we are nobody, got it?”

She lowered her head with a “Yes, Master.” She started to slide to the floor then glanced at him and moved back in place.

“What in the abyss are you doing here with us poor folks?” Marla asked.

The look Ellie gave him said she had the same question. He told them the only thing he could. “It isn’t safe for people to know where I am right now. If word gets out, thousands of lives will be in danger. It is very important no one knows I am here.”

Marla nodded. “Ya can trust me and Betty.”

Betty’s face became stricken. “I can’t tell no one I was saved by Tayan Montara himself?”

He shook his head. “Not a soul.”

“Awww, damn!” she cried, stomping a foot.

“Betty!” Marla barked with a glare. “Mind your tongue!”

“But, Ma,” she complained, waving an arm at him. “This is *the* Tayan Montara!”

Red-faced, Marla glared at her, "Didn't ya hear what he just said? He's hiding here to keep people from being killed!" Her mouth hung open as she realized the impact of that statement. Slowly, she turned to him. "That means we're in danger, too?"

Seeing her concern, and Betty's exuberance at finding out whom he was, he didn't dare stay here any longer. "No, I'm leaving."

"We're leaving," Ellie corrected.

"You can't leave," Betty whined. "There's still bad men here!"

"There will always be bad men around," he sighed. "At least the boys have swords now."

Tipping up his bowl, he drank his gruel and waited for Ellie to finish eating. He noted she acted like she hadn't eaten in days.

Trying to think what to do with her, he decided to keep her as close to him as possible. If something did attack, that damn gargoyle would take care of it. "Ellie, I want you to stay within arm's reach of me unless I tell you different."

Holding the last bit of her bread in her hand, she said, "Yes, Master" with a mouthful then inched closer to him.

The door opened and Randy came in. "What's all the--" Settling his eyes on Ellie, he grinned. "Wow, we got us a slave!"

"She ain't ours," Marla said quickly.

"She a runaway?" he asked.

Before too many questions got asked, Tayan decided to get the boy's mind on something else.

"I need to go north--do you know of any merchants heading out, or maybe a caravan?"

Randy jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "That general has got his big steel wagons in the fields outside town. Maybe you can hitch a ride with them."

"Randy, no foolishness!" Marla said, eyeing him.

Tayan perked up. "Can you show me where they are?" Randy nodded, so he put another silver on the table. "Marla, thank you for the hospitality. Will you let Randy take us out to General Cooper?"

"That's his name, Cooper." Randy nodded. "Just follow the main road out, can't miss 'em."

"Thanks," he said as he got up. Beside him, Ellie swallowed her last bite and shot to her feet. He helped her pull her hood up so her face was covered then gave Betty a stern look. "No one will know, right?"

Betty squirmed in place and forced out a "Yes, sir."

"I'll see to it," Marla told him.

Going back up to his room, he got his sword and the bent piece of wood. When he came down and walked through the common room, the people made a path for him, eyeing him with a mix of fear and awe. Marla's boys had probably embellished a little on what happened outside; then again, no one had actually seen anything. No amount of fictionalizing could encompass the horror that was in that alley. In the crowd, he noticed a couple men who wore clothes similar to the men he and the gargoyle killed. Stopping at the door, he turned and addressed the crowd.

"I like the lady who runs this place and her family," he said as he scanned them. He settled his eyes on the two men, who pretended to be interested in something else. "Anyone who wants to hurt them will end up just like their friends in the alley."

The men looked at him and turned pale. He waited until they turned away then left, making Ellie walk beside him.

As Randy had told him, it was easy to find General Cooper's wagons. They had no more than got out of town when on his right there was a field that looked like it had been plowed by a madman. Deep ruts crisscrossed each other, and one set of wide ruts ran to a section of crushed stone fence. Something very heavy had come though here.

In the middle of the field, what looked to be strangely built houses were clustered together. The smaller ones he took to be tractors, by Jeni's description. The larger ones were over twice the size of those. Round chimneys billowed dark smoke behind their square end, while in the middle an angular section sported three thick pipes before the front sloped down in a wedge. The large machines sat on wide, tall wheels that were belted together.

Struggling through the deep ruts, he and Ellie made their way to the center of the field where he now saw the tractors had two or three wagons behind them. By one large wooden wagon, smiths had an anvil and forge set up. Inside the wagon, steel bars hung on the wall and thick plates of steel covered the floor. Another was a portable kitchen. Asking the way, he found General Cooper in the large square shack atop one of the steel behemoths.

Despite Tayan's clothing, General Cooper recognized him.

"Lord Tayan," he grinned then swept his eyes over his attire. "Why are you sneaking about as a commoner?"

"Long story," he said, shaking the general's hand. "I need your services."

"I have half my payment, and your credit is good," Cooper said with a bow. "What can I do for you, M'lord."

"I heard you want to test these machines. I need to go north to the plains. If possible, I would rather not go through the city," he explained.

A glint of excitement shone in General Cooper's eyes. "The plains? I can think of no better challenge. As far as going through the city, we can't. No bridge will hold my battlewagons. We will have to go way north to the beginnings of the Jude, unless you know another way."

Looking out over the top of the gigantic steel body, he hoped the bridge he was thinking of would hold such heavy machines.

“Actually, I do. There's an ancient bridge which spans the Jude River a hundred miles north of the city. How fast can we get there?”

Cooper frowned in thought. “Well, let's say decent terrain and no problems, we can be there tomorrow morning.”

“A hundred miles, overnight?” Switching horses, messengers might make a hundred miles in a full day of travel. He couldn't imagine these things going half that speed.

“The boilers are still hot, and we have a few hours of daylight left,” Cooper said. “I'd say fifty or sixty today, and the rest first thing in the morning.”

After all his bad luck in recent days, it was hard to believe something was going right.

“That's good news. I'm ready to go whenever you are.”

General Cooper turned to one of his officers. “Captain Stark, sound assembly. We shall be leaving in the hour.”

Above them, a harsh whistle blasted. Tāyan watched as the chaotic array of men and machines quickly packed up. When the lead tractors started moving, they squealed and chugged. The battlewagon ahead of them pulled out, and he felt the thumping chugs of its workings in his feet as it lumbered off. In little time, the wagons formed a long line of steel and smoke.

On the road, a company of knights blocked their path. A halt was called, and General Cooper went to the front to see who had stopped them. When he came back, Amber and Sir Parson were with him.

Upon seeing Tayan, Amber's face lit up. He climbed down the ladder to greet her, and somehow they ended up in a hug.

“We are so glad to find you, M'lord,” Sir Parson offered.

Amber pulled back and grinned at him like a schoolgirl. “I knew you'd be here! We caught the fake, so you can go back now.”

He considered doing just that. Thinking about it for a second, he knew whoever planned his kidnapping was still around. As long as they thought he was alive they wouldn't stop looking for him.

“No,” he decided, “I have a much better idea.”

He explained his plan to them.

Chapter 19

Aliana sat on the edge of her throne, grinning with joy. “You are sure of this?”

The elf in the peasant clothes nodded. “The official story that Lord Parnal and Lord Tolham spread is that he was killed by an assassin. I did some digging around and found out he was shot by a guard on the west end of the city the same day he escaped from our wizards. Apparently, he tried to get to safety, but he was caught at the gates and your gargoyle showed up. He fled from there and was leaving the city when they found him again. I talked to a knight who only would confirm that the man who murdered the wizard and his daughter was killed while fleeing.”

This was too good to be true, Tayan slain by his own people! “Did you see his body?”

The elf shook his head. “He was dumped in a common grave to the southwest of the city. I went there, and the workers told me about a man who fit his description being buried. I was not allowed to dig him up and see for myself.”

She knew this elf was trustworthy, and he made sure his facts were straight before he reported anything to her. “Very well. Keep a close watch on the people he was near. This may be a trick.”

The elf bowed. “As you wish, Master. If anyone even mentions his name, my network will hear of it.”

She knew her Tayan duplicate had been caught at about the same time. His loss was a setback but not too important. “You are certain it was not Necron who was buried?”

“Absolutely. I saw Necron. He is being held under close guard and interrogated. Would you like me to have him killed?”

She shook her head. “No, let him suffer for getting caught. He doesn’t know enough to be a danger to us.”

“Yes, Master. Any other orders?”

“No, just keep an eye on that elven army.”

The elf bowed and departed. Behind him, two men carrying a third in a bloody gray shift moved up to her. The man in the middle kept his head down, hiding his pale face.

“Ahhh, Lash,” she grinned. “Did you enjoy your whipping?”

Lash muttered, “Yes, Master.”

She beckoned the men to bring him closer. When he was right in front of her, she tilted his head up and looked into his eyes. The vacant look pleased her. “Those little things between your legs, you miss them?”

Lash swallowed, squinting as he recalled his castration. “Yes, Master,” he choked.

“You were a good servant and wonderfully sadistic. That is the only reason you are still alive,” she cooed. “In fact, I will give you a chance to redeem yourself, if you are man enough.” She stressed the last part.

“I live to serve you,” he said tightly.

Watching her fingers, she gently rubbed his jaw line. “You have one last chance to kill Zodiac. Destroy him and his army, and I will give you back your status--and your shriveled little sack. Fail, and it will be best if you die on the battlefield.”

Hope sparked in his eyes. “I will not fail, Master.”

Aliana whisked her hand at the men holding him. “Get him cleaned up and into a uniform then brief him. Go!”

“You can’t do that!” Odif barked at Frieda as she glared at her.

Mother Frieda had waited until morning, when Odif had had time to recover and heal, before she informed her of their decision. The whole group now circled around had agreed, even Sam.

“You got lucky once,” she scolded. “I know our enemy better than you do. I did not come to this decision myself, we all agreed on it.”

Sam looked up at Odif sadly. “She thought I was alone and was not prepared to deal with all of us. She will not make the same mistake twice.”

“I can’t believe this!” Odif said, throwing her arms up. “This is *my* mission. You just came along. How in the abyss can you take over as team leader?”

“We are still a team,” Scorpio insisted.

Odif gawked at him. “What team? There is something I have to do--*me*! None of you had to come!”

Jo-Jo crowded in a bit closer. “When you told us where you were going, don’t you think we understood? Whether you like it or not, we are a team. No one is going to let you stand against that demon alone.”

“No shit,” Shilo snorted. “You are one big pain in the ass, but we all love you.”

“Yeah, even if you are nuts!” Theo piped up.

“Don’t think we can’t knock you senseless and leave you here,” Gloredaniel told her.

Betrayal was the only thing she felt as she looked at the faces of her friends. Odif hadn’t wanted them to suffer her fate, but they had insisted on coming. Now, she had to put a stop to it. She gave a heavy sigh. “All right, you win.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. “No! You are not going to slip away and go by yourself. You have taught me well--I can sense you no matter where you are. We will all stand a better chance if we don’t have to chase after you.”

Odif had forgotten the half-demon could read minds. “I saved your ass, do you forget that?”

Sam’s face became softer. “You did save me. You gave me something I thought I would never

have--friendship. For the first time in my life, I belong.” She laid her hands on Odif’s shoulders. “As your friend, I will not let you go without me.”

“Even if it kills you?”

“We both know that is certain.”

“You are taking this fight too personally,” Jo-Jo told her. “Mother Frieda has a cooler head, and that is what we need.”

Scorpio moved closer to Sam so he could look Odif in the eye. “We are in the fight of our lives,” he stressed. “We need to stick together.”

“We can banish this thing to the abyss, as long as we work as one,” Frieda added.

Odif felt tears form in her eyes. The outpouring of love and support, not just from Sam but from everyone else in the circle, overwhelmed her. If it had been a different time and place she would have shown her own love in a more physical way. This time, she didn’t lie when she said, “All right, Mother Frieda is team leader.”

Scorpio nudged Sam with an elbow. “Well?”

“She’s telling the truth.”

Frieda gave a satisfied huff. “Now that’s settled, let’s finish what we started.”

They went on their way. The only thing changed was that now when Odif decided the general direction, Mother Frieda chose the course. Unlike Odif, she led the group around heavier thickets and swamps, much to everyone’s relief.

As they traveled, the ground became smoother. The vegetation shortened, and more fields of tall grass dominated the landscape. Another day, and the terrain became a sea of grass, the small rises flowing into the distance like waves on a living ocean.

Every night now, Sam would awake to find Odif gone. Some nights, Scorpio would also be missing; other nights she noted that it was another man. Early one morning, she found both Theo and Hutch had disappeared. Subtle changes in the men got her attention. Entaurus seemed to be a bit friendlier to Odif, and the comments aimed at her from Theo and Hutch were the same but were now spoken with a hint of affection.

During a mid-day break, Frieda announced they were going to rest until night while Gloredaniel sought out news of happenings elsewhere. People going off to check the area was common. Sam thought nothing of it when Jo-Jo walked off with Odif. What got her attention was Scorpio’s mood. He was clearly very upset Odif was leaving with the wizard. The only outward sign was his scowling glance at them as they left. She felt his anger smolder until he excused himself and walked off the way they had gone.

Knowing his thoughts were full of violence, Sam followed him. She was careful to stay quiet and cloud her presence, not that he was paying attention to anything but seeking out Odif. Shortly after he passed down into a shallow valley, he tipped his head, listening.

Sam heard it, too--off to her left, a male and a female voice chorused moaning cries. When Scorpio drew his sword and raced that way, Sam stayed behind him. The shift in his mood was hard to follow--he was very upset, traces of fear laced his anger. She wanted to stop him and ask what was wrong, but intuition told her not to.

They came around a curve and found Odif sitting over Jo-Jo. Their clothes were in a pile next to them. Neither saw Scorpio; they were engrossed in each other. Sweat poured from their faces as they coupled.

Sam's jaw dropped. She knew people did this but had never seen it. Motion from Scorpio got her attention: he walked towards them and drew back his sword. Hatred and betrayal radiated from him as he took aim at Odif's neck.

"Nooo!" Sam screeched as she dove for him. Her yell startled everyone. Odif turned her head to see Scorpio, and Scorpio paused for an instant. In that instant, Sam grabbed his wrist with both of hers to keep him from swinging.

She was thrown around like a rag doll as he yanked and pulled, attempting to break her grip. She clung tenaciously as he tried to shake her loose. In one long swing, he brought her off the ground, feet flying behind her. The move took him off-balance as well, and they crashed to the ground.

Green power flowed, the grass wrapped around them, pinning them to the ground. Sam tried to move away from the blade that was touching the side of her head; she was only concerned with survival at this point. Scorpio was crying and screaming.

"How could you do this to me!" he wailed. "I loved you! Let me up! Let me up, you whore!" His yells broke down into miserable sobs.

He didn't notice as Sam was freed and helped to her feet. Jo-Jo used magic to lift the sword from his now-limp hands. Even after Odif released the grass around him, he just lay there and cried.

Odif stared down at him, shocked and furious. "What in the abyss were you doing? You were going to kill me, weren't you!"

Jo-Jo grabbed her shoulder and pulled her away, getting between them. Looking down at Scorpio, he gave a sigh. "I'm sorry, I really am," He thought about saying more then decided against it. Holding Scorpio's sword, he gathered his clothes and started back towards the camp.

With Jo-Jo gone, Sam edged between, hoping with all her heart that one wasn't going to attack the other. She partly understood. Scorpio considered Odif his mate, but Odif wasn't as attached to him as he was to her.

"Are you proud of yourself?" Odif snapped as she grabbed her clothes.

Quieting, Scorpio sat upright as if it was all he could do to move. He glared at her, red-faced. "I thought we loved each other. You were supposed to be mine."

"I don't belong to anyone," Odif told him sternly. "As for you and me, you never asked for any kind of commitment!" She stepped closer, flinging her arm around as she scolded him. "You thought it was so great that I didn't want a wedding ring just to have sex--do you forget that? I gave you what you wanted, whenever you wanted it. How dare you interrupt me when I'm with someone else!"

Scorpio shot to his feet. "You shouldn't be with someone else!"

"I do as I damn well please!" Odif retorted.

"Great! You no longer do it with me!"

"Fine!"

"Yeah, fine!"

Sam looked back and forth, wondering which one would leap first. She had been taught how to handle a foe, but what was she going to do if her two friends started fighting? She was scared and confused. It seemed everyone was wrong, but then again no one was. Scorpio had one line of thought, and Odif another. Both believed they were right. How did things like this get started? Holding her arms out as if to keep them separate, she cried out, "Please, stop it!"

Odif stomped into her shorts then waved her shirt at Scorpio. "See he gets back to camp!"

She yanked her shorts in place then ran after Jo-Jo.

"I want nothing more to do with you!" he screamed after her. Fists balled at his sides, face red with heartbreak, he strode off in the other direction.

Sam was greatly relieved no one got hurt. She did note he was headed the wrong way. Hurrying up beside him, she pointed out the right direction. "Our camp is that way."

"I'm going back," he grated between his tears.

She didn't have to read his mind to get the events he was reliving--he was broadcasting them. Very clearly, he remembered every time Odif mated with him, every time he fought with her, every detail down to how sweetly she smiled at him. Once he ran out of memories, he played them over again.

"I'm sorry you hurt. It's not safe to go anywhere by yourself," she protested.

"Maybe I'll meet a vlak."

"You don't even have a sword," she reminded him.

"So what!"

"What will killing yourself solve?" she cried. "I can feel how bad it hurts, but--"

He stopped and whirled on her. "How can you possibly know how I feel?"

As she looked into his eyes, she knew. The only reason he had come was to be with Odif. All the fighting and putting up with his brother was to be beside the woman he loved. He wasn't here for his beliefs, but for Odif; she had become everything he lived for. Tears formed in her own eyes.

"I am so sorry," She tried to hug him and he slapped her arms away.

"Just leave me alone!" He turned away and stomped off.

Since she had met her new friends, Sam had stayed calm and tried as hard as she could, even though her anger threatened to erupt from time to time. She thought the evil had no part in her new life, so each time she felt the bad start to rise she shoved it back down. It was rising with a vengeance now, and she let it boil over.

Fixing her mind on him, she reached out with it and stopped him in his tracks. It was her will that twisted him about to face her. She walked towards him, sneering and showing her fangs. Her voice was rough and deep, each word she forced into his mind.

“Yes, now you know pain! After a normal life, you finally get a little taste of the unpleasant. I have lived with agony every single day of my life!” She walked right up to him so their eyes filled each other’s sight. “What we are doing is much more vital than your injured pride! You will go back to camp, and you will help those you call friends defeat the demon, or die trying!”

She stepped back enough to let him go, ready to shove him along if he didn’t move on his own. He did move, shaking slightly as he walked. Marching beside him, she was ready to steer him back on course if he decided to wander off. Slowly, her anger drained away; and after she had put it back into the dark corners of her mind, she felt terrible about frightening him so.

The camp was in sight by the time she got the nerve to apologize. “I did not mean to frighten you. I only wanted to bring you back.”

His chuckle surprised her. He clasped her hand, squeezing it gently. “You did open my eyes, thank you.”

“We can still be friends?” Even as she asked it, she knew the answer.

“Only a friend would do what you did,” he told her. Looking ahead, he sighed. “I should have known what she was like. It still hurts, but I think I can live with it.”

They got back to camp to find a strange sight. Shilo, who never said anything but snappy comments in the worst of situations, was yelling at Odif. He stood over her like an avenging angel as she sat cross-legged with her head down.

“You screwed up bad, that’s what I’m saying! This is just like when you drove Tayan away, and he was the best thing that ever happened to you!”

Odif’s voice was subdued. “Tayan is my brother; that was for the best.”

Shilo’s wings fluttered, fanning the campfire. “Who gives a shit? You will never find anyone who thought more of you than he did. You will never be that happy again in your life! The only good part of your splitting up was the rest of us were able to sleep all night. Are you too thick-headed to realize it tore his guts out to leave you? You just might come to find out that one day no one will want anything to do with you!”

Odif tipped her head slightly. “Soon it will no longer matter.”

Shilo’s face turned red. “It will always matter!”

Odif gripped her head. “I just wanted to say goodbye to everyone before it was too late! I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

“Well, you did! Maybe some day you’ll figure out that most people have feelings!”

Jo-Jo walked over to Scorpio and Sam as they came into camp. “I should have known better,” he said to Scorpio with a half-shrug.

Squatting by the fire, Theo and Hutch looked up at him.

“That goes for us, too,” Hutch offered.

“Us?” Scorpio asked.

The two men looked at each other.

“We do everything together,” Theo grinned.

Scorpio shot a mean look at Odif then plopped down by the fire. Entaurus was next to offer his apologies. Right after he did, Scorpio threw his hands up. “Enough! I’m the one who should have known better. Can we drop it?”

Odif cast a worn gaze at him. “I just want you to know...”

“Drop it!” he snapped.

“Fine!” she huffed.

Mother Frieda decided it was time to change the subject. “Sam, the place you escaped from, where is it?”

Fairly sure no one was going to get hurt, Sam settled down beside her. “When I came out, all I saw was grass, just like what’s around us now. I went towards the sun--it was morning. I found a lake and stayed there for the night. The next day, hoarcs were nearby on the far bank, so I went back the way I had come then started zigzagging my path in case they were after me,” She shook her head with a sigh. “I moved around so much at first, I don’t think I can take you straight to it.”

“How long did you travel towards the lake?”

“Most of the day. I was running, and trying to stay on the lower ground.”

“How big is this hole you came out?” Shilo asked.

“It’s a cave entrance. I’d say...about twice the size of this camp. It opens into a shallow valley, the top overhangs a bit.”

Shilo pointed at the sky. “If I take you up, do you think you can see it from the air?”

Sam gulped. “The air?” She had never thought about flying before, her short wings could barely make a breeze when she tried to flap them. How was she to fly?

“I’ll carry you. We could be on these plains for years before we find it on foot,” he explained.

“Take her up tomorrow,” Mother Frieda told him.

Seeing her apprehension, Shilo slapped her leg playfully.

“Relax, I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Us winged things got to stick together,” he said with a wink.

Dinner was started, and the conversation turned to how the wizards could get them all to the cave quickly once Shilo and Sam found it. Jo-Jo had a spell to levitate, Shilo would tow him to the entrance then he would open a portal at one end, and Glordaniel would open one on this end. The only problem was that she could not go through and hold it open. Someone would have to take her. Odif offered to change into a horse and carry her there.

“What if she doesn’t want to ride Odif?” Porthalen asked.

“Why not? Everyone else has,” Shilo beamed.

Laughter rose. Scorpio tried to pretend he didn’t hear it. Odif shot to her feet and stomped off.

Shilo looked around at the others. “Am I lying?”

“Let’s stick to the problem,” Frieda said evenly. “We have to know how far away it is before we commit on how to bring Glordaniel to the rest of us.”

“What about guards?” Scorpio asked. “Surely the entrance is watched.”

Hutch spoke up. “Good point. It also may be blocked. If she got out then others would, too, unless there is now something there to stop them.”

Sam shook her head. “Unrest is quickly taken care of. No one dares defy her.”

“You did,” he noted.

“I used an illusion to get out of the caverns. I made myself look like her. I don’t know of anyone else who can do that.”

“So, you didn’t see anything near the cave opening?” Hutch prodded.

“No. The last...I’d say mile or so was completely clear.”

One of the elves waved his bread at her. “Tell us about these caverns, what kinds of things can we expect to find down there?”

“More importantly, where can we find the demon?” Frieda asked.

Sam explained the route as well as she could. “If we don’t get caught in the tunnels then we’ll come upon a cavern used to hold those being tortured. As long as we stay quiet and we’re not spotted, we will get through to the hoarc chambers. It’s a large, open area where hoarcs are made and trained for combat. We’ll go by wizard’s labs then the underground lake. On the other side of the lake cavern, we’ll come to the underground city. There’s a wide passage to the right, my mother’s temple is at the end. Her own dwelling is a short distance from the temple, and she is usually in one place or the other. If she thinks

she's in danger, she will be in the temple."

"Of course," Frieda breathed. "The temple is her connection to Lucifer. We destroy the temple, and we destroy her power."

"There are always two vlaks outside the temple doors, we can't just walk in," Sam told her.

"This is insane!" Porthalen spat. "How can we fight our way through a city of...who knows what kind of evil, and then attack an underground temple guarded by vlaks!"

Shilo looked at the elf and chuckled. "What did you think we were going to do? Go in and ask for a nice game of horseshoes?"

"Yeah, elfman, did you think it would be easy?" Theo asked.

Porthalen looked at them with pleading in his eyes. "You understand what a vlak is, right? Have you ever seen what they can do? I was with King Alderlan's caravan, we got attacked by vlaks, we got mauled! Those things are unstoppable."

"I see you lived through it," Entaurus noted.

Porthalen snorted. "By incredible luck! If it wasn't for this big red-haired human, nobody would have made it." His voice got louder as he went on. "He charged into things that made everyone else run in terror. Twice he got caught in explosions, and it only made him madder. I never saw anyone charge a vlak by himself, let alone win. Unless he shows up, me, my men and Gloredaniel are not going anywhere near that place!"

"You were there?" Jo-Jo asked.

Porthalen nodded. "Yeah, I was there, and I'm telling you with vlaks in the way we don't stand a chance."

"We will deal with the vlaks," Entaurus said evenly.

"Who was this red-haired human?" Sam asked, trying to envision anyone killing a vlak.

Porthalen shrugged. "I don't remember his name, all I know is that he was the toughest bastard I have ever seen."

Frieda rolled her eyes with a groan. "Dear Leighna, I just figured it out," Seeing the questioning looks, she explained. "The one Porthalen just described is the Red Man. From what I know, Odif and Tayan are his children. Jo-Jo, in your vision, you said you saw three hammers."

Jo-Jo's eyes widened. "Yes! One brown and green, one red and one many colors." Getting it straight in his mind, he slowly said, "Red hammer, Red Man. Where we fail, he will succeed."

"Odif has told us all along she will be killed," Scorpio added. "She really knew it!"

"It's going to kill Odif and Tayan," Jo-Jo concluded. "Once it does..."

"He will come back," Frieda finished. "The Red Man will destroy the demon."

“We can’t be here,” Porthalen muttered with a shake of his head.

Shilo folded his arms across his chest in thought. “Maybe I’ll just watch from the air. I have to see that fight!”

Sam took in their thoughts. She got mental pictures of giant hammers and the general feeling from all of them that death was only a few days away and waiting down a dark hole.

“We have no hope of surviving?” she whispered.

“Don’t look like it,” Hutch said sadly. “Maybe Odif was trying to do us a favor,” Jerking a thumb at Theo, he said, “We never had a woman before.”

“Neither did I, before.” Entaurus stopped, glancing at Scorpio.

Scorpio looked at Jo-Jo, who said, “It’s been a real long time for me, too.”

No matter how much he didn’t like the idea, Scorpio knew that Odif believed in balance in all things. If she knew they were all to suffer and die then of course she would do her best to give them as much pleasure as possible. She was, indeed, saying goodbye to her friends. He dropped his head in his hands, dry-washing his face.

“Dear Odin!” he groaned. He tipped his head off to where Odif had left. “Jo-Jo, you...better go finish what you started with her.”

“I don’t want any more trouble,” Jo-Jo protested.

“It’s all right,” Scorpio assured him. “I don’t like it, but now I understand.”

“You sure?” Jo-Jo asked as he started to get up.

“Yes, go on.”

Jo-Jo was up and off quickly. Scorpio tried hard not to think about what they were going to do. He decided it was his turn to clean up the plates. To his partial relief, Sam decided she would help.

The camp was settled in for the night when Odif returned. Scorpio had volunteered for the first watch. He tried not to see as Jo-Jo hugged Odif then lay down in his blankets. Instead of lying down, Odif came over and sat beside him.

“I am sorry if what I’m doing hurts you,” she said quietly. “It’s just something I feel needs to be done.”

He looked at her; she was slouched over as she watched him. Despite the fact she was having every man in their group he couldn’t help how he felt about her. “Yeah, I know. If we’re going to suffer then we have to have pleasure first.”

“You do understand.”

He shifted closer and put an arm around her. “I hate it, but I know why you’re doing it.”

She pressed against him, wrapping one arm around his middle. “Don’t ever think that I don’t love you.”

Being alone with her in the dark, he had no doubts about it at all. “Shilo was right about one thing,” he sighed.

“What’s that?”

“You are one big pain in the ass.”

In the morning Shilo took off with Sam on his back. She clung to him tightly, eyes wide as he flew. The rest were packed up and ready to go, waiting for Gloredaniel to return. Mid-morning, the elven wizard materialized on the same spot she had vanished from, looking a bit ragged.

Theo spotted her first. “What’s the news, elf lady?” he asked cheerily.

Hutch nodded. “Yeah, good news first!”

She looked at him vacantly, her voice flat. “Good news. There is some good news. Zodiac and Stazor are moving as planned. Elves in Tolina have massed an army and are headed for Elrad.”

Porthalen and his elves looked relieved. “That is good news. How large is this army?”

Gloredaniel twitched her shoulder. “Not large enough, I think. I just came from Elrad City. It’s burning, dragons are dropping spears all over. The king’s palace is in ruins. I tried to help get people to safety, but there’s just so many!”

Hand over her mouth, she choked back a sob.

Porthalen’s face paled. “Dear Odin, it can’t be!”

Gloredaniel went on, fighting her tears. “The ones who can fight are preparing for invasion. Pilgyns have been seen just north of the city, and there has already been fighting in the northern district. No one knows how many got past our army, or even if our army still exists. Our priests told me that evil is driving this force. We have to stop it before there is no Elrad left.”

“Elrad City is over halfway down the kingdom. The elves lose this battle, and it’s over for them,” Jo-Jo stated.

“Longforest will be next,” Odif said. “Gloredaniel, did you tell Tayan what the situation is?”

The stricken look on her face became worse. “Tayan is dead.”

Odif looked at her blankly. She shook her head and started towards her. “No, Tayan is not dead. He has probably left to get help from King Gunthar.”

“He was killed in the western part of Tolina...”

Odif grabbed her by the front of her cloak, balling her hands into fists. Her eyes glassed over with disbelief.

“Tayan is not dead!” she insisted. “Someone lied to you.”

“It’s true,” Gloredaniel cried. “He was shot in the back by a guardsman...”

“He is not dead!” Odif shouted and started shaking her.

The rest grabbed the druid’s arms, trying to pry her off. They tore Gloredaniel’s cloak wrestling her away. She kept repeating that Tayan wasn’t dead as they made her sit down.

Scorpio sat by Odif as Frieda talked to Porthalen and Gloredaniel. He tried to hold her hand, and she shrugged him off.

“I’m fine,” she stated, combing her hair back with quaking fingers. “Gloredaniel made a mistake, that’s all. Tayan isn’t dead. He can’t be.”

Beckoning with her arms to gather everyone in close, Frieda announced. “Let us say a prayer for our fallen comrade.”

Odif got up. Scorpio grabbed her, and she gave him a hard shove in the chest, knocking him back down. Standing poised to fight, she snapped, “He is not dead!”

Entaurus moved in front of her. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

“I’m not doing anything to myself. Tayan is not dead!” she shrieked. Even as she did, her lips quivered. Somewhere in her mind she was beginning to accept it was true.

This time when Scorpio grabbed her, he put his arms around her. He was glad to be wearing his armor, for she began to pound his back as she screamed, “No! No! Nooo!” She sagged, and he sagged with her. Her screams broke into wracking wails. Odif cried for a very long time.

Sam clung to Shilo as they flew so close to the ground she swore he had to be getting smacked by the blades of grass as they raced by.

“Do we have to go so low?” she called over the wind.

“Hoarcs over there,” he called back, tipping his head slightly to the left. “It’s best if we’re not seen.”

A knoll was racing at them. He banked in a turn to go around it then threw himself the other way to miss the next one. Sam’s stomach was in her throat. It wasn’t the feeling of flying that made her sick, just his sudden movements. She had tried using her own stubby wings to help as he dove, which had proved disastrous. Instead of helping him bank, she had sent them into a spin that he barely managed to recover from in time to keep from ramming into the ground. She now kept them pressed tight to her body. The idea of hitting the ground at such speed was not comforting.

After another few minutes of ground hugging, he shot up a hundred feet. Sam had a good view now; but as in the earlier part of the day, all she saw was grass.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“You don’t know?”

“No, it all looks the same.”

“How about if I go higher for a better look.”

“Please.”

She let out an involuntary squeak as he threw himself vertical and shot skyward. The muscles in her arms were burning from holding on; she could feel herself slipping. A quick glance showed the ground a long way down and getting farther.

“Don’t drop me!”

Suddenly, she was thrown forward as he leveled off. Weightless for an instant, she screamed, sure she was going to fall. She started to then found he was under her again. Her heart was pounding as she clung tightly to him.

“Hey, is that the lake?” he asked, pointing off to the right.

On the horizon, she made out a darker green area. Bits of silver reflected the sun. She took a few breaths to collect herself. “Could be.”

Shilo turned into a gentle bank. “All right! Now, if you ran for a day then you probably started right around...there,” he said, pointing almost straight down.

From this high, all she could make out was yellow. As she studied the ground, she saw an S-shaped scar. Climbing up higher on his back, she pointed over his shoulder.

“See that? Take me down there.”

He dove, and soon the thin scar in the surface proved to be a valley. They descended far enough that she could make out the yellow was, indeed, grass.

She noticed movement. “Someone’s down there.”

“Yup, let’s go see who.”

Shilo slowed and began a corkscrew turn that widened out until he was making large circles. The creatures below were now visible. A dozen hoarcs were in the valley, another few appeared from one wall. The cave showed only as a dark slice, indicating an overhang hid it from the air.

“That must be it,” she said.

“We better make sure. Get a good look when we go down.”

“Go down?” she asked. Shilo answered by dropping head first into a dive.

The wind picked up an incredible amount of force as they dropped, and the ground came at them quickly. She focused on the entrance as they sped at it. He pulled up, and she was pressed against his

back so hard it took her breath away. Approaching from the opposite bank, they flew over the valley so fast she was sure no one had seen them.

“That’s it!” she cried. “I remember the large rock sticking out of the wall.”

Shilo gave a nod and banked to turn around. Again he raced for the valley, this time drawing his sword.

Sam’s heart was in her throat. “What are you doing?”

“They saw us, we have to get rid of them. Can you at least glide?”

Her mind spun--was he really going to attack the hoarcs single-handedly? “No! We should get the others.”

“No time. As soon as I set you down, go inside and keep them from getting past you,” He turned again, twisting onto his side as he banked hard and dropped into the valley. “Jump off when we pass the cave.”

Jump off! He was going to leave her to fight all those hoarcs by herself? He had to be insane! She had been holding onto him for so long, she didn’t think her arms would work, let alone be strong enough to fight.

There was no more time for talk; the entrance was coming up. A few hoarcs looked up and saw them coming.

She was wondering what to do when Shilo flipped upside down and pulled her hands free. She let out a shriek as she covered her head and curled herself into a ball. Something slammed into her back then the world spun. Gyrating visions of grass then sky filled her sight as she tumbled along.

Her landing ended in a skid on her stomach. She pulled her stinging face off the ground to see a hoarc staring down at her. Angered by what Shilo had just done, she yelled, “Damn you! Help me up!”

The hoarc grabbed her and helped her to her feet. Three others ran to her while the rest searched the sky. It occurred to her that not one had drawn a sword.

“Master?” one hoarc asked.

She was about to tell him she wasn’t his Master when a plan formed in her head. “Yes...have everyone come out, now!” she barked.

Shilo appeared at the top of one ridge. In an instant, he ran a hoarc through then shot up to disappear on the other side. She pointed at where he went.

“Get him! He is one of a whole troop of flying men getting ready to attack...off that way!”

Hoarcs ran to do her bidding. Another dozen piled out of the cave. Weapons drawn, they ran up over the hill to fight the group of imaginary Shilos.

Sam ran to the entrance. Peering into the dark, she tried to sense if there were anything else within. Finding nothing alive in there, she returned her attention to the hoarcs. They had all left the valley--she could hear their battle cries as they ran away. Now and then there were curses and a brief scream as Shilo came from a new direction to impale another one. Soon, the cries called out of treachery and began

to get louder as the creatures came running back.

Sam set herself to fight and realized she had left her sword back at camp. The only thing she had to fight with was her mind. The bits of magic she was learning would be useless against a pack of bloodthirsty hoarcs. Neither Odif's teachings nor Frieda's would do any good. She knew where the hoarcs were, and prayer wasn't going to stop them. The only weapon she had was herself.

She called up the anger, nursing every bad feeling she'd ever had to the surface. Her lips curled back and her wings stiffened as her rage grew. The world looked the same, but somehow a bit different. She saw the hoarcs running at her. Those were the ones who deserved her rage. They were the ones who wanted to hurt her.

The hoarcs were watching the sky, swords out as they ran. She focused on one and locked onto his mind. Lashing out with her will, she made his arm jerk up, stabbing the one beside him. The other didn't fall but cried out in anger and slashed back. As these two fought, she found another. This one she pushed to the side, making him bump into another hard enough to make them both fall. Again, they started fighting with each other.

Shilo came down at them again. She concentrated on the hoarcs set to strike back at him and made one swing his sword into the head of the one by him. She made the arm of the one on the other side of him twitch, and he dropped his sword. Shilo dove down and impaled two with quick strokes then climbed away again.

Not knowing what was happening, the hoarcs fled towards the safety of the cave. As they came closer, it was easy for her to pick one to control. The hoarc she chose she willed to start stabbing those ahead of him. She put an intense desire in him to kill the one who wore leader's bars across his shoulders. As he attacked his commander, she shifted her attention to another and made him turn and attack a group of his comrades.

One by one, she got them fighting each other. The rush to get back to the cave was forgotten as they turned into a confused rabble. Shilo was still diving down to pick off one or two at a time, but it was the hoarcs themselves that did most of the damage. A few ran off alone to escape the slaughter. Spilling into the valley they had been assigned to protect, the hoarcs fought and killed each other until only a couple wounded ones were left alive. They were too badly hurt to fight any more, so Sam went out and picked up a sword and killed them herself.

Standing alone in the hoarc dust and scattered weapons, it dawned on her what she had just done. Her anger faded, and pride began to swell. She had done this by herself! She was no longer a child who ran away from her mother's minions. She had stood her ground and destroyed them.

Shilo came down, flapping to a stop beside her. She looked at him, still amazed she had won. "I did it, I really did it!"

"You were great," he agreed heartily. "What did you do?"

"I made them fight each other. I just willed each one to fight another, and they did what I wanted them to," she explained.

He winked at her, giving her a smile. "We knew there was something special about you. Ready to go get the others?"

For the first time in her life, she felt confident. She no longer had to run in fear. “You go. I’ll stay here in case more come.”

Shilo looked at her for a moment then rubbed his chin. “Umm, Sam, you do great with hoarcs, and I’m sure you’ll do good against pilgyns, too, but what if Momma shows up?”

The enthusiasm she felt died. Nothing could stand against her mother; even Odif had been badly hurt fighting her. The anger tried to come back as she thought about Shilo ruining her victory with thoughts of possible defeat. She reasoned it out. He was trying to keep her safe. She pushed the anger down and got behind him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

“Slower, please,” she said.

Shilo took her back then returned to the spot with Jo-Jo. As the wizards moved everyone through the magic gate, Shilo went back again to fetch Gloredaniel once she had gotten everyone through the portal. The transfer went smoothly, there was enough room for Scorpio and Entaurus to walk through, carrying Odif between them. Although Sam only knew a little about the man who had died, she understood Odif was lost without him. Behind the blank face stained with tears there was no feeling from her; it was like she was an empty shell.

While they waited for Shilo and Gloredaniel, Sam sat on the side of Odif opposite Scorpio. He held the grief-stricken druid’s hands and leaned her against him in a physical attempt to provide comfort. Sam took the mental route, doing her best to send feelings of sympathy as well as friendship. Once, Odif started to respond and think about her brother, only to break down into tears again.

Frieda came over and tapped Sam on the shoulder. “Can you see in the dark?”

“Not as you mean. I know where objects and people are, but they don’t appear like they do in the light.”

Frieda hooked a finger at Porthalen, calling him over to her. “Take two of your men and Sam. See if there is anything down there that might hear,” she said, indicating Odif.

“I sense no one close to us,” Sam offered.

“Sound travels, go make sure we’re alone.”

She didn’t want to leave Odif; but with the woman clearly out of her senses, she was the only one available who could sense things at a distance.

“I’ll be right back,” she told Odif, laying a hand on her head.

Walking off into the dark of the cave, she was glad to find out the elves also could see without light. She kept her mind open, searching until the sound of crying was lost behind them. In the damp blackness, she felt nothing ahead but some small rodents and a few bats. By the time they got back, Shilo had returned, and Odif had quieted.

Odif rose as they approached. She watched them, and once they were with the group she said, “I have a request, a final request.”

“We aren’t dead yet,” Scorpio objected softly.

“Before I am, I want you all to know what to do with my body, if anyone survives.” Scanning the faces, she said, “The halshaken believe in the rite of Shankar, the dividing and consumption of their body. Druids also believe in a form of Shankar.”

“You want us to eat you?” Gloredaniel choked.

Shilo raised his eyebrows with a grin. “I know what I want to nibble on.” His mirth died as Frieda shot him a glare.

Odif paid no attention to him. “This is how I want my remains divided. My head is to be taken back to Longforest and buried at the base of an oak. My heart is to be...”

“You want us to cut off your head!” Scorpio gasped.

Her face was emotionless as she looked at him. “Yes. May I continue?”

“You want to be chopped up,” Theo said, gaping at her.

“My heart is to be taken to Tayan’s grave and laid with him. If you can’t find him, burn it and pray for him to find it.” She looked right at Scorpio then took his hand and laid it on her left breast. “This is yours. If you survive, take it with you...”

Scorpio jerked his hand away. “You can’t be serious!”

“I am very serious,” she said flatly. “If you don’t survive, it will be a pillow for your head.”

“And what if I die, and you don’t?” he asked.

“I will die here,” she stated. “If you die before me, I will leave it with you.”

“Damn! She’s crazy!” Hutch breathed. Scorpio just stared at her.

A trace of a grin crossed her face. “The right one is for the gardens at Glenholden. Chop it up and bury the pieces to feed the flowers and plants. The remaining parts of me are for whoever needs them, or a shallow grave.”

“Why?” Entaurus asked, appalled at what she was saying.

“So roots will be fed by my corpse,” she explained. “It is important that someone do these things, if at all possible.”

Frieda crossed her arms over her chest. “Well!” she huffed, “At least you don’t want us to eat you.”

Odif met her eyes. “If anyone is that hungry, I would not begrudge them a meal.”

“Eating the flesh of humans or elves is a deadly sin!” Frieda scolded. “I will have none of it!”

“Then go hungry.” Odif bent over and picked up a sword left by the hoarcs. “We better get moving.”

Chapter 20

The bridge spanning the Jude River was flat except for ends that angled down. The supports looked to be made of incredibly long, solid blocks of stone set on edge. The pylons were similar monoliths, dividing the bridge into thirds. The four-hundred-foot-long, fifty-foot-wide surface was carpeted with small trees and grasses. Vines hung down in a green curtain on both sides. A family of deer grazing its way across looked up at metallic creaking and chugging sounds then fled as the first wagons came into view.

The tractor stopped with a hiss and a billow of steam from the wheel cylinders; the wagons it towed spilled men out. The first few drew up with their crossbows and watched for danger as others started across the ancient bridge. Other steam tractors pulled up beside the first, and soon a row of five machines faced the river. Behind them, trees cracked and bent to the sides as the first battlewagon arrived. It stopped behind the tractors and lifted colored flags, red over blue, to halt the line behind it.

Tayan and General Cooper wound between the steel wagons to get a good look at the bridge. A squad of men ran back from the other side, stopping to salute.

“General Cooper, no hostile forces on the far bank. My men hold both sides of the river, sir,” a young corporal announced.

Cooper returned the salute. “Very well, prepare for crossing.” The corporal left and Cooper frowned at the bridge. “These old bridges are very strong, we should be able to cross with no trouble.”

Tayan knew this was true. Of the three that existed, any could still take a full regiment of cavalry across their span. The enormous weight of Cooper’s steam wagons, however, was something else.

“Send over Sir Parsons’ cavalry first then wagons, one at a time. Start with the smith’s wagons and the supplies. Once all the tractors are on the other side, we’ll send the battlewagons.”

General Cooper gazed at him curiously. “Don’t you want to see if they’ll hold now? If they can’t cross, they’ll have to go all the way to the north end of the river.”

“I’m in a hurry--whatever crosses goes on,” Tayan stated. “Any left behind will have to try to catch up.” Pointing to the column, he said, “Back those things up. The longer they’re on the bridge, the more chance they’ll have of falling in.”

Sir Parson rode up, his horse more manageable as it became used to being near the loud wagons. “Lord Tayan, will this hold?” he asked, eyeing the bridge.

Tayan nodded. “It will hold your cavalry. Get them across now, take the priests with you. Don’t forget Ellie.”

“Yes, M’lord.”

While Sir Parson wound his men between the wagons, he had the foot soldiers cross carrying everything they could. Every removable object was taken out of the battlewagons, lightening them as much as

possible. A long stream of men formed as pieces were carried by hand and in the few common horse-and-wagon teams they had acquired.

While this was going on, Tayan studied the crude map in the command shack atop the first battlewagon. They were a hundred miles north of Tolina; the ancient road they were following would run almost to the plains. Hopefully, by then the forest would thin enough as to not impede their progress. The plains showed as a large empty space on the map. He had traveled them before and knew his best chance was to go west until they found the road that ran north to south. Zodiac had to be close to that road somewhere.

Ellie quietly appeared beside him. "Tayan, you wish me to leave with the knight?"

She still kept her head lowered, as if she didn't believe he wasn't going to kill her.

"Yes. Have him take you to Sister Amber, and wait for me there."

"Yes, Tayan," she said dully. She started to leave then stopped and turned back. "Tayan, may I ask a question?"

"Go ahead."

"How long will you make me live in shame?"

They'd been over this before; he wished she would believe him. "I told you, I am not going to kill you," He reached out and held the stump of her wrist. "You suffered for me, you should be proud and happy to be alive. I feel very glad to know you."

She shifted in place then lifted her head to meet his eyes. "If what you say is true then you would have taken me as a woman by now."

"Ellie, I have a wife."

She shook her head. "I know your wife died. Sister Amber is also yours, but you do not take her, either." Her brow furrowed slightly. "Do you no longer like women?"

He picked up on only her mention of Amber. "Sister Amber is not mine," he told her sternly. "What made you say that?"

Ellie gave him one of her confused looks. "She is yours, everyone knows that."

Obviously, she was not seeing things as they were. Not wanting to get caught up in senseless debate, he waved a hand at the door. "Go with Sir Parson. I'll see you on the other side."

Returning his attention to the map, he tried to remember if this bridge was linked to the ancient road that ran east to west just north of Old Castle. Many parts of the road were clogged with brush, and in a few places farmers had found the flat area prime for building their houses and barns. This far north, he didn't think they would run into any occupied settlements.

It was tempting to angle to the south and pick up hard roadbed so these machines wouldn't be slogging through mud. The more he thought about it, it seemed best to just go west as fast as possible. That was their best chance at finding Zodiac; and even if he didn't, he was sure these machines could wreak havoc

all by themselves.

Cooper stepped up into the shack from below. "M'lord, all the spare parts and ammunition have been transferred to the far side. The battlewagons each have enough fuel wood to operate only for a few hours, and the water tanks have been dumped, leaving minimal water. They are as light as we can make them."

Looking out the window, Tayan saw the bridge was clear of traffic. "Very well. Send the tractors over. Stay on this side until the last wagon crosses, just in case the bridge fails."

Cooper tried not to think about one of his expensive wagons falling into the river below. "And if it does fail, where should we meet?"

He drew his finger over the map in the middle of the plains. "I know there is a road about here that runs north to south. That road is what I'm going for. When I get there, I'm going north to look for the city that's supposed to be there. Like I said, if you have to find another way across, you'll have to hurry to catch us."

"Let's hope that will not be a concern," Cooper said dryly. Leaning out the window, he called, "Chernault! Start getting your tractors over, one at a time!"

Tayan watched anxiously as the first tractor lurched forward. It chugged up the incline, billowing smoke. Partway up, one rear wheel spun on crushed bushes, making it fishtail. The driver straightened it out and continued to move along the bridge, crushing brush and small trees. It made it to the other side and chugged down the far ramp onto dry ground. Cheers went up as it pulled over to wait for the others.

Cooper clapped his hands together. "Ahh, yes!" Leaning out the window, he called, "Chernault! Let the tractors with wagons behind go over!"

While the others watched the progress of the tractors, Tayan watched the bridge. He picked landmarks on the other side and lined them up with the edges. When the tractors passed, the bridge didn't sag like he was afraid it might.

One by one, all twelve tractors crossed without incident. Each had followed the path of the first; parallel lines of bare rock showed where the wheels had gone down the center.

Russ Ironwright, the driver, and Captain Stark came up from below. Stark smiled broadly as Russ took hold of the levers that moved the steering wheels. "We are ready to cross, M'lord," he announced.

General Cooper left with a salute. "See you on the other side."

Tayan waited until Cooper was about to climb into the last wagon then he nodded. "Captain, take us over the bridge."

"Yes, M'lord." Speaking into a horn-shaped tube, he called, "Steam to wheels!"

"Steam to wheels, aye!" came a hollow reply. "Steam is set to wheels."

"Low gearset, ahead full pressure!"

As the reply came back, the battlewagon began to creep forward. Stark pointed at the middle of the

bridge. "Driver, straddle the tractor tracks."

"Yes, sir," Russ replied. Concentrating, he moved one lever then the other, lining the wagon up.

The wagon picked up speed as it rolled towards the ramp. When it hit and started up, Tayan listened intently. The chugging and squeal of metal was loud, but he thought he heard stone breaking underneath. Going to the outside door on the left, he swung it open and leaned out, watching the machine's progress. Below, all he could make out was the vegetation being snapped off and crushed by the massive belted wheels. The actual roadbed was under a thick layer of dirt--even if the stone below was cracking he wouldn't see it unless a large gulf opened up. By then they would be dropping into the river.

He kept watching for any sign the bridge might be giving way as they leveled out and began crossing. Occasionally, he heard a loud pop, but he couldn't see any signs of damage to the bridge. They passed the halfway point, and he began to relax. The view was incredible; he could see a good distance downriver. The trees at the banks were so full they dipped their branches in the water.

He was watching the far bank where the side of the weed-infested road was lined with wagons and tractors when he felt, rather than heard, a loud cracking. The wagon lurched to the right.

"We got a hole!" Russ called. Frantic, he hauled on the steering lever. The wagon righted itself then tipped again and slid back towards the hole.

"Keep going!" Tayan barked as he ran to the other side. Stark had already seen and was shouting orders down the tubes to increase speed.

Out the right side, Tayan saw a clean sliver of bridge had fallen away. They rode on the edge of a hole only a few feet wide, but a third of the bridge long. The edges of the hole showed raw ends of rusted steel bars that had been sunk into the stone. It also showed one of the stone beams popping out a spray of rock chips.

"Move this beast!" Stark yelled down the tube. "Driver, ease away from the crack onto solid bridge."

"No!" Tayan countermanded. "We are over a support beam--move and we'll fall in!"

Russ, wide-eyed with fear, looked at Stark. "Captain?"

Stark screwed his face up. "Stay this course," To Tayan, he said, "I pray you're right."

The bridge snapped out chunks of rock into the river; and on passing over the last piling they felt a slight drop. Finally, they moved down the ramp and onto solid ground.

Tayan moved to the open door. "Let me off then go to the end of the line," He climbed down the ladder; and as soon as the machine slowed enough, he jumped off and ran towards the bridge.

Knots of people were gathered, looking at the underside of the bridge. Tayan ran up to Sir Parson, Amber and Ellie. He made his way to the bank and got a look.

Where the battlewagon had crossed, the beams underneath were spider-webbed with cracks. Here and there, small pieces of bridge still fell into the water.

"Most of that happened when you came across," Amber told him as she gripped her talisman of

Leighna. "We were sure you weren't going to make it."

"It didn't look good," Sir Parson agreed.

Tayan went down the bank and got under the bridge. As he suspected, the other beams were intact, only the two they had traveled on were damaged. He studied the structure closely then ran back.

"Ride over and tell General Cooper we can get two more across," he said between breaths. "One has to stay to the right, the other one to the left. Have them mark where the supports are, and move directly over them. If they move off the supports, they'll end up in the river."

"Understood," Sir Parson said and ran to his horse.

Tayan looked around the people gathered by the bridge. "We didn't bring any wizards, did we?"

"No, M'lord," a knight said.

Cursing his own short-sightedness, he decided he would watch the bridge closely. Every wagon that was left behind would have a long way around to travel. That thought was less troubling than the idea of watching them fall into the river. It was tempting to just send the others back now, but he was fairly sure the bridge could hold another two.

Amber stood beside him as the next wagon began crossing. He held her hand out of habit, gripping it as if this alone would see the wagon safely across. The one coming over was on his left, the upriver side. The supports popped as it came on, and every now and then bits of rock would fall into the water. He held his breath as it passed the halfway point then the two-thirds point where it passed over the piling on this side of the river. The bridge was shedding pieces of stone, but it was holding together.

The wagon started down the ramp, and there were a series of loud bangs and snaps. The left side of the ramp broke free, and the wagon dropped. His scream accompanied others as it fell in a cloud of dust then hit the bank, still atop the broken slab of bridge. Steam escaped from view ports with a whooshing sound. Inside, men screamed in pain as steam filled the interior.

He ran towards the stricken wagon. On the top, a door flew open and men piled out, trying to escape being cooked alive. A mob gathered around and began helping those they could. Tayan counted the red-skinned, scalded men. There were twelve to a wagon crew, and all he could find were five.

Amid the clouds of steam, he leaped onto the hot metal casing to help the few who still screamed from within. When he grasped the main hatch in the cannon turret his hands were burned. He let go with a pained yell. Hands grabbed him and pulled him off and away from the dying men inside.

Major Chernault was beside him, guiding him away from the destruction. "We can't help them. They're dead."

Tayan listened. He heard only the moaning from the men on the banks and the yells of priests as they called for water and bandages; there were no more screams for help. The steam now billowed out at a slower pace. Nothing lived inside it.

"*Damn!*" he bellowed, clenching his raw fists. "That's it! The others go back!"

"M'lord, we have to pull the wagon up and re-man it," Chernault told him.

His first thought was to leave it. It wasn't a battlewagon anymore, but a steel coffin for those poor men. On the other hand, he would not want to be left in a wreck like that.

"Get it cooled down and bury those men properly. No crossing except on the right side, by foot or horse."

"Yes, M'lord." Chernault bowed then left to do his bidding.

He sat down hard. He had gambled with the lives of those men and lost. If he had shown more discretion, they would be headed north now, not burned alive. He had caused this waste of life.

He noticed Ellie as she did her best to wrap his hands. Seeing her struggle with one hand and her stump, he helped her cover his burns. She had no more than finished when Amber was beside him and spoke her words of prayer that healed his bubbled flesh. The lack of pain felt great, too great. He should be suffering, like those men.

"We all know the dangers of the wagons," Chernault told him. "Our engineers think we can shore up the remaining bridge and bring the others across."

"How long?"

"It will take the rest of the day at least, maybe into tomorrow. It will also take time to pull that battlewagon up where we can repair it."

Other than the steam that had poured out of it, Tayan could see nothing wrong with it. "Is it broken?"

Chernault began to rattle off possibilities. "One boiler is ruptured for sure, possibly both. All the piping will have to be checked, and a drop like that most likely damaged the steering gear. If you look at the middle cannon it's drooping, so the elevation gear is either bent or torn loose by the fall. We can operate without it, so that isn't a priority. I'll have my men check the wagon out thoroughly. If it is damaged too badly, we may have to strip it for parts."

The promise of a fast trip across the plains died as he thought about how long they would have to sit here and wait. "Get started and inform General Cooper."

While Cooper's men took care of the bridge and the wrecked wagon, Tayan ordered camp set up. He had Sir Parson scout ahead with a few of Cooper's men so that once they were ready to go the path would already be laid out. A tractor went with them to uproot trees and make the road as clear as possible.

Tayan's quarters were in half of one of the towed steel wagons. Steps in the front led to a regular door and a room inside as well appointed as any palace guestroom. The rough, steel-framed windows were covered by heavy green curtains. The carpet was lush thick pile, and all three chairs in the sitting room were upholstered. He went to one and sat down heavily, resting his head against the back to stare at the ceiling.

"I should have had the bridge reinforced first!" he groaned.

Amber slid into a chair by him, much more smoothly. She reached over and tapped the back of his hand until he looked at her. "You didn't know it couldn't take the weight. We all thought there wasn't going to

be a problem.”

“I should have made sure. What happened out there was my fault.” Leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, he said, “I don’t know enough about these wagons to make decisions like that.”

Amber turned to Ellie, who was standing by the door. “Ellie, would you get us some lunch, please?” Ellie left, and she turned back to Tayan. Softly, but firmly, she said, “After lunch, why don’t you get into a battlewagon and find out how it works? By what I heard we have a couple days.”

At times she seemed to have the simple wisdom that he somehow lacked. He looked up at her. “That is exactly what I plan to do.”

Tayan told Captain Stark he wanted to be worked like any other crewmember, and Stark did just that. He was put in white cotton overalls and went through every task in the wagon. The first was filling the boilers. He had no idea what a valve was; but by the end of the day he had turned every one at least four times. In the cramped innards of the wagon, he worked the hand pump that pushed air into the water storage tanks then watched little needles with marks on them called gauges to make sure the storage tank pressure was above the boiler pressure. Otherwise, water would flow out of the boilers and not in. He hauled wood and pumped the bellows to keep the sides of the firebox glowing. The work was hard, and became more challenging as the wagon moved. He learned to keep his balance despite sudden shifts while working continuously. At the riverbank, he hauled buckets of water to fill up the water tanks then opened and cleaned a large piece of pipe with a screen in it called a “filter.” By the end of the day, he knew what it was to be a “boilerman.” He was sure he knew everything that went on inside the wagon, but the grin of the crew chief told him he wasn’t even close.

At the end of the day, Tayan slogged into his sitting room, exhausted. He took reports in filthy coveralls that once had been white. Ellie was aghast at his condition; Amber just grinned and asked what it was like to be working class.

The wagon sitting in the rubble of the bridge ramp was in bad shape. He understood when they told him that the boilers were ruptured, as well as one water tank, and that the left side feed pump was broken. He heard the bearings in the wheel engines were also gone, and the steering gear needed all new rods. He hadn’t seen these yet, but he was sure he would tomorrow. The overall opinion was that the wagon could be repaired in three days.

News of the bridge wasn’t any better. The ramps were being shored up with block and timbers, but the main span was too long to do anything with, and the river too deep to build more pilings in less than a month. Cooper came up with the idea to gut his wagons and tow the hulks across the bridge then reassemble them on this side. Again, this was a week-long task, further delaying them. The trek upriver to the beginnings of the Jude then back down the other side to meet them was also a week’s travel, if not more. Adding the possibility of another wagon’s getting stuck, this time with no smith wagons to repair it, it made the trip more hazardous.

Taking the lesser of two evils, Tayan had Cooper start dismantling the wagons on the far side. Since they were stuck here, he ordered an area of forest leveled to build a temporary fort.

The next day he became a gunner and spent the day in the hot, sweaty turret, operating more steam and hauling rock. Ellie insisted on coming with him and ended up as the cannon sighter. To his surprise, and that of the other gunners, Ellie had a dead eye when it came to aiming the big barrels. After an hour’s practice, she was able to point the gun as accurately as the other two sighters were. It took her a bit longer to be able to call out the rotation and elevation, which was met with some mirth. Soon she was

lining up shots at five hundred yards and landing them within feet of where she wanted them.

While Tayan learned one job then moved to another, Ellie kept perfecting her gunning skills. By the end of the day she won a bet by shattering a tree six hundred yards away with a single volley.

She tried to play down her accomplishment as the news spread. Every day thereafter, while Tayan went to other laboring tasks, Ellie sat in the cannon turret, angling the barrels higher and getting longer ranges with more precise hits. In a few days, she was telling the other gunners how to “read the feel” of the way the wagon sat and watch for wind direction.

On the fourth day, the wagon that had dropped with the section of bridge was proclaimed ready to operate. The captain of the wagon and his second stood beside it with the other three survivors, ready to climb back in without a second thought. In gathering a new crew, General Cooper offered the lead gunner spot to Ellie.

Ellie shook her head. “I belong to Tayan,” she told him.

Tayan suddenly came up with a great idea. He put his arm around her and gave her a smile. “That is just what I want you to do, be the lead gunner for Captain Angler. You're too good not to be.”

Ellie frowned at him. “You’re giving me away?”

“I never said that. I’m going to be up in that command shack, and I want the best sighter guiding those cannons. You do your job, and take the money Captain Angler gives you.”

“Yes, Tayan,” she said tentatively. “I am still yours, right?”

He nodded. “Don’t worry about that, just get up there and be the best gunner you can be.” This was a golden opportunity. He only hoped that she wouldn’t have a hard time being accepted into the crew.

“Yes, Tayan.”

His concern about the other men putting up a fuss about having a Slavonic woman as a sighter was unnecessary. They accepted her without question. Most seemed eager to have her in the wagon with them. Tayan rode with them as they worked the wagon through drills and found that with Ellie on board they worked that much harder to perform flawlessly.

The other battlewagons had been dragged across and were being assembled a little quicker than the original estimate. They decided to have a feast to mark the occasion before moving on. On the day the last wagon was declared ready to go, boards and stumps were made into long tables, and fresh meat was hunted for the fire pits. Someone even came up with a keg of ale.

Tayan sat between General Cooper and Amber as the head priest gave blessings for the meal. Ellie sat on the other side of Amber, wondering why she wasn’t serving. Over her gray slave clothes, she wore the brown coveralls of a gunner. Once the long prayers of thanks and hopes of victory over evil were finished, they dug in.

Right after they started eating, Ellie leaned over and held out her hand to him. “Tayan, these are yours.”

He took what she held out without thinking. Seeing the five silver coins, he asked, “Why did you give these to me?”

“Captain Angler gave them to me for being lead gunner. They are yours,” she explained.

He looked at Amber for help. She picked up her plate and stood. “Ellie, switch seats with me.”

Ellie slid over. Beaming Tayan a smile, she said, “I understand now--you have me be the sighter to get money. That is very clever.”

Tayan handed her back the coins. “Ellie, these are yours.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “I’ll keep them for you, if you want.”

“Who is in that turret, you or me?” he asked.

“I am, because you want me to be.”

“The point is that you are the sighter. The money you get for being sighter belongs to you.”

She frowned at him. “Slaves can’t have money.”

Amber took her turn to explain. “Ellie, Tayan wants you to keep the money for yourself. You deserve it.”

Ellie looked at her then back to Tayan. “What am I going to do with money?”

“Right now, just hold on to it,” he said, putting the coins in her breast pocket. “When we get to someplace where you can spend them, Amber will take you shopping.”

She looked at him, blank-faced. “I am very confused.”

“You will understand in time,” Amber told her. “For now, just do what Tayan wants you to.”

Jacob, another gunner in the wagon crew, appeared over Ellie’s shoulder. “Hey, Ellie, the rest of us are sitting over at that table, why don’t you join us?”

Ellie glanced at him. “I am supposed to sit by Tayan.”

Jacob was taken aback by her reply. He looked down his nose at her. “Too good to sit with your fellow crewmembers?”

“You can go sit with them,” Tayan told her quickly. Leaning towards her, he whispered, “Maybe you should.”

Amber had gotten up and was whispering in Jacob’s ear. He frowned at first then nodded in understanding. Ellie looked over at the other men. The look on her face made Tayan think she would rather be with them.

Tayan picked up her plate and handed it to Jacob. “Could you take this for her?”

“Sure,” he said then reached over and picked up her cup. “Come on, Ellie. Bart really misses you.”

Ellie got up hesitantly. Again, Amber said something quietly to her. She looked at Amber and gave her a grin then went over to the other table. Satisfied, Amber sat back down, sliding to her original place beside Tayan.

Tayan turned to see Ellie sit down with the others, all smiles. She was quickly caught up in the chatter as they ate.

“What did you tell her?”

Straightening up, Amber took a breath that made her chest swell as she looked at him with a twinkle in her eye. “I told Jacob what we’re trying to do, but not to let her know yet. I only told Ellie we wanted to be alone for the night.”

“Good, very good,” He refrained from telling her that it sounded like a wonderful idea. A chuckle came from the other side of him. General Cooper gave him a smirk and a wink.

“What?” he asked, a little too self-consciously.

General Cooper waved his fork over his plate as he shook his head. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

He kept checking over his shoulder at how Ellie was faring. She seemed to be having a good time. He was quite pleased to hear her laugh. Hers wasn’t a smooth, clear sound--she laughed in snorts. The donkey-like noises she made soon got everyone else around her laughing. He couldn’t help himself, and neither could Amber. Ellie’s mirth spread quickly; and the more it spread, the louder she snorted.

He leaned toward Amber as he chuckled. Meeting eyes with her, he felt her gently squeeze the hand he hadn’t realized he was holding. He held hers a bit tighter, thankful for her presence. Their laughter subsided as they gazed into each other’s eyes.

Suddenly, the last thing he wanted to do was laugh. The soft look she was giving him and her closeness made his heart beat faster. He wanted to wrap his arms around her, to kiss her and never stop. The sounds around him faded and the only thing in his world was her. Her lips quivered, and a soft hand caressed his face. He reached out to touch her cheek, to let her know that he was one person who would never think of her as anything but beautiful.

General Cooper broke the moment by slapping him on the back. “That girl has a hell of a laugh!”

Acutely aware he was about to kiss a Sister of the Cloth in front of hundreds of people, he snapped his attention back to reality.

“Ah, yeah, sure does,” he said, getting his breath back.

Amber composed herself, or tried to. She was so flushed her ears were red. Like him, she was pretending that nothing had happened. Across the table, men had their heads down, avoiding their eyes. She took a few breaths, unable to speak. She tried to get a drink from her cup, but her hand shook so badly she put it down. Not looking at anyone, she stood up.

“Please excuse me,” she said in a whisper then all but ran away.

Tayan was ashamed of himself. Amber had to be embarrassed to tears by his actions. How dare he try something like that! He would apologize to her tomorrow--that was, if she ever spoke to him again.

“Didn’t interrupt anything, did I?” Cooper asked.

“Oh, no,” he replied quickly. The rest of the dinner he made small talk with those around him. The whole time the image of her horrified look stayed with him.

When he got up, he decided he couldn’t wait until tomorrow. He checked on Ellie; she was still with the wagon crew. Their plates were empty, but they were heavily engaged in conversation.

They had built a roughly oval fort with log and dirt walls. The area they dined in was towards the river side. When Amber ran off, she was headed for the priests’ tents, which were gathered in the back. He went that way, searching for her.

Amber sat at the base of the thick stump with her knees drawn up to her chest. This stump was used as an offering table. On it, the gold cup that signified Odin sat between two candles. The candles were not lit, for which Amber was thankful. She was able to pray then sit in hiding with no one to bother her.

She didn’t wipe away the tears that took jagged paths down her face as they paused in each depression. In a way, they felt cleansing, as if they were washing away the lust that she felt. At the table, she had been ready to give herself to him right then. Now, she didn’t know why she had felt like that. Maybe there was something about his laugh, or the way he looked at her. She had ignored the whole world and Leighna and would have given both up just to taste his lips on hers. Once again, she had disgraced herself.

A shadow moved in front of her, kneeling down on one leg. His voice sounded sad.

“Amber, I am very sorry for what I did. Please forgive me.”

What he did? She tried to focus on him, but his form was backlit by the fire in front of the tents. Hugging herself tighter, she shook her head. “No need, it was my fault.”

“I don’t think it was your fault I tried to kiss you,” he said slowly.

She half-heard what he said. Her mind was on the prayer she had offered. “I wanted Leighna to forgive me,” she explained, “But even as I asked it, I knew what the answer was.” She looked up at the shape of his head, where his gorgeous eyes were. “To be forgiven, I first need to feel regret. I can’t regret wanting you.”

“I...” he started then lost the power of speech.

“Acting how I did in front of everyone, that I asked forgiveness for,” she went on, trying to grin. “I can’t help how I feel. Every time I look at you I have to think before I speak, or else I might burst out and tell you how much I love you, or that given the choice between Motherhood or being your wife, I would rather be your wife.”

Tayan sat down, holding a hand to his forehead. “Amber...I...”

“You still love Lucinthia,” she said, telling him what she knew he was thinking. “To me, that makes you the sweetest man alive. I’m glad you feel so deeply, it only makes me love you more,” She noted that now he held both hands to his head, as if to crush something inside. Blinking, she attempted to clear her

vision of tears. "You must get on with your life some day, and when you do I'll be waiting."

She wished with all her heart he would say something, do something to let her know she had poured her soul out to him for a reason. She ached to have him tell her that he loved her at least half as much as she loved him. He didn't. He only sat holding his head as if it were about to explode.

Neither of them spoke for a while. The night air seemed to deepen the tension as she waited for him to react. After what had to be hours, he staggered up and turned away from her. His voice was thick.

"I'm...so...damn sorry," he choked. He jogged away.

Amber had to bite down on her fist to keep from crying aloud. Her tears were not only for herself but for him. He would go on as he was, pining over his dead wife. Never would he know the joy and tenderness they could give each other.

Chapter 21

In the morning, Tayan was glad to have the column start moving. His job was easy. In the command shack, all he had to do was stare out the window unless they ran into trouble. The worn look on his face and the dark circles under his eyes spoke of the sleepless night before.

He ran it through his head a thousand times. What could he have said differently? If he let her think that some day he would be selfish enough to take her away from her vocation, it would mix her up even worse than she was. If he had stayed with her to explain it then he would have ended up hugging her and possibly causing her worse disgrace. Amber was a good friend; he had to do what was best for her.

The engine noise became louder as the door to the interior of the wagon opened. Jacob the gunner popped his head out. "Request to enter command."

Captain Angler waved him out. "Come up."

Jacob shut the door behind him, much to the relief of Tayan's ears. He stood watching out the window and glancing at Tayan. After a couple minutes, he got up the nerve to speak.

"Lord Tayan, I want to talk about Ellie."

He took in the nervous look on the man's face. "What about her?"

"I want to buy her," he said quickly.

Tayan returned to staring out the window. "I don't sell people."

Jacob dropped his eyes. "I really want her, but she said that only her Master can..."

He stopped as Tayan eyed him. The half-elf lord wasn't in the mood to discuss most subjects, and Ellie

was at the top of the list.

“Do you want to own her or marry her?”

Jacob shrugged. “I want her, however I can get her.”

“Then be patient.”

Jacob waited a few seconds then asked, “That’s it? Just ‘be patient?’”

“That’s what I said.”

Jacob shifted like he wanted to resolve this right now. He noticed Captain Angler giving him the evil eye, so he decided to leave.

“Yes, M’Lord.” He swung the door open and disappeared into the wagon.

After the door shut again, Captain Angler walked over to Tayan. “It seems Ellie is becoming quite popular. Before we left this morning, it was Bart who claimed he had to have her. Sometimes I think these men spend too much time cooped up in this thing.”

The way he said it rubbed Tayan the wrong way. “What does that mean?”

Captain Angler shrugged. “Nothing, just that maybe my men need more time with normal women.”

“Normal women?”

“You know, ones who aren’t green,” he said with a smirk.

Tayan’s voice became hard. “I suppose they should avoid elven women as well. And let’s not even discuss the dark women of the south islands.”

Captain Angler opened his mouth then took a good look at Tayan’s ears. “I did not mean to offend you, M’lord,” he said slowly.

“You’re right about one thing,” he replied evenly. “Ellie is not quite the same as most ‘normal’ women. I’d say she’s better.”

Captain Angler gave a slight nod and became very interested in getting reports.

The wagons moved at a brisk pace the whole day. Lunch was served in shifts, half the crew at a time. Although they didn’t travel at the blistering speed Tayan had heard about, they did move at a near horse-gallop, and they kept it up the entire day. By the time the sun was setting, they had gone from the river in the middle of the forest to the more lightly forested edge of the Jude.

Tayan retired to his quarters as the crews chopped wood and fetched water for the next day. He made sure he didn’t go near the priests or the tents where crewmen who’d been burnt in their daily duties were being healed. It was best if he stayed away from Amber for a few days, if not the entire trip.

Sitting down, he leaned back to the sounds of axes and saws. He’d learned by now it took full water tanks and many trees to keep these things going all day long. That thought led to another one--where

would they find the wood or water once they hit the plains?

He got up and went to find General Cooper. It happened that Cooper was on his way to see him. He no more than opened the door and stepped out when he saw the General approaching with a small entourage. All five battlewagon captains were with him, as were Sir Parson and Amber. Seeing him, Amber dropped her gaze and slid behind the knight.

He tried to pretend he didn't see her at all. Keeping his attention on General Cooper, he put on his best smile. "General, I was just coming to find you."

"As we were coming to discuss matters with you, M'lord." Waving a hand, he added, "You first, please."

Tayan nodded towards the logs being cut up. "Your wagons use quite a bit of wood. Do you have another source of fuel?"

"Coal, M'lord, but we are very far from the mountains. It seems we were thinking along the same lines. My captains agree--we must slow our progress. Traveling so quickly is burning up all our reserves; and if we're going on the plains, wood will be hard to come by."

"My thoughts exactly," he agreed. "What will happen after we're on the plains for a week or two?"

The captains looked at Cooper and shook their heads. Planting his hands on his hips, Cooper said, "There is no way we can operate that long without some kind of fuel. Even if we are fully stocked, the longest we can go without resupplying is three days, and that's at an easy pace."

Tayan folded his arms across his chest as he thought. "We've been traveling at a pace of a week's worth of normal travel, every day. I've crossed the lower part of the plains before--it's two months of grasslands. Let's say we use every corner of every wagon to store wood. How much farther would that get us?"

"Fuel is not the only issue," Cooper said. "Water is also needed, and lots of it. We can stuff wood just about anywhere, but that will do no good when the water runs out. We get into one fight and use the cannons, we'll deplete our water in a single day."

"I'm supposed to meet Zodiac at a lake in the middle of the plains," Tayan reminded him. "If we make it to there, we can get everything we need before we go on."

"How far is this lake?"

"At the speed we've been going, about four days."

Cooper sighed. "That would be eight days if we travel at the most efficient rate. M'lord, that is out of our range."

"We have to make it within range," he replied heavily. "Get rid of anything we don't need and pack as much wood as we can into these wagons. We'll hang canvas to catch rainwater if we need to." Pointing back at his quarters, he said, "That's first. Gut it and start filling it with wood. Do you have coopers?"

"Three, but it will take a thousand barrels to hold enough water for even two days of travel."

“Then they better get started.”

Tayan helped strip his quarters, keeping only the bed. The only reason he kept that was night fell before they could fill up both rooms with the four-foot-long chunks of log. As his and other sleeper wagons were turned into woodbins, the engineers got together and devised inverted tent roofs. Instead of coming to a point on top, supports were positioned so the canvas caught rain and funneled it down into the center. Many complained about this, since they had a wide stream not too far from where they stopped. Changing the design of the tents had only begun, though, before the camp settled in for the night.

Morning brought Ellie stumbling into Tayan’s quarters. He awoke to find her in the doorway holding her hand out to Jacob, who gave her a large bowl.

“You got it?” the man asked, holding his hands out as if expecting her to drop it.

“Yes, thank you, I’ll be back in a while.”

Ellie came in and smiled. “Tayan, I brought your breakfast. We are in a hurry to get our wagon started, I hope you don’t mind that I can’t serve you as I should.”

“It’s okay,” he said with a yawn. He took the bowl then eyed her as she knelt in front of him. “Ellie, you don’t need to do that.”

“It’s comfortable. I’ll be sitting all day in the turret,” she said cheerily. “It’s hot in there.” Quickly, she added, “But not too bad.”

He noticed she still wore her gray clothes under her coveralls. “Why don’t you take off a set of clothes?”

“I can’t—I have to wear the coveralls.”

“You can take the gray stuff off.”

She frowned at him. “I am a slave, I can’t take those off.”

He had been wondering when a good time to tell her would arrive, and now seemed to be as good as any. “Ellie, the day you climbed up into that turret, you stopped being a slave.”

“What?”

“You are a cannon sighter now.”

She stood up, a pained look on her face. “I don’t understand.”

He took her hand and pulled her gently to sit on the bed. “I want you to listen closely.” He waited until she gave a slight nod then he said, “Don’t get upset. You’re worried that I freed you, right?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t have to. Ellie, you freed yourself,” She started to pull away, and he tightened his grip to make her stay put. “We both know you were a good slave, a damn good one. Now, you’re a damn good cannon sighter. The other men in that wagon depend on you.”

"I...did that for you," she said. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"And you did well. Captain Angler is paying you, just as he pays the other crewmen. The money you get you can spend on food for yourself, clothes, a place to live of your own." He watched her closely. She had a lost look on her face, but at least she wasn't carrying on. "How do you feel?"

She swallowed and shifted her gaze to him. "Like I just stepped off a cliff."

Her analogy was amusing, and not too far from the truth. "In a way, you have. Only, in this case the cliff was holding you prisoner."

"I am to be alone," she choked.

He put an arm around her and spoke as soothingly as he could. "You are not alone. You have a whole crew who want to be your friends. If you need me, I'll be here for you."

She bit her lip. "When I am not in the wagon, what do I do?"

"Whatever you want."

"How about where I sleep?"

"Get a room somewhere, you have money," Trying to anticipate her next question, he said, "And when you're not on the road riding in the wagon, you can walk into any inn and get a meal."

"You will stay with me?" she asked cautiously.

"That's what I said." He tipped his head to touch hers. "I know you are confused; but believe me, in a few months you'll be wondering why you stayed a slave for so long."

She sat in silence for a moment then took his arm from her shoulders and got up. Going to the door, she shut it and started removing her clothes. Tayan averted his eyes, waiting for her to put something back on.

"Here, I will not be needing these anymore."

He looked up to see she was holding her gray slave clothes in her hand. She was also naked. This was the first time he had seen her scars. Not thinking, he stared at them and traced a few of the thick welts that covered her stomach.

"Dear Odin," he breathed.

"If I can find no place to sleep, would you let me share your bed?" she demanded with anger in her voice.

He sensed she was asking about more than actual sleeping arrangements. He stood up and took her in his arms. "Ellie, you will find a man who loves you and does not care about your scars."

She didn't hug him back, just stood with her arms hanging on her sides. Her voice was tinged with acid. "Like you do not?"

He slipped back enough to hold her face in his hands. Looking into her eyes, he said, "I love someone else. If I did care for you, those scars would not matter one bit."

"You are confusing as hell!" she snapped then brought her hand to her face. Moving out of his grasp, she went to her coveralls and snatched them up. She looked at them and shook them at him. "I don't know what I'm doing. Please tell me you are not going to let me starve!"

"You will not starve. I will help you however I can."

"You better," she mumbled and quickly put her clothes on. Once dressed, she opened the door, pausing before she went out. Her voice was a mix of fear and anger. "I feel betrayed. After all I went through for you, it is clear you want nothing to do with me. I will be the sighter for Captain Angler, and I will do my best. Maybe he will appreciate me!" She slammed the door on the way out, which made an echoing clang.

He sat down with a sigh and picked up the bowl of fruit. She hadn't taken the news very well, but at least he had done what he needed to do. He remembered the day Duke Toma had told him he couldn't change a born-and-bred slave into a free woman. Picking up an apple, he told it, "See, you bastard, I did it."

By afternoon, the trees had thinned dramatically. The landscape inclined upward, and the wagons chugged louder as they built up more pressure to climb. They followed a section of ancient road cut into the hills. The crest of one hill was split, the road carved into solid rock; and to each side were soaring rock walls. When the road descended, it was easy to see that the ridge it ran on had been built just for that purpose.

Tayan marveled at the engineering that had gone into its construction. Huge amounts of dirt and rock had been moved to make two wide surfaces, one beside the other. They stopped on one section that was elevated a good hundred feet from the valley below. In the valley was a stream feeding a small pond. Tayan sent scouts to find a way down to get water. None was found, so a bucket brigade was set up from the road down the steep banks of the ridge to the pond. It took all of the men and Sir Parson's knights to form a living chain.

They worked until nightfall, filling the wagons. Thankfully, enough wood had been collected that they didn't need to work into the night gathering that as well. Tayan decided to send two tractors ahead in the morning so crews could find and start felling trees before the rest of the column moved.

His foresight paid off. The advance tractors found a small lake surrounded by the last thick group of trees they could see for miles. One of the boilermen came up with the idea of lining the inside of a towed wagon with tarred canvas then filling it with water. The idea was sound, but when it was filled the wheels sank into the ground and they broke the hitch trying to move it. Experimenting, they found the most they could fill one was halfway before the wagon became too heavy. Using this method, they half-filled four towed wagons. The men that had been riding in the wagons now rode either inside the battleg wagons and tractors or clung to the outside and top of the machines. General Cooper did some figuring and decided they had increased their range another two days.

The stop at the small lake cost them a day's travel. Then one of the tractors broke down and cost them another. They finally set off again, and the road became straight and flat.

After the fourth day on the grasslands, Tayan walked back to a collection of tents near the last tractors that pulled the horse wagons. Two priests were talking in front of the largest tent as he came up. The

white collars on their brown robes told him they were Brothers.

“Good afternoon, Brothers,” he said and gave a slight bow. “Is Father Fisher available?”

Both men smiled, and one said, “He is involved at the moment, M’lord. I will see if he can be disturbed.”

The Brother went in. He came back out and held the flap open. “Father Fisher will see you, M’lord.”

Tayan uttered a thanks and went in. Father Fisher sat in a folding chair, leaning on his walking stick. On his seeing Tayan, a grin crept across his aged face. “Welcome to Odin’s house, M’lord. Please, have a seat,” he said, indicating a mat in front of him.

“My business is brief.” He knelt on one knee. “We need to get these wagons to a lake, the only one on the plains. General Cooper has told me that by using the ancient roads we have extended our ability to travel. Both I and the general have done everything we can conceive of to reach this destination. I would like to ask if there is any way Odin can help us.”

Father Fisher eyed him. “Do you attend church?”

“Not since my wife died,” he answered honestly.

“Ahh,” Father Fisher breathed, as if this was an answer. He shifted his cane to lean on his shoulder. “A time when you need Odin the most, yet you turn your back on him.”

Tayan wasn’t so sure now about his decision. He had wanted this to be quick, fearing he might see Amber. “Look, Father, I don’t have much time.”

“You have no faith,” the priest stated. “If you had faith then you would know Odin is with you and will guide you if you let him.”

Tayan shrugged. “I thought maybe an extra prayer or two might help.”

“Prayer always helps,” Father Fisher nodded. “Continue to pray, and keep watch for Odin’s signs.”

A mental picture, as clear as a sign hanging off a building, came to his mind; it read “big mistake.” “I was hoping you would offer a prayer.”

The priest’s face became solemn. “I have offered many prayers, prayers not only to ask that our holy mission be victorious but also prayers to keep us safe and our souls at ease. Just a short while ago, I was offering prayers with Sister Amber to help her through her troubled times.”

Involuntarily, Tayan rubbed his forehead. “I never meant to hurt her. Could you tell her that for me?”

“I am a priest, not a messenger service.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said defensively. “It’s just that I can’t be around her, not anymore. She doesn’t need me interfering with the path she’s chosen.” He leaned towards the priest in an attempt to make him understand. “Father, it’s not that I don’t love her, I do. If I ever were to want another wife I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather be with. The fact remains that Lucinthia died for me. How can I possibly ask Amber to leave her robes, and her life, for someone who can’t protect the ones he loves?”

Father Fisher was unmoved by his outburst. Slowly, he said, "A Sister will always be a Sister, even if she marries. Tell me more about the death of your wife. Did she live a happy life before she died?"

"We were happy. There were times when the pressure of being a princess got to her, but I did my best to make up for it." As he thought about their last days together, his fist tightened. "The day of the attack we had a fight. She wanted me to talk to my father and, I don't know, come to terms with him."

The pain of that day became fresh in his mind. It was the last day of her life, and instead of telling her he loved her he had an argument with her. He felt like he was going to choke as he continued. "A vlak was after us, and it caught us." Tears clouded his vision. "I told her to hide so it wouldn't find her. I knew I was dead, but she had a chance to stay alive." A sob escaped his throat. He squeezed his fist as if this would ease the agony. "She could have lived! All she had to do was keep her mouth shut!" His knee gave way in his grief. He fell to sit and look at the floor. "She screamed for him!" he cried. "The last words I heard from her was her screaming for him!"

"Did he come?" Father Fisher asked calmly.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, he looked up. "Oh, yes. He came, he killed the vlak, but that didn't help my wife, did it?"

Father Fisher sat on the floor in front of him. "Your wife gave up her life for yours, just as you were trying to do for her. You should be thankful for such deep love."

Tayan glared at him through his clouded vision. "I should be thankful that son of a bitch let my wife die? He managed to save me, why not her! Can you tell me that?"

To his surprise, Father Fisher slapped him. Raising a bony finger at him, he said, "Listen, young man! You are too quick to pass judgment and far too quick to hate. Might it occur to you that he couldn't save her? Too many souls are lost for just this reason. You are consumed with things that might have been."

The slap calmed him but didn't change what he felt. "Things that might have been," he whispered. "If Odin is as merciful as you say, I might have never been."

"I never said Odin is merciful. Odin does have his plan, and that is what we must accept." Struggling to his feet, Father Fisher went back to his chair. He sat down and eyed Tayan sadly. "If your wife lived a happy life and went into Odin and Leighna's embrace when she passed on then you should be thankful. When you pray, talk to your wife as well. Let go of the anger you hold."

Tayan couldn't remember the last time he had prayed. Even when he did go to church he just bowed his head and waited for the "amen." As he thought about it, to ignore Odin for so long then to ask help to find this damned lake, just didn't seem right. He had no idea why he had told the priest as much as he did about Lucinthia's death. It was just something that had eaten at him for so long he had to let it out to someone.

"I'm not too good at praying, but I'll give it a shot."

"Just talk, Odin will listen," Father Fisher suggested.

"Even if I don't forgive him either?" he whispered.

"Start by forgiving yourself then ask Odin for guidance."

He gave a sarcastic chuckle. "Right now, I'll settle for a lake."

"I will pray for you," Father Fisher said sternly. "Unless you set your soul right, a lake is of no consequence."

"It is to those steam wagons."

"The will of Odin is not carried by steel machines that move. It is carried by us." Father Fisher flicked his eyes to the far corner of the tent. "M'lord, if you insist that this lake is so important, I must have someone stay with you to help you set your soul right."

"That has been my task all along," Amber said from the corner of the tent.

Tayan twisted his head so hard to look at her he felt his neck crack. She had been there the whole time! She had heard every damn word he said. How was he going to explain it?

She came over to him. Squatting down, she cupped his face in one hand as she locked eyes with him. "I was so consumed with my feelings I forgot why I came with you. We will conquer evil. First, we must do as Father Fisher said and get your soul straight." Standing up, she twitched her fingers, signaling for him to take them. "Come on, we have much work to do."

The power of speech eluded him as he took her hand and got up. Many thoughts raced through his head; he ached to organize them enough to say something intelligent. Amber wasn't supposed to know he loved her. The last thing he had wanted her to find out was that he had let his wife die. Yet, every time he thought he had what he wanted to say straight, it either sounded like he was wallowing in self-pity or that he didn't care enough about her.

They were walking along a line of steam tractors when Amber broke the silence. "I have come to find that life is not as simple as we'd like it to be. I am not as crude as Odif, so I won't slam you into one of these wagons and yell at you. I am going to ask that you believe me when I tell you that all things work out in the end."

A grin cracked his face. "So, when is the end?"

"I don't know." She clasped his hand and laced her fingers through his. "I do know that, whether as husband and wife or a Lord and his Priestess, we will see it together."

He looked to see her eyeing him. "You aren't going to give up on me, are you?"

"Nope. How's Ellie?"

"She's doing good. I'm no longer her favorite person in the world, but she knows she's free."

Amber gave his hand a squeeze. "Very good. Can we go see her?"

"Sure." He lifted their clasped hands. "Second battlewagon from the front. They were spreading the canvas in case it rains tonight." Looking up at the clear sky, he added, "I don't think we'll have much luck there."

She jerked on his arm to get his attention. Looking at him sternly, she said, "Have a little faith, honey."

Have a little faith.”

Tayan didn't see any sign of rain on the horizon, though his own mood was less cloudy. Seeing her frown made him grin—he loved the way she knitted her brows together. “I'll try.”

She tried hard not to grin back. Still, a corner of her lip curled up. “We will pray together tonight. You will start, and it will be meaningful.”

He cringed inside, but what had he expected? “I will, it will be,” he said, wondering if he could pray and actually mean it. The sun was on the horizon; he had a few hours to prepare himself. Until then, he had things to do. “Let's go see Ellie.”

Ellis was quite pleasant with Amber, though she ignored him until Captain Angler growled at her to show some respect. Even then, she only gave him a crisp greeting and stated she had to get back to work. She might hate him, but she was free. To Tayan, this was an equitable trade.

True to her word, Amber stayed by his side and followed him to his quarters after dinner. She made him kneel down in the middle of the floor and begin the prayers. Kneeling in front of him, she held his hands with her talisman between them and waited for his stumbling devotion to be over. Not sure what to say, he asked Odin to help them find the lake so their mission could continue then tacked on a few words about promising to renew his faith. After his “amen,” Amber gripped his hand to let him know not to move and spoke more eloquently.

“Leighna, our light and salvation, we thank you for this day you have given us, and your help on our holy journey to rid the land of the evil that plagues us. Let us continue to walk in your light. I ask that you help this man find peace and keep him safe from the darkness that threatens us all. I also ask you to let Lucinthia know that he is thinking of her. His love for her withstands the separation of death. Let her feel this love and be joyous, and let him know the love she feels for him so he may carry on. It is in your divine light that we live, and in your name we pray, amen.”

He was doing well, partially feeling some comfort from her prayer, until she mentioned Lucinthia. As she asked Leighna to let his wife know he still loved her, he found he was, indeed, praying along. More than anything, he wanted his dead wife to know the harsh words they had spoken meant nothing. He couldn't stand thinking she had died believing he was angry with her, not only for the argument but also because she had summoned his father, forfeiting her own life. Right after Amber finished her prayer, he gripped the talisman and prayed with all his heart.

“Please forgive me,” he choked.

Amber put her arms around him, and he hugged her tight. Her softness and the sweet aroma of her hair was the very essence of love and forgiveness. He found it very hard to let go. Eventually he did, for no matter how badly he wanted her to console him, she was a Sister and he would not cause her disgrace again.

That night, they were hit with one of the worst rainstorms he had ever seen.

“Tell me again what you saw,” Zodiac ordered the scout.

The man in brown leathers told him again, glancing every now and then at Stazor, who sat on his barded

horse beside Zodiac. "We found the lake, tracks are everywhere. Besides hoarcs and men, there were pilgyn tracks, and Gus said one set looked like vlak. The tracks cover the whole area ahead, but they are mixed up--we can't tell what direction they were going."

"These plains are flat, so set trails aren't used," Zodiac mused.

"Could you determine a general direction?" Stazor asked.

"Not really. For every set we saw going one way, another went in the opposite direction. Signs are all over the place, but we didn't run into anything."

"With the lake ahead, it might be a crossing point," Stazor offered. "Even evil has to stop for water."

"Go up the eastern side with your men," Zodiac told the scout. "Have another team go up the west side. If this is a crossing point for them, they will have some kind of watch set."

"Yes, M'Lord," The scout turned his horse and galloped off.

Stazor pulled his helmet off and wiped the sweat from his brow. "What if scouts find both sides are watched? Dare we split our forces?"

Zodiac shook his head. "Not here. Once they find us, they are going to throw everything they have at us. We're getting pretty close to home."

"I pray to Odin that evil has gone further south," Stazor said. "Our two thousand are strong, but every one will be needed when we get to this city."

Zodiac looked back over the long column that wound through the shallow valley. Three abreast, they went back as far as he could see. He knew all too well, though, that once the fighting started numbers didn't matter as much as how well they were used. Decisions and information either made or broke the battle.

"If needed, we'll travel hard to avoid any battle we don't have to fight."

Stazor, who thought avoiding any evil thing was a sign of cowardice, didn't like to admit Zodiac was right. He consoled himself with "We'll clean up the stragglers on the way back."

"Right," Zodiac agreed. Giving a look around, he added, "We may as well stand down until the scouts find something."

Stazor called for a dismount. In unison, the entire column of knights swung one leg over and got off their horses. Here and there, squires ran back to the wagons to get water. No one rested, but stood ready to leap back in the saddle at a moment's notice.

Scanning the horizon, Zodiac tried to visualize every way the enemy could come at them. The shallow rises would each hide only a few dozen. Dragons or anything airborne would be seen coming from very far away. Even those damn ballistas would launch their spears into the air, so they would have some warning. Duncan, or one of the other wizards, would know if evil was hiding by magical means. On this open grassland, surprise was out of the question.

An hour later, two scouts rode back at a full gallop. One was trailing a horse with an empty saddle. The

scout he had talked to before pointed as he slowed his horse.

“They got a fort on the east side! They got horses, and they’re coming!”

Immediately, Stazor was back in the saddle, calling out for the knights to ready lances.

“How many?” Zodiac asked as he locked his visor down.

“A bunch! Two, maybe three hundred men, armed and armored. They can’t be but a few miles behind me.”

Zodiac waved for his men to come forward. “Governor, take your knights and meet them. We’ll set up the second rank.”

Stazor nodded and lifted his lance. Guiding his knights, he led them to form a long line across the marching path then turned them as one to continue on at a walk. Zodiac made the second line with his cavalry and set the rest of his infantry with bows in a third. Taking up places directly behind the archers, the wizards and druids fanned out. Squires and priests stayed with the wagons and waited for the wounded to be brought in.

The knights held their lances high; the banner of each company fluttered at the tips. When a cloud of dust grew and moved toward them, Stazor tipped his lance down then up, and they moved into a trot. Once the oncoming riders were in sight, the lances dropped. The knight charged.

The band of oncoming horsemen was large--Zodiac guessed about three hundred riders. Upon seeing the knights, the semi-orderly lines broke into chaos as some wheeled their mounts and fled. Before the knights could reach them the entire band had turned and was galloping away as fast as they could go. The Paladian knights followed, but the enemy horses were faster than the heavily barded mounts of the knights.

Zodiac called a charge just to keep up with Stazor. He had the archers race back to the wagons, knowing that as quickly as the enemy now fled they could swing around and attack from the side. He didn’t want anyone left behind.

Eventually, the knights came back, but they still held a long front. Stazor slapped his visor up, glaring toward where the enemy had gone.

“They’ve no stomach for a fight!” he growled.

“Or they’re just tiring out our horses for later,” Zodiac told him. “This trip has been long and dull--let them get a bit closer next time.”

Stazor glanced at the line of knights. The horses were panting; a few had begun to froth at the mouth. Even heavy warhorses could not run far loaded down with their barding and the knight’s armor. “You’re right, my friend. It’s been so long since I’ve taken the field my enthusiasm has cost us the fight.”

“I don’t think they planned on fighting. They’ll spread the word we’re here, so we better get moving and take that fort.” Raising an arm in the air, Zodiac called out, “Glier! Take the lead. Everyone, move out!”

Glier rode by with his troops. The rest formed back up and moved out at a trot. After traveling another hour, they found the lake. Ahead of them, enemy scouts retreated as they started up the east side. Not

long after they passed the end of the lake, the watchtowers of the fort rose above the land.

The fort was not very large. It was a square earthen structure Zodiac guessed was a hundred yards to a side located on the lakeshore. The gate was made of logs lashed together and was raised with ropes. Surrounding the fort was a dry moat, probably with spikes or sharpened sticks at the bottom. Atop the walls, men and hoards waited behind a log parapet.

Stazor was immediately for storming the fort. Zodiac thought about leaving some men to lay siege and moving on, but it wasn't good tactics to have an enemy fort at your back. Storming the stronghold didn't seem a good idea either. He knew they probably had those damn spears, and the cost was not worth such a small gain. He decided to send a probing sortie with a company of cavalry and two wizards. Once they had the fort surrounded at a respectable distance, he ordered the attack.

Two hundred horsemen charged in at an angle. He watched as they closed and traded arrow fire with the defenders. Other than a few lightning bolts from his wizards that toppled the watchtowers and a burst of fire to set the gate ablaze, no magic was used. When his men retreated, he noted their losses had been light--only twenty had been hit, and seven of those got back to be healed by the priests.

With the success of the first wave, he sent in infantry to lay down a constant barrage of arrows against the walls to keep the enemy from putting out the gate fire. Again, his men did very well. The gate fell into burning chunks of charred log. Beyond, the open courtyard was full of figures turning over wagons to make a secondary defense. His archers moved closer, and the defenders used catapults to throw rocks at them. His men closed right to the edge of the moat and traded short-range arrows. More were being killed now, but it looked like the defenders suffered greater losses. A scout came back and reported that the moat was only ten feet wide, an easy jump for a horse.

Something bothered him about the fort. They had no wizards, no spears, and their defenses were inadequate. Taking the fort was too easy for his liking; they hadn't even brought out their horsemen.

Glier rode up beside him. "The gate is down, and we've got enough room to ride right in. Cavalry through the opening and infantry climbing the walls, we'll have that fort before dinnertime."

"That's what bothers me. We know they must have more powerful weapons. Why aren't they using them?"

"Maybe they sent them all to Elrad. After all, that's where the war is," Glier offered.

Zodiac shook his head. "I don't like it. Send in our cavalry and finish it off quick. Don't hang around in there--get the place burning and get out."

"Right." Glier nodded and rode off, calling for his troops to gather.

Zodiac rode to the hillock where Stazor was watching the battle with a group of his knights. He was now thinking this fort might be a diversion. While they had their attention on it, the enemy was probably massing for the real battle. It would not be a total surprise, of course; but it would catch them thinned out in a long semicircle. The only thing he was glad of was that all the druids and supply wagons were safely tucked away in a valley.

He had reached the base of the hillock and started up when a series of loud explosions rocked the ground. Thinking of the fort first, he looked that way. The fighting had stopped for a moment as his men there also searched for the source of the noise. He spurred his horse to gain high ground so he could see

what was happening.

On the top, the knights were looking behind him and pointing. He turned to see smoke rising from where he knew his own men were. Only it wasn't fighting men hidden in that valley, but the druids.

A large number of horsemen appeared over a ridge behind him. The lead riders swung what looked like slings as they charged, flinging globes that sailed into the valley again; and more explosions rocked the area.

Stazor was already barking orders to his knights to form up and surround the raiders.

"Collect your men! We'll reform at the southern tip of the lake!" Zodiac shouted to him then galloped back to his own men.

More explosions sounded, this time to the north. Right after that, he happened to be looking at the fort and saw his cavalry racing to the gate. Several spears shot up and out of the fort, ripping into them. Pilgyns emerged from the banks behind the fort and charged. A vlak sprang over the wall and attacked a group of his men.

It was a trap, and he had fallen into it. He got back to his observation point and found more pilgyns charging out from the lake. His men in front of the fort were being decimated by explosions. Duncan had gathered a score of infantrymen around him and was turning back the spears and globes that came near him. The soldiers around him shot at the advancing pilgyns. Near the northern end of the fort, another group tried to run from the vlak that was slashing them.

The battle spread as small groups of hoarcs and pilgyns came from their hiding places behind what he thought had to be every low area on the plains. As his men retreated from the fort, horsemen poured out of the burnt gate. Quickly figuring the new odds, he thought that at best they were now evenly matched in numbers. In weapons, his side was coming up short.

Zodiac rode hard, consolidating his troops. Gathering the remains of Glier's cavalry, he broke through a phalanx of pilgyns to help a troop of embattled elves. In the midst of the battle, he formed most of them back into ranks. Fighting along the way, they got to the valley where the druids waited.

The area was blasted; robed figures and their guards lay everywhere. They checked every body, but the ones who hadn't been killed by the explosions had been run through. Even the wounded had been slaughtered.

The sound of hooves approaching geared them up to fight another enemy force. Zodiac breathed a sigh of relief as instead Pynlee led a band of horsemen over the rise accompanied by three knights. Seeing him, she rode up and waved her sword the way they had come.

"We got quite a few and split the others up. The druids are dead, or gone to ground. The enemy went off to the west to reform." Waving at the knights, she said, "This is all that is left of Sir Glandow's knights."

Zodiac knew Sir Glandow had commanded a full company of a hundred-twenty knights when the day started. He hoped they had killed at least that many to suffer such large losses. Adding the group Pynlee brought in, he now had just over three hundred on hand. "Have you seen Stazor?"

Pynlee glanced at her sword. "Yes! I know there are more coming from the south!" Returning her

attention to Zodiac, she said, "He's headed for the fort to help there. Duncan is still holding out at the southwest corner."

"Hey!" an elf called from a nearby rise. "Enemy cavalry coming, three large groups."

Wheeling his horse around, Zodiac rode up to him. The group to the right was coming out on a rise, the center pack of about fifty was on flat land and to the left a mass flowed into a dip. He dropped below the top and shouted, "Everyone not mounted, man this rise! Pynlee, when they get close come up on the right with your men. I'm going to swing around and flank them on the left."

Leading half the cavalry, he stayed in lowlands until he got to where the enemy's left flank should be. Getting his men into a line, he waited until he heard the oncoming force then charged up and out. The enemy had the same thought he did. They also were coming up out of a dip a scant thirty feet away. Instead of charging at their side, he met them head on.

They collided in a clash of steel and battle screams. Zodiac slashed one across his middle as he passed then gouged a second. The third one he met had a lance and caught him on his hip, unseating him. He flew back off his horse, pain filling his right leg.

On the ground, he staggered to his feet. Not having time to check to see how badly he was wounded, he balanced on his left leg. All around him the battle raged. A dismounted man wearing the black coat of the enemy staggered toward him. The man had lost his sword and came at him with a dirk. Although Zodiac still had his sword, he couldn't move to press an attack. Any weight on his right leg threatened to topple him.

The man seemed to sense this. He moved to the right and began to circle. Zodiac hobbled around to keep the man in front of him. The man thrust again and again, feinting. After each, he jumped to one side then the other. Following him was difficult--each time Zodiac managed to face him the man would move the other way.

Zodiac made a show of bending over and howling in pain. Not all of this was pretense--his right leg was sending shocks of pain through his whole body. As he hoped, the man leapt to strike. He twisted and thrust up, catching his attacker low in the torso. The man's chain armor didn't hold, and the blade broke through.

It was all he could do to jerk his blade free. The force of the movement put too much weight on his leg, and he fell to his knees the same time the other man did. From all fours, he swung at the man's head, slicing off a chunk of scalp. The man winced as he fell prone then passed out.

Adrenalin got Zodiac to his feet. The battle around him raged, just as much on foot now as on horseback. A group of black-coated men pulled one of his horsemen to the ground and stabbed him to death. Not twenty feet away, four of his cavalry ganged up on a rider and slashed him until he fell dead out of the saddle.

"Zodiac is mine!" came a high-pitched scream from his left.

As Zodiac turned to face the shouting lancer, the enemy lowered his weapon and charged. The voice sounded like that of a woman. In this fight, there was no chivalry, only friend and foe. He braced himself, watching the lance. The rider moved the tip on purpose to make it hard for him to know exactly where it would strike. The face was bearded; the eyes shone with murder.

Zodiac had no plans on standing still, though. Given the choice of being run through or run over, he opted to take his chances with the horse. Just before the lance was on him, he dove in front of the animal, thrusting his sword up into its chest.

The impact slammed him back as the horse screamed. His vision blurred as he tumbled to the ground, the mortally wounded horse falling over him. He felt a snap in his left knee and a grinding in his hip as it rolled atop him. His arm was wrenched back then thrown over his head. When he finally came to rest he was staring at sky.

Whether he tried to move or not, the pain was unbearable. He couldn't draw a breath, let alone cry out. Amid the chaotic battle, the man with the lance lay half under the dead horse, screaming in pain. He had time to notice this just before he passed out.

Zodiac came to in agony. Burning pain filled his legs; his shoulder felt like someone had ripped his arm off. He drew a breath to moan, and his back and chest stabbed with fresh agony. He exhaled the bit of air he had drawn in with a creaking groan.

A face appeared over him. The young squire wiped his forehead then offered him a drink from a horn-shaped bag. He got enough water to wet his lips. Swallowing hurt almost as bad as the rest of him. Looking down, he saw both legs and one arm were in splints. His armor had been taken off and piled on the ground at the end of the blankets.

"We were routed, M'lord," the squire explained. "The lake is in enemy hands. Governor Stazor has sent riders to search for more survivors."

He barely was able to draw enough breath to live. "How bad," he mouthed.

"There are six hundred in camp, M'lord. Most are wounded, some badly. We lost thirty this morning from their wounds." As if to anticipate his next question, the squire added, "All the priests are dead. The druids, too, we think, and most of our food supply was destroyed. The extra horses were killed or driven off."

Zodiac understood why so many warriors were left. The enemy was smart. Instead of just killing the men in the field, they had concentrated on destroying their support. Without food or healing, their army would cease to be effective in a few days. Even if they did scrape together enough men for a sizable attack, they could not sustain it. The enemy, on the other hand, had the lake nearby and plenty of time to wait them out.

He lay back and stared at the sky. In Newburg he had known they weren't prepared. They had gotten the townspeople out, which was at least a partial victory. This was different; they were as ready as they could be. What it came down to was that he had fought two major battles and lost both. The explosive magic evil was using gave them an edge he couldn't counter. Wizards could cause similar magic, but it would take a hundred wizards to match what evil was carrying with them.

Low rumbling sounds came to his ears, the sound of far-off explosions. He wondered what poor fellows were being ripped apart this time. The number of explosions increased, as if another major fight was going on. It wasn't a few occasional noises but a constant pounding. A rapid run sounded a bit hollow, over a dozen at once.

Had Stazor committed to another attack? He leaned up to see the ridge to his left was lined with men watching intently and pointing. What was Stazor fighting with? By the sound of it, he was being ground into paste. Stazor was brave, but his lack of battle sense now was destroying any hope of survival.

“Squire!” he groaned as loud as he could.

The squire came back, glancing over his shoulder at the ridge. “Yes, M’lord?”

“See...what’s...”

“Go see what’s happening?”

Zodiac nodded, and he was off.

Smoke was now trailing through the sky in dark lines. Grass fires, it had to be. All those explosions were sealing their fate--evil didn’t have to kill them, the fires would. He expected the sounds would soon die out, but they kept going. Several times the air vibrated with a staccato of blasts. Then the men on the ridge began to raise their fists and yell in excitement.

What in the abyss was going on out there?

A friendlier sound, the thunder of horses, came to his ears. The men on the ridge parted to let four long lines of riders file down into the camp. On the right side were ragged remains of Stazor’s knights. The banner on the left belonged to the Knights of Tolina. From the two rows between them, priests and packhorses began to disburse. Looking closer, he saw a few druids in their ranks.

Stazor, a priest and the lead knight from Tolina rode towards him. They dismounted and walked up. The priest laid his hands on him and began prayers of healing. As he did, Stazor introduced the other knight. He wore a look of pleasant surprise.

“Lord Zodiac, this is Sir Parson of Tolina. He has come with Lord Tayan; and I must say, the method of attack they are using is totally outrageous! Evil has no chance, from what I’ve seen out there today.”

Sir Parson bowed. “Greetings, M’lord, please accept my apologies we did not arrive sooner.”

He felt the healing course through him. He thanked the priest and asked, “The odds are turning in our favor?”

“We will have the lakeshore and the fort secured in a few hours,” Sir Parson told them. “We will need every available man to help fell trees and fill the water tanks.”

Trees, water tanks? Zodiac felt he had to have missed something. “What in the abyss for?”

“The steam wagons,” Stazor told him. Shaking his head in disbelief, he said, “I have never seen a vlak get run over and crushed before today. It really is quite heartening.”

“If Tayan can’t shoot it, he runs it over,” Sir Parson beamed.

Zodiac tried to visualize what kind of wagon could run over vlaks. As he pondered this, he heard a new mix of sounds. Heavy chugging noises, squeals of metal on metal and a ground-shaking rumbling were coming from the other side of the ridge. Sitting up, he feared the worst, some kind of new weapon evil

had made. He caught sight of twin columns of smoke pouring straight up, and then the first battlegwagon lumbered into view.

Chapter 22

Odif crept slowly through the dark, trying to keep an even distance from Sam, who was right in front of her. Behind her, Jo-Jo kept touching her feet, as if to verify she was still in front of him. Like her, he didn't care for being in total darkness.

Since Sam and the elves could see, there was no reason to give themselves away by lighting a torch. The small tunnel they crawled through passed by the main chamber where wizards were engaged in their magic. Every so often, she spied a bit of the cavern through cracks in the thin separating wall of rock. Besides wizards, she noted glassblowers were at work. The last hole she paused at showed hoards carefully loading spears into wooden crates. This was the place they made the explosive magic. She would have to find a way to destroy it.

She sensed Sam move to the left. Searching with her hands, she felt the tunnel make a sharp turn away from the cavern. It then dropped in a steep slope, moved right then became even narrower. She wondered if it would close off completely, forcing them to backtrack.

After they had crawled long enough to make her knees raw, dim light showed enough so she could make out Sam ahead of her. One last twist and the tunnel open up into a larger passage. The faint yellowish light came from mosses that clung to the walls and ceiling.

The group assembled, stretching out kinked backs as the last few exited. Everyone had made it through though somehow Gloredaniel, who had been towards the front, now came out last.

"Did you see that cavern?" Scorpio asked Frieda. "They're making those spears in there."

"We have to find a way to destroy it," Odif added.

Theo smacked her in the thigh. "Hey, crazy woman! Those things go boom, and in there was a lot of boom. We set those off, and it'll bring all these caves down on our heads."

"I've already taken care of it," Gloredaniel informed them.

Mother Frieda eyed her. "How?"

"I cast a fire ring to pass through the cavern. I set the spell so I hold the magic in check. It will not go off unless I command it, or if I die. Only then will the magic be released."

"We better keep you alive for a while then, eh?" Hutch said nervously.

"You did well," Frieda told her. "Sam, which way?"

Sam looked one way then the other. Nibbling on a fingernail, she scanned both directions again. "I'm not sure. I don't think I've ever been here before."

"You led us here," Shilo reminded her.

"I know. I think maybe I took a wrong turn."

"Take a guess," Odif ordered.

Hutch pointed at the far wall. "That way is north."

"How do you know that?" Scorpio snorted.

Hutch scowled. "I have a very good sense of direction. We are also eighty feet below the ground, unless the land above us had changed."

Theo shook his head. "You're wrong, brother. We are only seventy-five feet down, but you did get the direction almost right. North is that way," he said, pointing off slightly more to the right.

Hutch turned his scowl on him. "Says who?"

"Says me," Theo replied, planting his hands on his hips. "Do you want to get us lost?"

"We are lost," Hutch reminded him.

"I am never lost, I only...find new places."

"Enough!" Frieda hissed. "Sam, do you have any idea which way to go?"

Sam laced her fingers together and shrugged. "Not really."

Hutch tapped her arm. "Bat lady, when you were leaving, did you go up most of the way or down?"

"Up, I think."

"Makes sense," Hutch noted. "When you first started, was that up or down?"

"It was mostly flat until I got to the lake cavern then it was up."

"Then we go that way," Hutch said, pointing to the left.

"Yes," Theo agreed. "Left."

"May I ask how you came to that conclusion?" Odif asked him.

Hutch looked at Theo and muttered, "Her mind has gone, she has no brains."

Odif looked away, staring down to the left so she wouldn't have to look at them. As she did, she began to notice what they were talking about. "The moss seems a bit thicker that way, and the floor has a slight decline."

“You win a biscuit!” Theo chuckled. “You do have brains!”

Scorpio interrupted them with a low growl. “Hey, guys! *Weare* inside enemy territory. Keep it down.”

“Please,” Frieda agreed. “Let’s move. Hutch and Theo in front, Porthalen and Scorpio next.” Pointing to one of the other elves, she said, “You scout ahead. Sam, stay by me. Odif, you’re behind us then the wizards. Everyone else behind them. Shilo, you have the rear guard. ”

Shilo folded his arms over his chest in a mock-angry manner. “Oh, so I’m the ass!”

“If the shoe fits...” Theo shrugged with a grin.

“Move!” Frieda hissed.

The passage looked as though it had been carved out rather than made by nature. The jagged turns, rises and falls of the other caves were replaced by a smooth, even floor and clean, parallel walls. They traveled for a while before the elf came back, crouching low and keeping to the inside wall of a gentle curve. He waved them all to the side then moved up beside Frieda.

He spoke in a quiet tone just loud enough for them to hear. “Just beyond this corner are hoarcs. Two are in the tunnel, and there is a cavern or something to the left. I saw three come out. They headed away from us.”

“Armed?” Scorpio asked.

The elf shook his head. “I didn’t see any weapons.”

“Can we sneak up on them?”

“No, the sides are too smooth.”

“All right, we’ll shoot the ones in the passage then rush them. As long as we keep them quiet, we can take them then deal with whatever is inside that cavern.”

“And suppose it’s another couple hundred in there?” Porthalen asked.

Odif leaned forward. “It’s a risk we’ll have to take. Entaurus, you keep them from yelling. Jo-Jo and GloreDaniel, be ready to help with whatever is in that cavern.”

They all looked at Mother Frieda, who nodded. “Go.”

The three were gone from sight as Scorpio crept on his hands and knees to peer around the bend. Carefully he signaled back with two fingers then moved out far enough to lie prone and set the sights of his crossbow on the farther hoarc. The creatures sat against the right-hand wall looking quite bored. They didn’t notice Porthalen edge into sight, drawing back on his bow.

The instant Scorpio heard the twang of the bowstring he shot. Porthalen’s arrow drove into the near hoarc just under his arm. Scorpio’s bolt landed with a crack square into the other one’s head. One hoarc turned into dust immediately, the other kicked at the ground for a few seconds before turning gray and crumbling.

The rest of the group ran down, searching for the entrance. Not seeing anything, Odif motioned for them to start tapping at the walls. Porthalen and the other three elves ran down the passage and knelt on one knee, ready to shoot whoever came their way.

Sam found the entrance. It was cleverly hidden, an illusion with form. While the others tapped on what they thought was solid rock, she saw through the image and into the chamber beyond. A pair of hoarcs sat watching a ragged man who was chained to a wall. The man's clothes were rags covered in old bloodstains. His head was down; the mop of tangled red hair hung too long to see his face. He was not conscious, though the life force she felt from him let her know he was still alive.

Grabbing Mother Frieda, she spoke quietly, indicating the outline of the illusion. "There is the portal. Inside, two hoarcs are guarding a prisoner."

"Weapons?"

"The prisoner has a battleaxe on his belt. The hoarcs have small knives."

Frieda raised an eyebrow. "A prisoner with a weapon?"

Sam nodded. "My mother will do that, just to add to the prisoner's anguish. He is chained and probably can't reach it by a mere few inches."

"But close enough to keep trying for it in vain," Frieda said in understanding.

The surprised bark of a hoarc and the snaps of bowstrings got their attention. Porthalen raced off with two elves, sending the last one back. The elf wasn't trying to be quiet as he skidded to a stop in front of them. "One got away, we're going to have company."

Mother Frieda pointed at Scorpio then Sam. "Scorpio, take care of it and cover us. Sam, help me get that man down. Shilo, Jo-Jo, take care of the hoarcs inside."

Scorpio loaded another bolt. "Let's go--wizards behind warriors, Odif and Entaurus, attack. GloreDaniel, get ready to defend us," In a breath, they formed up and jogged after Porthalen.

Sam slapped her hands onto the illusory wall. At her touch, the barrier vanished. The hoarcs inside only had time to get to their feet before a flash of magic from Jo-Jo turned them both into dust. Sam ran to the chained man and started to work at the bolts on one shackled wrist while Shilo started the other one.

The man groaned. His eyes partly opened, as if he sensed someone near him. "No, not again," he breathed.

"We're going to get you out," Sam told him gently.

His head lolled in her direction. Hate flared within his eyes so quickly and strongly it caused her to stop and gape at him. His lips curled back in a snarl.

"Not again!" he growled.

Sam backed off as he lunged, jerking at his chain. The feeling she got was clear--if he got hold of her he was going to kill her.

A heartbeat after waking, he jerked and flailed at his bonds so violently he knocked Shilo into the wall. Jo-Jo retreated a few steps, though not even near him. They backed off as he swung in half-circles, trying to yank himself free. Once more, he bellowed, "*Not again!*"

Shilo took a cautious step towards him. "Hey, pal, we came to save you." He stopped and ducked back as the man swung his foot at him. The foot slammed the wall, not that the chained man noticed.

Frieda got Sam's attention. "Try to make him stop. Hold onto him."

Sam nodded. She called up her anger and lashed out at his mind, intending to hold him in place. To her surprise, he snarled at her then planted his feet against the wall and shoved out as far as his chained arms would let him. Her will was not only cast from him but slammed back at her with rolling waves of hatred. She recoiled, afraid he just might snap those chains.

"I will never break!" he spat at her. "Never!" As hard as he had thrust out, he pulled himself back into the wall, snapping his head back as he hit. His head made a loud crack, and he slumped to dangle by the chains.

Shilo touched the back of his own head with a wince. "Ouch, I felt that."

"Get him down before he wakes," Frieda commanded.

Sam's eyes went wide. "No! He'll kill me if you do!"

Shilo started for him. "Once we get him down and explain it to him--"

"No!" Sam cried. "There is no explaining to him!" Terrified, she tried to plead with them. "He's been here so long he thinks everyone is an enemy. He's been tricked so many times, he won't believe anything you say."

"How can you know that?" Jo-Jo asked.

Sam put a shaking hand to her forehead--they had to believe her! "I felt it. If you let him go, I don't think you'll be able to stop him. He doesn't care if he lives, only if he can get his hands on me! He thinks I'm my mother."

"Sound's like he's a bit pissed," Shilo offered.

"We will deal with it. Get him down and bind his arms behind him," Frieda told him.

"Better make that legs, too," Shilo added. Looking at the bloody mat of hair on the back of the man's head, he asked, "Is he alive?"

Frieda looked at Sam, who nodded. "He just knocked himself out."

"Tough guy," Shilo said as he started to work on the cuff bolts. "A smack like that kills most folks."

Sounds of battle came from outside, followed by a crack of thunder. Frieda motioned to Sam and Jo-Jo. "Go out and help, we will take care of him."

Jo-Jo eyed the limp man. "You sure? If he wakes up, you might need help."

“He’s unconscious--go,” Shilo told him. “We’ll take care of Thump here.”

“Thump?” Frieda asked.

Shilo patted the man’s head. “Yeah, I heard a thump, didn’t you?”

Frieda glared at him. “Just help me get him down.”

Scorpio kept his crossbow shouldered, watching down the passage as Theo and Hutch dragged the elves back to their line. Porthalen’s empty stare told them he was dead, and another elf was deeply slashed and no longer had a heartbeat to pump out blood. The third one was still bleeding enough to show he was alive. Entaurus stood beside him, shifting to let the men past.

“See where they came from?” Scorpio asked.

Theo dropped the still-living elf by Odif so she could do what she could for him. Returning to stand by Scorpio, he said, “They came out of the wall, on the right. Those elves didn’t even know who got ’em.”

“Think that’s a single room like what’s behind us?”

“Who knows? There could be anything behind that wall.”

Squinting, Entaurus said, “I can make out the portal, now that I know what I’m looking for. I don’t see any others. If I get close enough, I can make it solid.”

Scorpio started moving slowly. “Theo, Hutch, come on. We’ll cover Entaurus while he casts.”

Scorpio got against the left wall and scanned the area through his bow sights as Theo and Hutch moved in front of Entaurus, their battleaxes poised to strike. They approached the portal slowly. A hoarc stuck its head out, and Scorpio put a bolt through it before it could pull back. It disappeared with a scream.

“They can’t see through the illusion either,” Scorpio realized as he cocked his weapon again.

No other hoarcs tried to come out. Entaurus slid along the wall the last few feet, reaching out with his fingers to touch the portal. In a low but strong voice, he cast his spell. The opening glowed for a second then faded.

“Done, solid rock,” he said with a sigh of relief.

“What if they go for help?” the last elf asked.

“Then they’ll ram into his wall,” Theo said, jerking a thumb at Entaurus.

“No one else scouts ahead,” Scorpio told them. “Entaurus will stay behind me and watch for more of these portals. We’ll put Jo-Jo in the back to keep them from sneaking up on us.”

The elf had a tear in his eye as he looked at the blood of his comrades pooling on the floor. “We’re all going to die, aren’t we?”

“That’s what Odif said, but there’s no need to rush it,” Scorpio told him. “Go see how Mother Frieda is doing.”

Shortly, Odif came running up, her face lit with excitement. She grabbed him by the front of his breastplate. Her eyes gleamed as she said, “We got him. I think we got him!”

Excitement was the last thing he expected to see from her in these tunnels of death. “Got who?”

Gathered around the limp wretch who was bound hands and feet in the passage, they looked down at him, not believing what Odif had told them.

“This is the Red Man?” Entaurus asked. “The all-powerful, mean-as-the-abyss bastard who kills vlaks?”

“He looks more like the beat-up man to me,” Shilo commented.

Odif moved his head toward Scorpio, brushing back the thick mop of hair. “Doesn’t he look a bit like Tayan?”

Scorpio shrugged. “He barely looks human. If he’s as wild as Sam says, maybe we better leave him here.”

Sam moved up a little closer behind Scorpio, peeking out from the side. “Odif, all reason has been tortured out of him. He is mad. I know that if he sees me he will come after me.”

“He wasn’t afraid to knock himself silly,” Shilo smirked then said more seriously, “He didn’t like Sam one bit. I think she’s right, Thump here is not safe to be around.”

Frieda spoke up. “We cannot, in good conscience, leave anyone.”

“We can’t fight and watch him, too,” Hutch complained.

“Yeah, so what are we going to do with Thump?” Shilo asked.

Odif shot him a glare. “His name is Eric!”

“He *might* be Eric,” Scorpio reminded her. “How will we know if he is?”

“Sam can get into his mind and find out,” she told him.

Sam shook her head. “Oh, no, not again. When he comes to, I’m hiding. I can’t stress this enough--he really wants me dead.”

“Well, the question right now is, who’s going to carry him?” Scorpio asked. “We need to keep moving before anyone finds us.”

Frieda motioned to Shilo. “Carry him, stay behind me. Sam, you keep in the front so he can’t see you.”

Sam gripped Scorpio’s arm and looked at him pleadingly. He patted her hand and tried to smile. “Don’t

worry, I'll keep him away from you."

"I hope so," she said weakly.

Shilo gave a huff and hoisted the unconscious man across his shoulders with Odif's help. He winced as she accidentally pinned one of his wings to his back, but managed to free it without damage. "Why do I get the dead weight?"

"Shut up, that's my father," she snapped.

Shilo settled the weight across his shoulders. "*Could be* your father," he stressed.

"Let's move," Frieda scolded.

They traveled long enough for hunger to start gnawing at them. They passed two more illusion-disguised entrances, which Entaurus turned into rock before they went on. A few hundred yards farther, the passage opened up into a natural cave. A split showed one side went on and the other angled up. Investigating, they found the one that angled up only went another bowshot before it ended.

Tired and hungry, they went up the dead end. Hutch discovered airflow from thin cracks in one wall. This time, Jo-Jo sealed them in so they could rest without being disturbed. Odif made a bright yellow light, splashing it onto an overhead stalagmite, causing the rock to glow.

"We won't suffocate, and we can make a fire," Hutch said cheerily.

"Hot food!" Theo grinned.

Frieda shook her head. "No fire. We do nothing else to attract attention."

Much to their dismay, they sat down to cold jerky and hard bread. As they ate, Shilo sat cross-legged by the man he called Thump. Every now and then, he'd give him a poke to see if he was coming around. Sam sat behind Scorpio and Odif, staying quiet and doing her best to mask her presence. Theo and Hutch settled down by Shilo.

Hutch picked up Thump's axe and hefted it. The heavy blades were curved around to touch at the top, and the metal shone as bright as silver. "This is a real good axe," he said, turning it over. "The handle has bloodstains, but there's not a chip in the blade."

Shilo shrugged. "Maybe he bled on it."

"It's magic, I can sense it from here," Jo-Jo told him.

Tracing a scrape in the handle, Hutch showed it to Theo. "What you think, stone or bone?"

Theo inspected it. "Bone, definitely."

Gloredaniel cast a look at the man. "How can we tell who this is?"

"When he wakes up, I'll ask him," Shilo said then poked him again. "Hey, Thump, you got a name?"

"Shilo, stop that!" Odif growled. She got up and walked over, plopping herself between them. She

stroked the man's hair, her eyes boring into the winged man. "I will talk to him when he wakes up."

"Good luck," he snorted.

He heard the voices and came awake when he was poked. He didn't know what torture it had for him this time—it had never done anything like this before. This was a new trick. It couldn't buy him with riches and hadn't broken him with torture. He felt the hand on his head--was it going to try to seduce him again?

Instead of moving, he lay still and tried to absorb what was being said. The voices sounded human, except one female. That one was lighter and familiar, like someone he'd once known. The conversation came and went in spurts, but he got the idea they were hunting for something. A man said something about he couldn't be the one, but they had to rescue him, anyway. Another man called him Thump.

Rescue? That had to be it. The demon was trying to make him believe someone had come here to free him. She had tried everything to make him break the pact by force, now she had sunk to a new low. The knot on his wrists was within reach. He thought about the pact, all the things he couldn't do. The demon was devious, but now it had made a mistake. He could not hurt her minions, but nothing stopped him from hurting her. He ran the pact through his mind over and over to make sure he didn't make a mistake that could get his family killed as he slowly worked at the knot.

He stopped as someone poked him again. "Hey, Thump, you with us yet, buddy?"

"Shilo, enough!" a woman said and slapped the one who had spoken to him.

He kept still until he was sure they were back to talking then slipped one wrist out of the ropes. He couldn't reach his feet without moving. He would have to play along with the game long enough to get those free.

He had been in pain so long that a crack in the head was of almost no consequence; but he groaned loudly and shifted, curling his feet up so his hands could reach the rope.

Excitement filled the cave. The people by him jumped up, someone told another he'd protect her. He opened his eyes to face two dark men holding battleaxes ready to strike. On one side of them was a muscular woman in skimpy, tattered clothes and on the other side a man with wings. A stocky woman in brown robes and a man in a blue one embroidered with silver designs blocked his view of the others. Two more, a man and a small woman with pointed ears came closer to help block his view.

The woman in tattered shorts and shirt moved cautiously towards him, holding out one hand as if to keep him still. "We are friends, we mean you no harm."

Yeah, right. "Who are you?"

The woman knelt in front of him. She had the nerve to look anxious as she said, "I'm your daughter, Odif. This is Theo, Hutch, Shilo..."

He listened as she went on. He glanced at the people as she introduced them but paid more attention to the chamber. It looked larger, but was still the same closed-off box he had always been in. Beyond the robes of the line of people, he saw two more pairs of feet farther back. One set was metal-shod, as a

knight's would be; the other wore leather.

"Who're they?" he asked, nodding towards them.

"Two of my friends," Odif explained. "I need your help. Can we trust you?"

"Sure." They could trust him--until he worked his feet free.

Slowly, she started to reach behind his back as she watched him. "I am going to untie you, stay calm."

He nodded, carefully plotting his move. He could not hurt them, and he wasn't going to.

When she was bending over his knees to reach his hands, he sprang into action. Jerking the rope loose, he brought up a leg and planted a foot in her chest. Her face registered surprise as she sailed backwards into the robed men. She was quick--she grabbed his leg but only ripped off a piece of pants leg in her flight.

Scooping up two handfuls of dirt, he threw them at the robed women and dark men. As the dirt flew, he pushed off the wall and tackled the winged man.

One of the two he couldn't see had to be the demon. Battling his way up, he grabbed the elven female by the front of her robe. Despite being hauled around, she gripped his arm and spoke a few strong words. Pain filled his arm as electric arcs shot from her fingers. He ignored the pain and swung her around to send her flying back into the men trying to grab him. The one called Odif was on her feet and running at him. Directly ahead, an armored man stood in front of someone, brandishing his sword. He caught sight of a piece of leathery wing--there it was!

He dove for the man, grabbing the top and bottom edges of his armor. The man stabbed him deep in the stomach. Odif and the demon screamed. He echoed the scream, planting his feet to fling the man into Odif.

It stood before him, wide-eyed and screeching a terrified howl. He jerked the sword from his stomach and grabbed the demon by her hair. Twisting around so his back was to the wall, he put the sword to her throat and pressed.

"You want to see it die?" he growled.

Odif was getting to her feet again, as was Scorpio. They all gaped at him, fear in their eyes.

He jerked the demon's head back and pressed the blade in far enough that blood appeared. "Show me the way out, now!"

The heavy-set woman straightened and looked him in the eye. "You will put that down, and let her go."

"You must think me a fool!" he spat. "Show me the way out or I'll give you its head!"

"No!" Odif yelled, stepping closer. "We are your friends--please, trust me."

He bent the demon's head back and growled in its ear. "Trust, huh? Let me out or die here."

The demon kept up her disguise well. Shivering in fear, she blubbered, "I can't! Please don't kill me!"

“That is not the demon!” Scorpio cried. “That is Sam, her daughter.”

He had to grin at how foolish the man sounded. “My daughter, its daughter--couldn’t you come up with better lies than that?”

“It’s the truth!” Odif cried. “Let her go, and let us help you. You’re bleeding to death.”

Death, now there was an amusing thought. “Then maybe I should kill it now.”

The brown-robed woman pointed at him and spoke firmly. “By Leighna’s light, let her go!”

He felt his hands twitch. For a second, his grip loosened. In that second, the demon grabbed his sword arm and pushed, slipping out from under his grasp. He tried grabbing her, but she flew into Shilo’s arms. The dark men closed in front of her, and the robed men now faced him. Odif came at him from the left. He swung too soon on purpose, slamming the sword into the wall. His bluff worked, she stopped and backed off.

The demon was now wrapped in Shilo’s embrace, crying hysterically. Her minions closed around her, watching him. Any chance he had of getting to her was gone. The only good thing was that no one was coming close.

Odif moved to face him, her arms out to the sides. He followed her with his sword but kept his eyes open for trouble from the group. Behind her, the man in armor tried to pull her back.

“Get away from him!” he said, pulling on one arm.

Odif twisted free. “Get back!” she barked. Moving slowly towards him, she kept her arms out, even though he pointed his sword at her heart. “Please, listen to me.”

He laid the tip of his sword over her left breast. “Don’t move,” he growled.

She swallowed hard but didn’t back off. “I know you will not kill me.”

Of course, it would have told them to let him hurt them. He couldn’t kill her. He couldn’t even cut her. The way she acted, though, she wasn’t sure if he would or not. Maybe this was part of the game. If they let on somehow that this was a trick then they couldn’t get him to believe it.

“Give me one good reason why.”

Odif spoke slowly. “I am your daughter. We have come to destroy the demon that held you prisoner.”

“Damn it, Odif, get away from him!” the man in armor cried.

The way the man said it, he was truly afraid Eric was going to kill her. The deception made him grin. “You really want me to believe this isn’t a trick.”

“This is no trick,” she stated.

The man in the blue robe with silver symbols took a step forward, glaring at him. “You hurt her, and I will kill you!”

He returned the glare. "Do it!"

Odif turned her head. "No! Entaurus, back off!"

"Enough games!" he roared, which made Odif spin back to him. "What's next?" he snapped. "More little knives if I don't go along with you?"

Odif studied him for a few seconds. Her face softened, becoming sad. "You don't believe we're friends, and nothing we can do will convince you."

"Convince me by leaving."

"I know what holds you," she said quietly. "My brother, your son, is dead. Your wife is safe in Tolina. The demon no longer has any power over you."

He pushed the sword enough to dent her skin. "Then nothing is lost if I run you through?"

Odif stiffened herself. "Only that I will die. If that is what it takes to convince you I'm telling the truth then so be it," She reached up and moved the point more towards the center of her chest, laying the tip on bare skin. "Right here, you'll split my heart. That seems only right."

In a chorus of cries, some shouted for her to get away, others pleaded for her life. She didn't move; she just looked him in the eye, waiting to be killed. It was all very convincing, but he wasn't going to be taken in. His memory was nothing but spotted dreams and nightmares, a collection of images from his tortured mind and bits of lies the demon had fed him. The only thing he felt was right was that, somewhere, he did have a wife. The elven woman reminded him of someone, possibly her. The woman in front of him was far too tall and muscular to be the child of an elf.

"If I got a daughter, you ain't her," he said quietly. He slid along the wall, distancing himself from her and the others. "I've had enough of this."

He flipped the sword around to point at his own chest then fell forward. Odif screamed and dove for him. She knocked him to the side and kicked the handle of the sword so it fell flat. Before he could grab for it, she kicked it away then dove on him. He grappled with her, trying to get her off. For a woman, she was incredibly strong. She got behind him and struggled to pin his arms behind his back as she called for the others to help her.

More of them piled on him as he struggled to get away. He knew what always happened after its tricks. Chains and more torture waited if he was awake enough to scream. He vowed not to be. Flailing about, he got one arm free and shoved up hard, gaining his knees. Four people were on him now, and the rock jutted out of the floor just ahead. He shoved with both legs and a scream of determination. He and the pile on him lurched and came down hard. His aim was good--the rock caught him on the side of the head, the weight on him did the rest.

Odif shoved Scorpio and Hutch off Eric. She rolled him over and laid her hand over the bloody side of his head. Mending his cracked skull then his stomach, seemed easy. She thought briefly about bringing him to consciousness then decided against it.

“I don’t believe it,” Scorpio panted weakly. “I ran him through, did you see? I ran him through and it didn’t even slow him down.”

“I sent lightning through his arm, and look how much good that did,” Gloredaniel huffed. “I don’t even think he felt it.”

Hutch sat up to glare at Odif. “And you heal him so he can do it again!”

Odif glared back at him. “We have to make him understand!”

Frieda sighed and folded her arms over her chest. “So much for not drawing attention to ourselves.”

“You do not understand!” Sam wailed from Shilo’s embrace. She held her bleeding neck, her face white with terror. “That man has been here a long time! Look at him—he is covered with scars. Pain no longer means anything to him.” She sent a mental picture to Odif. “I once saw someone who was tortured so long he didn’t even know it when she cut him open. She roasted him alive, and he was happy to be dying. This man is in the same condition!”

Odif gasped. The others didn’t see the image, but they still winced at Sam’s description.

“How long do you think he’s been down here?” Jo-Jo asked.

Sam gazed at him. She got the feeling what she was saying was starting to sink in. “To build up resistance to pain like that, many years.”

“Possibly twenty?” he asked, thinking of the knights’ failed attempt many years before.

“If someone has done something to anger her enough, that is quite possible,” Sam said. Looking at Odif she added, “Take a good look at him—that could be our fate.”

Odif sat thinking. “If he has been down here that long then he can’t be my father. Erica is only just over a year old, and the attack on King Alderlan’s caravan was about two years ago.” Disappointment filled her. She thought she had found the key to defeating the demon. All they had found was a mad knight. Silently, she cursed herself and Thump for not being who she thought he was.

“The Knights of Paladnia used to wear shirts like what he’s got on,” Gloredaniel offered. “There is still the question of what to do with him.”

Odif took a deep breath. “I’ll take care of him and see he doesn’t hurt anyone.”

Scorpio laid a hand on her arm. “I’m sorry he’s not your dad. I was kind of hoping he was.”

She gave him a half-smile. “Me, too.”

He awoke in another cave. This one was open on the end. Through the opening, he saw bits of light here and there high up. Below, a smooth dark surface reflected the lights. The reflections shimmered as small wavelets passed. He was bound tightly, not just his hands and feet this time but the length of his forearms where they crossed, his upper arms to his chest and the entire length of his legs wrapped tight. There would be no freeing himself this time.

In the cave with him were two people. The outline of one told him it was Odif. The other he wasn't sure about, but he thought it was the demon. He just had time to register these things when Odif looked over at him.

"Sam, he's awake. Join the others."

The demon got up to leave, and he made out the stubby wings on its back. Odif got up and moved over to sit by him. "How are you feeling?"

He didn't answer, so she kept on. "I healed you, and I'm the one who tied you up. We've been traveling most of a day, though down here it's hard to tell." She pulled at a loop of rope on his chest. "We carried you by this. I'm glad you didn't wake up when we went through the other cavern. We killed a few hoarcs, but I don't think they know we came this way. From what I can tell, they still think we're down in the southern caverns."

"Let me guess--you're going to drive me insane with endless chatter," he sneered.

She looked down at him and shook her head. "No, but I will sit here and make you understand that we are not your enemy."

"Then stick me with knives."

Odif dropped her head in her hands then combed her hair back with a groan. "I know it must be tough to believe anything. I want to try something, but I will need your cooperation."

He looked around to see if anyone else was in the cave with them. Towards the back, he thought he saw a wall in the gloom but wasn't sure. If only there weren't so many damn ropes on him, he might be able to do something.

"Will it hurt to talk to me?"

"Might." He noted that he wasn't near anything he could use for leverage. He had no way to fight or defend himself.

"Can you tell me who you are?"

He looked at her--that was a good question. He knew pain and the demon's tricks, but he had lost his identity. What his name was, or even if he had one, he didn't know.

"No," he said quietly.

She touched his cheek. "You don't know, do you?"

"All I know is pain. It comes, and no matter what it promises or how nice it speaks, the visit always ends in pain. Just as this will," he stated.

Odif looked down at his emotionless face. His eyes held a defiance that said no matter how many times he was hurt he would never give in. "How long have you been here?"

"Can't remember anything else. You tell me."

“I’ll try, if you let me,” she offered. She leaned over him. The soft look on her face, the way her hair hung down to tickle his cheeks, even the soft touch of her hands on his face felt very comforting. He looked up at her and began to feel something. He started thinking about the place he had been kept then the time the thing had taken him to a hot bath and given him good food. Too late, he realized she was in his head.

This was a trick! He remembered when it had come to him before, acting very soft and nice. It had made itself look very attractive and kissed him, trying to arouse him. He forced himself back to see the woman above him as just another enemy. He glared at her. “I will never break!”

Odif jerked back as she was thrown out of his head. The latent image of the demon seducing him stayed with her. “Dear Goddess, she did that to you?”

“I’m not fool enough to have it happen twice,” he growled. “Go tell that thing it will never, ever win.”

“That’s right, it won’t,” she agreed. “I came to kill it.”

He gave a snorting laugh. “Yeah, right.”

“You want it dead, I want it dead. Why can’t you see I’m on your side?” she asked. “You could have killed me, but you didn’t. Somewhere inside, you know I’m telling the truth.”

This was becoming another game, and he wasn’t going to play. “I can’t hurt you because you work for it. I swore never to hurt any of its minions, you know that! I never gave such a promise not to hurt the thing itself. If you’re on my side then bring it here.”

Sam walked in, staying clear of his reach. She sent a thought to Odif to let her speak. Odif looked at her and nodded. She stood at his feet, looking into his hate-filled eyes.

“You are correct, we were its minions. I was to trick you, find out everything you knew then cast you back into your cell; but not until you fully understood everything we promised would never happen.”

“I knew it!” he growled in triumph.

“I want more than to be second-best,” she added. “I want its power. Like you, I took an oath--I cannot kill it,” She squatted at his feet to get as close as she dared. “I need you to do that for me. I get you there; you kill it. Once it is dead, we’ll see what happens next.”

Of all the stories he had been fed, this was the most believable. That also meant it was too good to be true. “How can I know you’re not lying?”

Sam traced her neck where he had cut her. “You cut me, do you remember? If I were still the demon’s minion then you would no longer be able to resist. You would have broken your word. If I were the demon herself, I wouldn’t waste my time hauling you through these caverns.”

His mouth dropped open. She was right. The demon had told him he would know if he broke the pact. He had cut her, and yet the pact wasn’t broken. “Why do you trust me?”

“I don’t,” she stated. “I am afraid of you. You tried to kill me once, and there is nothing that can stop you from doing it again.”

“So, why bother telling me this?”

“I can’t win without you. The other evil things we can destroy, but not her.”

“I can’t raise a hand to help,” he told her.

“Against the other minions, no. We clear the path and get you to her. Then she’s all yours. I will stay by you, and any time you feel I’ve trapped you you can kill me.”

OK, this was starting to make sense. He flicked his eyes at Odif. “Who’s she, really?”

“My sister.”

That made sense to him. “And the others?”

“Mercenaries, others who want me to be in charge. They will not betray us.”

He tried to think of any way the thing could be making this happen. He couldn’t find one. He had cut the demon in front of him, and he hadn’t broken his pact. Compared to the other, she didn’t seem that powerful. In fact, she looked a bit scared. This might be an act, but if he was to ever have a chance at truly being free this might be the only one.

“All right. I’ll help you try to kill it. Trick me, and your head will be on the floor before you know you lost it.”

“Fair enough,” she said with a squeak then nodded to Odif. She left as Odif started removing his bonds. He lay still until he was free then sat and rubbed the sore spots while she gathered up the rope. He noticed that he felt much better; nowhere did he hurt. He was just weak from being chained for so long. He started to get up, but Odif stopped him.

“Wait, we’re not finished here yet,” she told him.

Sitting back down, he waited. When she was done with the rope, she squatted before him. “I thought you were someone you’re not. Sam explained to me that you were hurt for so long pain no longer affected you, even when Scorpio ran you through.”

“Yeah,” he said, wondering what this was leading to.

“You’re weak from captivity. I have a ritual to make you stronger, but you must cooperate,” she explained. “It does involve sex, and you have to react naturally. I am not seducing you. I’m only trying to help our chances at success.”

“What are our chances?”

“Poor,” she admitted. “Unless we do find my father, we’ll probably all be killed.”

“I ain’t afraid to die.”

“Me, either,” she sighed. Crossing her arms, she pulled the remains of her shirt up and over her head. “Let’s use this ritual to live, just for the moment.”

Scorpio should have seen it coming. Sam returned to let them know Thump was going to help them. Lacking a better name for him, they went with what Shilo called him. Not long after Sam had settled down, Odif's first soft moans drifted from the cave. He tried not to hear it. Then Thump's moans joined hers in a chorus. He gave it a few minutes of pretending not to hear as the noises slowly got louder.

At Odif's first cries of "Yes! Yes!" he decided to go off for a while. Theo and Hutch went with him, smirks on their faces. Sam jumped up and came as well.

He walked around a curve, but the noises followed them. Looking back, he asked Sam, "You're positive that Thump isn't her father, right?"

Sam nodded. "She told me my mother fed off him. When she feeds, she eats your soul. There is nothing left but the body."

The sounds were punctuated by a yelp. Right after that, a rougher male cry sounded. Scorpio thought about going back but noticed the cries hadn't stopped there. They had died down, but from the sounds of it, they were far from stopping.

"You gotta be kidding," he huffed. Not wanting to be too far from the group, he started to wander back, slowly.

He sat through another round of yelps and a screech of glee as he told Frieda there was nothing on the banks of the underground lake but bank. It was all he could do to keep from screaming at them to at least shut up. Focusing on the crude map Sam had drawn, he went over how they were going to get through the underground town, and everything everyone was tasked to do. Their plan was set. All they were waiting for was Odif and Thump to finally get worn out.

His head rested on her chest as he gasped for air. Her rapid heartbeat and the sound of her lungs filled his ear. She stroked him and asked breathlessly, "Feel better?"

The sound of her voice echoed deep in her chest.

"Yeah," he gasped. "Much better. Think we sealed the change?"

"Sealed it? I think we cast it in iron," she chuckled.

He laughed with her then struggled up on one elbow. Looking down on her sweaty face, he was reminded of someone else long ago who had made him feel as good. He didn't remember what she looked like, only that she had been his whole world.

"If we do survive, and I do get out of here, will you help me find my wife?"

Shifting up on one elbow to face him, she grabbed his chin and shook it playfully. "I'll do what I can. I have to meet the woman who can keep up with you."

He didn't know if she meant it, but the compliment sounded sincere. "That was just the ritual, right?"

“Must have been. Come on, we have to join the others now.”

He did feel stronger; and despite wearing himself out, he felt refreshed. Other than a little shakiness in his legs, he felt like a new man. Untangling from her, he got his clothes on and followed her out. Only ten feet below the entrance, the rest of the group was gathered. All eyes except Scorpio’s were on them as they picked their way down the bank.

Seeing Sam brought him back to why Odif had done what she did. He walked over to her and sat down. “You know the deal. Where’s my axe?”

“I got it,” Hutch said and handed him the weapon handle first.

“Hey, Thump, you know whose side you’re on, right?” Shilo asked cautiously.

Frowning, he asked, “Thump?”

“We have to call you something,” Theo grinned.

Shilo waved a finger at him. “You were called Thump back in the old days. Don’t you remember when you used to get drunk and knock out horses? That’s how you got the name.”

“I did? What’s my real name then?”

Shilo shrugged. “All I knew you by was Thump.”

Odif shot Shilo a glare. “He has a real name!”

“Do you know what it is?” Shilo countered.

“Thump’s fine.” He shrugged. What did it matter what he was called?

Shilo squeezed a fist and hissed, “Yes!”

“It’s settled,” Frieda stated as she eyed Shilo. “Thump, you’ll be just ahead of me, beside Scorpio...”

“I’m staying by her,” he said, indicating Sam.

“I should be in front, anyway,” Sam offered.

Frieda sighed. “Scorpio, you are in charge of keeping any distractions away from Odif and I. Odif, you do nothing but keep the demon from casting magic. I will keep its other powers at bay until I can sprinkle it and the altar with holy water. Sam, you will stay by me. Thump, you can stay by Sam and protect us from the side...”

“I can’t do that,” he told her. “The only thing I can do is attack the demon.”

“He can’t harm anyone but my mother,” Sam explained. “We have to keep him in the middle.”

Thump frowned at her. “Your mother?”

Sam nodded. "That's right."

"Who's your dad?" he asked, trying to imagine two demons.

"Just a man she tricked then tortured," she replied. "We are the only ones who can stop her."

"So you can become like she is."

Sam's nose flared. "No, I will never be like her. I can't stand what she does to innocent men like you."

He partly felt like he was becoming involved in just another elaborate game. Some elements were not making any sense. However, he had cut her, and the pact wasn't broken. During their mating, Odif had restored his strength. He highly doubted the demon would let that happen. If these were, indeed, rebels then they were still his best chance.

He wasn't sure who was in charge here. So far, it seemed three people were. He shifted his gaze to Odif then the one they called Frieda. "Let's go kill it."

Aliana stood staring at the chains hanging from the wall. Her food slave had escaped. By the hoarc dust on the floor, he had to have broken the pact, but she would have felt it if he did.

"Impossible," she breathed. *How in the abyss did he get away?*

She went into the passage. Hoarc dust littered the floor out here, also. Besides the hoarc dust, she found a few bodies lying along the wall. Pulling one up by the hair, she saw it was elven. Throwing this one to the side, she checked the others. All three were elves. Picking one up, she looked at it closely. When she had found her daughter in the company of Odif, she was sure this one had been with them.

A smile crept onto her face--they were here.

Flying through the caves in spirit form, she found other traces of their passing. That arrogant bitch was planning to fight her in her own territory; she couldn't have planned this better herself!

She called the lead hoarcs together to block offshoot tunnels and start driving the intruders closer to her temple. In the underground city she had the main tunnel to her temple packed with defenders. She knew the druid would get through, but leaving it empty would arouse her suspicions. The vlaks at the entrance to her temple she sent into rooms to each side. Her worry wasn't that Odif and her band would get in, only that they might escape once she had them.

Her next stop was her throne room. She recalled Lura and Grief and sent for her best warriors. She was still waiting for Grief to show up when Lash came in, hobbling on a crutch.

His armor was dented and bloodied, and one leg was in splints. The men with him helped him to stand in front of her. He bowed his head and began rattling before she even acknowledged him.

"Master, we have a serious problem at the lake. Our forces are being beaten back by large metal machines. We ambushed Zodiac, and his army was all but wiped out; then here come these things and--"

"Stop!" she commanded. "Did you kill Zodiac?"

He paused. "Yes, I unhorsed him then ran him down myself. He is the least of our worries!"

She glared at him, which froze him in place. "Do you forget who you are speaking to?"

"No, Master," he whined.

"What are these machines, and where did they come from?"

Lash slowed his speech. "They came from the east. There are larger ones and smaller ones, but every one shoots--we think they're rocks, but they go so fast they kill anything. An entire regiment of cavalry was wiped out by two of them in the time it takes to blink your eye. We fought back with spears, but the spears didn't have any effect on them. The worst damage we did was to knock one of the smaller ones off its wheels. Vlaks didn't fare any better. The ones they didn't kill with rocks they just ran over!"

"They must have a weakness," she insisted.

He waved an arm. "I'm having a long trench dug at the north end of the lake, banking the dirt on our side. Those things look very heavy; we hope they'll get stuck trying to climb up the loose dirt walls."

"Master, we still have dragons to attack from above," one of the other men added.

Aliana lazily pointed a finger at the man. "You, build the best defense you can. Let these machines come to you behind the trench Lash started. When they attack, send dragons at them from above. Make a raid tonight across the lake, find out what it will take to stop them."

"Yes, Master," the man said with a bow, and left.

"Lura, take care of Lash and give him back his manhood. After you're done, bring him to the temple."

"Yes, Master." Lura bowed.

"Thank you, Master," Lash said with sigh of relief.

Aliana's original plan was to kill most of Odif's group, saving only her daughter and a couple others to bring a few demons from the abyss. These machines were a new threat as long as they were fighting against her. They would serve her well if she could capture them. To do so, she would need many demons, and that meant many souls to send into the abyss so the demons could come forth into their bodies. Her own slaves would not gain Lucifer's favor enough to get the strongest demons. Her daughter, and live enemies cast down, would gain that favor.

As she pondered how to do it, Grief arrived. One of her guards explained the situation to him.

"Grief, find my daughter in the caves below. I want to know exactly where they are and how many are with her. Once you have that information, meet us in the temple."

"Yes, Master. What of these machines? They could very well make it to the city."

She waved her hand, dismissing the thought. "The city is nothing; my daughter being caught alive is everything."

Grief pressed his point. "Master, we have much invested in the city. If we lose it, it will take years to recover. The war in Elrad needs the spears and creatures we make here."

Her first impulse was to smash him across the face for questioning her, but he was right--they did need the city to keep sending Hans his weapons.

There was one sure way to stop these infernal machines. Before she began creating vlaks and pilgyns, she had used to cast magic into arrows that allowed them to pass through steel to strike flesh. It was ironic that for all the power she commanded now, it took a simple spell to stop her enemy.

"I will take care of the machines. Gather the best bowmen we have."

Tayan stood atop the command shack, shielding his eyes from the late-afternoon sun. In the distance, he saw a dragon flying low. It dropped to the ground miles ahead. Searching the sky, he found another one heading for the same area. They were landing on this side of the lake, apparently summoned to help the retreating enemy.

General Cooper called up to him. "M'lord, all the wagons that still operate have full water tanks. We're using the wood from the disabled ones to fill the bins. We will be ready to go tomorrow morning."

He looked down at the general, who was leaning out one of the windows. "How many did we lose?"

"Captain Nyles's battlewagon is stuck in that fort, wedged on a mound. One tractor is on its side, and another has been too badly damaged to repair. The damage to the others is minimal--bent plates and broken track belts."

Tayan had seen the one tractor go up--a spear had gone through a window, exploding inside. The steel plating had been ripped apart, killing the men inside instantly. Considering all the spears that had been thrown at them, they had come through the battle very well. Today's fight was over, though, and he was thinking about the one to come.

"There are dragons to the north, so keep a boiler hot on each wagon. Pass the word to sleep in shifts and maintain a good watch. They'll probably come at us after dark."

"Yes, M'lord," the general said, and disappeared inside.

On the wagon below him, Ellie stood beside one gun barrel with her head laid against it. Tracks in the black scorch marks left by spears' landing on the casing showed where she had walked on her inspection of the cannons. She called into the command shack, "Captain Angler, the right cannon is bent. I don't think it will be much good past three hundred yards."

"Very well," he called back. "Note it and use it accordingly."

The turret hatch opened, and Bart stuck his head out. "Ellie! We have two good sighting units, where do you want them?"

"Left and middle," she told him. "Hang on, I'm coming down."

Although Tayan waved to her, Ellie pretended not to see him. She kept her gaze fixed on the hatch.

After she was in, she slammed it shut.

“Lord Tayan! Governor Stazor and Lord Zodiac are here!” someone yelled from the ground.

He climbed down from the roof onto the main body. Walking to the edge, he swung onto the ladder and joined the knot of men waiting for him.

Stazor was first to shake his hand. “Lord Tayan, I must say you proved me wrong about these wagons. I was never so glad to see such ugly piles of metal.”

“I’m sure General Cooper appreciates that.” He smiled back then, offering his hand to Zodiac, said, “Good to see you. Tell Odif I have my bent stick up in the command shack.”

Zodiac’s grin faded. “We’re glad to see you. I’m afraid Odif isn’t here.”

“She’s gone scouting?”

Zodiac took a deep breath. “She split from our army weeks ago, took half the Company with her. She was heading straight for the city. I tried to stop her, but you know how she gets.”

“Why would she do a dumb thing like that?”

Zodiac shook his head sadly. “She insisted that she had to fight the demon herself. Gloredaniel came by to let us know they had already made contact. She also told us you were dead. If I know Odif, she’s going right into the demon’s lair.”

He knew Odif, too--when she got an idea in her head there was no changing her mind. A sick feeling began to rise in his stomach. “She’s keeping it busy for us,” he suggested hopefully.

“Until it kills her,” Zodiac finished. “She told me she knows it will. She believes that’s the only way to stop it.”

“By getting herself killed. Please tell me why she thinks that.”

Zodiac leaned against the side of the wagon, propping his crutch in front of him. He blew out a tired breath. “Our wizards had a vision. Odif took it to mean you and her would try to kill the demon, and fail. Once that happened then it would be destroyed by the third hammer.”

Tayan’s legs felt weak. Because of a vision, she was running out to commit suicide. He gripped the ladder with one hand. He wanted to scream, he wanted to find her and beat the daylights out of her for even thinking she needed to die just to fulfill some damned vision. “When was the last time you heard from them?”

“Gloredaniel visited us two days ago. The demon came, and they beat it off. Best I can figure, they’re ahead of us, off to the west.”

He knew Odif could be pigheaded at times. Hopefully, she hadn’t walked off by herself. “Who’s with her?”

“My brother,” Zodiac snorted. “He was the first to follow her. Jo-Jo, Entaurus, Gloredaniel with a half-dozen elves, Theo, Hutch, Shilo and Mother Frieda. They have a decent group, but if they run into

things like we have..." He let Tayan pick up on the rest of that thought.

Tayan did. "They're in deep shit," he sighed. "Who do we have left?"

"You, me, Duncan, Glier and Pynlee. Zit is off getting more help, if he's still alive."

"Damn," he breathed. He was thinking of a way to get them together, but by what Zodiac told him there weren't that many of them left. For the first time in a long while, the Company was too weak to be an effective fighting force. All he had was General Cooper and his machines.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cooper come down and stand beside him. "General, get every machine you can ready to move at midnight. I want to be in that city in the morning."

General Cooper gave him a wry smile, "M'lord, we need daylight to travel by."

"We'll make light. Every wagon that can't travel will stay back with everyone we don't bring," Tayan commanded. "As soon as you can tomorrow attack those defenses they're putting up."

"What about support?" Cooper asked. "Surely you don't plan to leave the smiths behind."

"Get all the towed wagons behind the tractors that can move. Fill them with bowmen. Anyone of elven heritage who can drive, does."

"Do you mean to take cavalry?" Stazor asked.

"No, just wagons and men. We'll be pushing these wagons as fast as they'll go." Seeing the looks of disbelief, he explained his tactic. "The army just north of us is expecting a standard head-to-head battle. After we punch through, they'll be chasing after us. That will break them up as well as draw off the dragons."

"Makes sense," Zodiac agreed. "You are thinking of the fight and not trying to find Odif? I know what kind of relationship you have with her."

He knew Zodiac was trying not to give away the fact Odif was his sister. Although she made him so angry he could rip her head off from time to time, she needed his help. He felt that at least he could admit who she was.

"My sister," he stressed, "has gotten herself into a mess, and only she can pull herself out. I am going to wreak havoc on that city and bring it to the ground. If what I do helps her, so much the better."

Zodiac looked satisfied with his explanation. "All right. We'll follow through in the morning. The priests should be done by then, and we now have this fort to hold any who have to stay behind."

"Excuse me, M'lords," General Cooper said carefully. "We can't see well, we are not fully prepared and everyone is tired from the day's fighting. No one follows an all-day battle with another the very same night. This is a terrible time to launch an attack"

Tayan eyed him. "That is exactly why we must."

It had been dark for hours when Tayan addressed the wagon crews. Sitting on the bank by the road with a long line of machines behind them, the crews looked worn. Their faces, however, showed

excitement.

The moon was out, and the sky was clear--not the best conditions for a surprise attack, but it would help them see. He noted Amber sat beside Ellie with Captain Angler's crew. They talked, as did many others, until he climbed up onto the buckboard used for a speaking platform. Waiting for the conversations to die out, he scanned the line of machines. Three battlewagons led a line of six tractors. Behind each tractor were three towed wagons filled with men waiting for him to speak.

"I want everyone to know what we're doing so there will be no misunderstanding once we start out," he called loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Each wagon that can move will stay on the road. If your wagon becomes disabled, get off to the side so others may pass. If your wagon is too badly damaged to shut yourselves in, get out and wait for the last tractor--it will slow down so you can get on.

"The flag system will not work at night, so keep a close eye on the wagon in front of you. The first two lead wagons have bottles of lamp oil that will be thrown to help light the way when they are needed. We will be moving fast and loud. When we hit the enemy's defenses, we keep going. Cannon crews, use maximum spread to your barrels and use bucket shot only. Shoot at will--if you see something in the dark, blast it. Side cannon men and tractor cannon men, get as many shots as you can into the enemy as we go by. They have dragons; but unless they are close, just shoot at groups and dark areas where groups may be hiding.

"Once we're past their lines, all steam will be used to move faster. There will be another short briefing for the Wagon Captains before we go into the city."

He looked over the group then yelled, "Mount up!"

He jumped down and started towards the lead wagon. The crew hesitated, letting him catch up. To his surprise, Ellie walked over to him with Amber by her side.

"I'm counting on you," he told her as she continued beside him.

She nodded stiffly, rubbing her hand over the stump of her wrist. "I am sorry for being angry with you. All I saw was you didn't want me anymore. Sister Amber told me that if you didn't care about me you would not want me to have a better life."

He glanced at Amber and gave her a smile. "She's right. That's what friends do for each other."

"I have many friends now, and I am important," she continued. "I would never have that, if it wasn't for you."

He put an arm around her and gave her a hug. "I'm glad you're happy."

Ellie hugged him back. "If you ever need anything, let me know."

"Right now, just have good aim," he told her.

She cast him a smile and started to move off. "I have to get back to my crew."

He waved to her, and she waved back, all smiles. Amber, who was walking slightly behind him, caught up and grinned. "Felt good, didn't it?"

“Very good.” He was glad to have Amber here--then it hit him. “What are you doing here?”

“Each wagon has a priest. I am yours.”

He hadn’t thought about risking her life. She had decided to go, so he knew trying to send her back was pointless.

“Keep your head down,” he told her firmly. Wracking his brains, he figured out the safest place in the wagon. Boilers could be split open, the command shack could be hit, as could the turret; and the front where the bowmen sat was an invitation to be killed. “If no one is hurt, stay in between the water tanks. It’s small and warm, but safe,” Anticipating her reaction, he quickly added, “If you get hurt then who will heal the others?”

The way her eyes bored into him, she didn’t like the idea of being down below when he was up in the command shack. Thankfully, she didn’t argue. “Yes, M’lord,” she sighed.

They climbed aboard. Besides the five men with crossbows who shot through small slits in the front, six more climbed up. Two walked along the top, settling down behind the turret, and the other four took up window positions in the corners of the command shack. With Tayan, Captain Angler, the driver, the signalman and four extra men, there was barely room to swing elbows.

The signalman watched out a rear window. When he saw the wagon behind him wave a flag out the door, he announced, “Column is ready to move, Captain.”

Captain Angler looked at Tayan, who nodded. He leaned over the sound tube to the engine man. “Full ahead, low gear. Shift to high when we reach speed.”

A heavy chug sounded from below then another. The wagon inched forward then began to pick up speed as the chugging increased in frequency. The signalman lit a lantern and lowered it out a back window as the driver watched the road in front of them intently.

Tayan could see just fine. To his part-elven eyes, the landscape stood out as clear as day. He inched closer to the driver. “Can you see where you’re going?”

Not taking his eyes off the road, the driver nodded. “Not far, M’lord, I should be fine as long as the moon stays out.”

“I’ll be right here if you need help.”

“Thanks, M’lord.”

“Captain!” the signalman called out, “There are boats on the lake headed for the camp.”

“They will have to deal with it,” Tayan told him.

Captain Angler nodded. “I’m sure the camp sees them, also.”

Tayan turned and watched, fearing that maybe the enemy had the same idea he had. There were a dozen boats spread out, small ones at that. “A raid, on a moonlit night. They must be desperate.”

As he watched, a tractor that had been left behind billowed out two clouds of steam. The booming

report came to him as the shots sent columns of water up near one of the boats. The other boats began paddling faster and turning.

He returned his attention to the road. "It's nothing, watch ahead."

The cannons in the turret moved as Ellie trained them flat for short range and spread the outside ones to their limit. She then moved them back in then out again.

Captain Angler went to the speaking tube. "Sighter, what are you doing?"

Ellie's voice came out. "Captain, the gear sets are a bit rusty, I was having Jacob oil them up."

"Very well," Angler said. Glancing at Tayan, he said, "She does an excellent job."

Picking up speed, they traveled through the moonlit night. The driver was doing well at staying on the road. The ground became flatter, almost tabletop flat. The distance in height between the rises and shallows couldn't be more than a few feet. Tayan watched ahead for signs of the enemy. The wind was blowing through the command shack now as the engine man announced, "Captain, we are in high gear."

"Very well, make best speed."

In the distance, Tayan made out a group of dark lines. "Captain, are the cannon chambers pressurized?"

"Yes, standard half-pressure, M'lord."

"Fill them up, tell Ellie to stand by to shoot." He pointed to where the lines were growing into figures with feet. "Out there, about six hundred yards. Have her aim and shoot at four hundred."

Captain Angler squinted. "I don't see them."

"May I?" he asked, moving over to the tube to the turret.

Captain Angler moved to the side. "Please, M'lord."

Tayan watched the shadows as he called down the tube. "Ellie, put full pressure in your cannons. Aim for four hundred yards."

"Yes, M'lord," she called back. "What am I shooting at?"

"Do you see those dark lines ahead?"

"Wait...yes, the ones ahead that look like humps?"

"Right. Use all three cannons. After you shoot, bleed the pressure back up so you don't slow us down."

The barrels moved up then close together, the right one a bit closer than the left.

"Lord Tayan, I cannot be sure about the right barrel."

"Don't matter, just get it close," He watched the figures ahead start to move towards the road. Others disappeared as they dropped into depressions.

“Ready,” Ellie called.

He waited until he was sure they were at four hundred yards distance. “Shoot!”

The wagon shook as all three barrels blasted out steam with a boom. Vapor flowed back through the command shack as they ran through their own discharge. The driver squinted. “I can’t see!”

“Just go straight!” Tayan told him, trying to see through the cloud himself.

The vapor parted. Ahead, the ground lit up into fireballs as spears planted there exploded. In the brief light, he saw a barrier of standing logs across the road and piles of dirt to the sides. Figures flew as the explosions ripped them apart.

“Damn! I really can’t see now!” the driver complained.

Tayan pointed. “See the burning logs? Go straight for them.”

They had been trying to trap the road. He wasn’t going to let them try again. “Ellie! Next volley, stagger your shots. Flat, one and two hundred yards.”

“We’re going too fast!” she called back.

“All right, flat and straight!”

The burning barrier was clearly visible as they raced at it. He noted the outline of a few more figures planting things in the road. The barrels moved painfully slow as they were trained. He was waiting to hear she was ready when the barrels blasted out another load. Water vapor was still billowing out as it was backlit by more explosions. Through the haze, he was sure he saw the barrier fly apart.

“Reloading!” Ellie cried.

They were almost on it as they cleared the haze. Behind them, the second wagon shot its cannons to the sides. The road was well lit now by grass fires. Logs were scattered in a semicircle beyond the pitted road. A flash of brightness arcing through the air caught his attention.

“Spears! Get down!” he yelled and crouched below the windows.

More cannons spoke behind them then ear-splitting explosions made the wagon shudder. Light filled the shack as at least two spears hit the wagon. They bounced as they ran over the pits then cries of pain arose as fire blew into the command shack. The driver was on the floor, holding his face and screaming.

Getting up, Tayan grabbed the steering levers and looked out the front. Smoke rolled over the top of the wagon, obscuring his sight. He could see flatness ahead, but the road was lost to him. Stealing a look to the side, he noted others were getting up. One bowman was trying to help the driver.

“Start throwing the lamp oil!” he cried over the ringing in his ears.

Behind them more explosions sounded as spears and cannons went off. He didn’t think anyone heard him, so he grabbed a bowman and pointed to the oil then made tossing motions. The man nodded and grabbed a bottle of oil with a rag stuffed in the top. Using the lantern that hung out the back window, he

lit it and dropped it to mark their track.

Captain Angler staggered to his feet. Tayan shouted he was driving then pointed at the injured driver. The smoke thinned out quickly until only long wisps still came from the right side of the turret. From what he could see, the plating had been ripped open again. By a miracle, he was only a few yards off the hard, flat road. Hauling on the levers, he eased the wagon back on track.

The signalman came up beside him. "My Lord, the column is still behind us. All wagons made it through!" he shouted, stressing each word. "Captain Angler is assessing the damage!"

Tayan nodded. He felt a shaking in the steering and they had lost some plating, but they hadn't slowed down.

A short time later, Amber appeared out of the interior. She went to the driver and performed her healing. Once she was done, she had him taken below. She talked to Captain Angler then came over and stood beside Tayan.

Her face was covered in sweat, but her forlorn look told him she was also crying. The ringing in his ears had died down, so he didn't quite shout. "Everyone make it?"

Amber shook her head. Laying a hand on his shoulder, she said in his ear, "The turret was hit, no one in it survived. Tayan, Ellie is dead."

He gripped the levers harder as his eyes welled with tears. He ran through memories of the odd looks she gave him when she was confused and that snorting donkey-like laugh she had. For all the horrors she had gone through, he had hoped she would live to enjoy a few years of the freedom she deserved.

"At least she died free," he whispered. He stared straight ahead and concentrated on driving. To his comfort, Amber stayed right beside him.

Chapter 23

Aliana cast her magic over the quivers laid out on the long table. She touched each rawhide sleeve, forcing her magic into the arrows within. Not having her food slave to recharge her energy quickly, she only enchanted twenty. She still had Odif and her daughter to deal with, and that would require a great deal of her strength. To weaken herself before they were in her control was to risk failure, and failure meant being cast back into the abyss to face an angry Lucifer.

Her spells done, she addressed the bowmen who stood on the other side of the table.

"Your arrows will now penetrate the thickest armor. My magic does not include accuracy--you still must hit your targets. Do not waste my magic on long shots. Every one of you will be on the walls or within the city. Stay out of the battle until those machines start passing through the gates," She waved a hand at them. "You are dismissed."

The lesser task done, she went directly to her temple, where her best servants waited. Appearing behind her altar in the pentagram-shaped structure, she faced her best two wizards and Lash, who now commanded forty of her strongest hoarcs.

“Where is my darling daughter?”

Lura turned to her with an evil grin. “Loving Master, they have left the lake cavern and are moving into the main tunnel.”

“We are prepared?”

“Yes, my most beautiful Master.”

Aliana looked at every face there. “Remember, you are only to render them unconscious--Lura and I will decide who needs to die. Disobey, and you will suffer the fate I have planned for them.”

Lash and the hoarcs muttered “Yes, Master” nervously.

“Take your places.” Turning her back to the door, she leaned against the altar as Lura and Grief made preparations. All there was for her to do now was wait.

They stood pressed against the wall by the entrance to the torch-lit tunnel. Odif, who was in front, slid to the opening and shot a quick peek down the passage. Holding her hands up, she raised all her fingers five times then drew an oval in the air, followed by walking her fingers ten paces. Fifty hoarcs at close range, and they had no solid defense set.

Sam and Thump stayed in place as the others moved closer. Entaurus and Jo-Jo started to cast their spells, leaving the last words and gestures for when they were seen. Checking that everyone was ready, Scorpio drew his sword and nodded.

They spilled out to span the width of the tunnel. Scorpio, Theo, Hutch and Shilo knelt as behind them Jo-Jo and Entaurus lashed out with white bars of magic. The loose mass of hoarcs just had time to realize they were under attack before they were sliced apart by the bright energy. Hoarc dust hit the floor as all but two died instantly. The four men in front raced to finish the dying creatures off then stood ready as the rest of the group caught up. Odif and Gloredaniel stayed alert, ready to cast their own energy as the group formed up and continued down the widening tunnel. At the end was a finely carved wooden door painted with a magic circle around a pentagram.

“That’s it?” Theo asked quietly.

Scorpio looked back at Sam, who nodded. “That’s it,” he confirmed. “Where are these vlaks that are suppose to be here?”

“Some questions you just don’t ask!” Shilo hissed.

“That was too easy,” Odif whispered.

Mother Frieda stared at the far door. “The demon is in there, and it knows we are here. When we get to the door, Odif and I enter first. Scorpio, Shilo, take our sides. Theo, Hutch, watch out for the others.”

They crept down the hall. At each intersection, they peeked around the corner, checking that the way was clear, then moved on to the next. Just before they got to the last intersection, hoarcs piled into the passage from both sides. The lead hoarc held up a clawed hand.

“Stop, and we take you alive,” it hissed.

Hutch shot his hands up.

“Hold on!” Looking at Theo, he nodded towards the hoarcs with a grin on his face.

“What are you doing?” Scorpio blurted.

“No need to waste magic, trust me.”

He grinned and walked towards the hoarcs. Theo followed him, waving for Scorpio and Shilo to come along.

“You surrender?” the hoarc asked in a menacing tone.

“I got a thing to axe you,” Hutch said brightly.

The hoarcs looked at each other. The leader pointed his sword at Hutch as he approached. “You surrender, and we take you alive, understand?”

Hutch nodded. “But I still got a thing to axe you.”

“What?” hissed the hoarc.

The creature’s blade was inches from Hutch’s chest. He turned as if to say something to Theo then whipped out with his axe, smashing the hoarc’s blade aside. He then stepped in and slashed it deep across its belly. Theo swung his axe, chopping the legs from under the one beside it.

Scorpio and Shilo jumped into the fray on each side. Although outnumbered, they pressed into the mass of hoarcs, who were packed so tightly they couldn’t swing their own weapons. The ring of steel and hoarc screams filled the air. Hoarcs died and crumbled, leaving their comrades fighting room. Odif raced down and joined in, using only her sword and her feet.

In a short time the number of hoarcs had dwindled; the last few fought with their backs to the door. Theo and Hutch attacked low, Shilo and Scorpio attacked high. Soon, nothing but dust and scattered swords remained.

They were breathing heavily, but with the exception of a few deep cuts Odif healed for them everyone was fine. Shilo wiped the sweat from his face and grinned at Hutch.

“So, did you axe him?”

Hutch hefted his battleaxe. “Yup!”

Mother Frieda strode up, her talisman in hand. “All right, everyone get in position!”

Sam looked at the door to her mother's temple. The realization of what they were about to do hit her full force. They were going in and they were all going to die--if they were lucky. The whole time they had been traveling here, she told herself the combined powers of Odif, Mother Frieda and the wizards was enough to defeat anyone. The vast stores of power her mother held she had avoided thinking about.

Now, seeing this door reminded her of how mighty her mother really was. Behind that door was all the strength and trickery of the abyss.

"Mother Frieda, a prayer, please?" she pleaded.

Shilo looked back the way they had come and grabbed Scorpio by the arm. "Remember those vlaks you wanted to find?"

Frieda looked past Sam to see the vlaks coming at them. "No time, we go in now!"

Frieda and Odif shoved the door open and piled in. Sam wanted to wait, just for a moment. Thump grabbed her arm and towed her through. She looked back to see Jo-Jo shutting the door. Beyond, she got a glimpse of the vlaks coming down the passageway.

"Welcome," Aliana said pleasantly.

The walls of the temple angled out sharply to surround an altar. Behind it, the demon stood with her hands on her hips, watching them with a sadistic smile. Sam knew that smile--it meant someone was going to be in agony. She knew as well the shape of the temple, and that this was one arm of five that led to the altar.

Ahead, Mother Frieda held out her talisman as she beseeched Leighna to rid them of evil. White power covered them and extended to within a few feet of the altar. Odif concentrated beside her, and green power flooded out to cover Aliana. Swords and axes were out, and the wizards were ready to cast. Aliana offered no resistance; she merely watched them with an amused smile.

A feeling nagged at Sam that this wasn't right. She knew the altar was in the center of the room, but she didn't remember it faced one of the arms. It faced the base, and was part of the stone floor. Behind the altar, the top arm ran straight away from them.

"The walls are fake!" she cried.

In the next few moments chaos erupted. As Sam shouted her warning, the walls faded to show a mass of hoarcs. Lura and Grief stepped out from behind the walls that made the side arms, speaking their magic. Gloredaniel, who happened to be looking that way, saw Grief and quickly cast her own spell. Lura's hit Entaurus, and his head split open with a bang, showering the others with his living brains. Gloredaniel got her spell off faster than Grief, who erupted in a ball of fire before he could scream the last word.

Jo-Jo saw the wall to his right open and hastily shot a lightning bolt into the hoarcs, dropping most of them into dust. On the left, Theo and Scorpio slashed into the mass that appeared to their side. On the right, the remaining hoarcs and a man in black armor charged.

The hoarcs directly in front of Theo and Scorpio fought them with wooden clubs. The ones behind pitched rocks at the others. Hutch and Shilo, who had turned to the right to face the threat there, got pummeled with stone from behind. Thump did the only thing he could--he put himself between Sam and

the rocks, staggering into her as they hit.

Scorpio and Theo hacked furiously, downing hoarcs as fast as they could. Odif tried to focus on stopping Lura and the demon from casting magic. A rock cracked against the back of her head. It didn't stun her but did delay her enough to let Lura disappear then appear again beside Frieda. Grabbing the Mother's robes, the evil elf woman sent electricity coursing through her body.

As Frieda spasmed and opened her mouth in a silent scream, Jo-Jo was hit with a rock, ruining the spell he was casting to destroy Lura. Gloredaniel threw up a shield to protect her from the rain of rock and concentrated on extending it over the group. On the right, two hoarcs grabbed a stunned Hutch by his arms and rammed him into the wall until he went limp. Shilo maintained his defense and killed the hoarc in front of him then lunged over to help Hutch. On the left, Scorpio and Theo kept up the slaughter, slowly driving the hoarcs back.

When Frieda fell to the floor unconscious, Aliana was free to use her power. She threw Jo-Jo into Shilo then sent a blast of mind energy into Gloredaniel that made the elf grip her head and scream as she collapsed.

Thump pushed Sam towards Lura in an attempt to get through the chaos. Heart in her throat, Sam did the only thing she had the wits to--she grabbed Lura and pushed her to the side, right in front of Odif. The druid punched her hard with an uppercut. Lura, who had been prepared to shock Odif next, was lifted off her feet and hit the floor limp.

Gloredaniel died, releasing the magic she had cast in the caverns where the spears were made. In the pitched battle, no one noticed the surroundings begin to tremble. Falling stone from the ceiling added to the rain of rock from the hoarcs.

Hoarcs from the right clubbed Shilo and Jo-Jo senseless as the last one got to Thump and started beating him. On the left, hoarcs mobbed Theo, pressing him down with their weight. Scorpio stumbled back, escaping being pinned and pounded, only to be slammed from the side as Aliana lashed out and sent Odif flying back into him. He regained his feet to take a chunk of ceiling on the side of his head then a hoarc club in his groin. His last swing chopped deep into a hoarc neck, but the one beside it came down square on his head. He collapsed.

Aliana noticed the earthquake and diverted her power to hold her temple together as the rock shook and heaved. She reformed it as the shaking subsided then concentrated once again on her victims.

Sam stood stock-still. Terror consumed her as Aliana's gaze bored straight into her. She felt her mother's will take over her body. The resistance she put up was crushed as completely as any hope of survival. Beside her, Thump was twitching under scattered chunks of ceiling that had come down on him. Odif was frantically fighting hoarcs with lightning-fast kicks and flashing steel. Everyone else was on the floor, out cold or dead.

Aliana moved from behind her altar, paying no mind to Odif's desperate fight. She sauntered over to Sam and gently caressed her face.

"Ahh, my darling child. Did you have fun with your friends?" She made Sam's head nod then grinned. "I am so glad. Now, it is time for you to do what I brought you here for." She started to move away then stopped. "I have a nice room awaiting your special friend," she cooed, indicating Odif. "While you will be sacrificed, she will live a long time in agony for trying to take you away from me."

Sam was turned so she could see what was happening. The black knight advanced on Odif, swinging his morning star. Odif killed the hoarc she was facing and turned in time to duck. She rolled closer and kicked upward, catching him in the groin hard enough to take him off his feet. He fell, curled up in pain as she jumped up over him to slash the hoarc behind him.

“Enough of this!” Aliana roared, and spread her arms wide.

Nine hoarcs had survived. They backed off; a pair helped Lash to his feet and led him stumbling to one side. Alone, Odif glared back at Aliana. Her breaths made her whole torso expand and contract. Holding Scorpio’s sword in one hand and Shilo’s in the other, she growled, “I’m not beaten yet!”

Her hard gaze burned with hatred as their eyes locked.

Aliana laughed. “Oh, yes, you are.” She used her power to slam Odif back against the door. The druid bounced off and dropped one sword. Aliana tried again, and this time Odif resisted. Stiffening, she called up all her energy to block Aliana’s will. Slowly, she staggered forward.

The druid’s will was strong. Aliana had to use all her power to stop the advance and hold the woman in place.

“Beat her!” she snapped.

Hoarcs rushed to obey their Master, and Odif had to shift some of her attention to them. When she did, Aliana didn’t try to throw her. She instead slowed her down. Despite her best efforts, Odif couldn’t move fast enough to avoid the blows. Clubs slammed into her stomach, back, legs and arms. Her sword was knocked from her hand, and she fell to her knees as blows slammed her from behind.

Aliana waited until they had beaten her to the ground then yelled, “Stop!”

Sam wanted to beg, she wanted to cry, she wished with all her heart that Odif would just die right now. With her mother in control of her body, all she could do was watch.

Aliana stopped by Odif’s head. Quivering, bruised and bloodied, the druid bitch now looked pleasant to her eyes.

“See? You are beaten,” she gloated.

Odif slipped her hand under her. Instantly, Aliana knew what she was going for. She grabbed Odif with her will just in time. Odif sprang up, but couldn’t move forward to use the dagger she’d made.

“Hold her!”

Hoarcs swarmed around Odif, holding her immobile. Both her eyes were puffing shut, blood leaked from her nose and the corners of her mouth. She was covered with large, ugly bruises. Her will, though, was still intact; and Aliana knew better than to get closer. What a pity it was she didn’t have such a determined servant in her own ranks.

“What will it take to break you?” she wondered aloud. “Perhaps we’ll start with your arms.”

Clubs once wielded by now-dead hoarcs littered the floor. Aliana extended her hand and levitated a club into it. Her will helped the hoarcs twist Odif’s right arm out, elbow up. She raised the bludgeon and

brought it down with all her might, adding mind power to the impact. The crack of breaking bone and the sight of the bitch's arm bending the wrong way was almost as pleasing as her scream.

"Now, the other one," she said sweetly.

Odif started crying when her other arm was shattered.

"Now we are getting somewhere." Aliana grinned. "Lay her flat."

The hoarcs complied, shoving Odif down and pinning her to the floor. Aliana smashed her wrists. The hand that held the dagger she slammed down on until the dagger was in pieces and every bone was broken. She then moved around to break both ankles. Odif was starting to convulse and vomited a mix of blood and bile. Aliana sensed she couldn't take much more without magical help, so she ordered her rolled over on her back and her legs spread. She forced Odif to watch as she stood holding her club aloft.

"This is for stealing my daughter!" She slammed it on Odif's groin hard, breaking her pelvic bone. Odif half sat up, peeling out a scream; then her eyes fluttered and she fell limp.

"No!" Aliana yelled, throwing the club aside. "No rest for you!" Gripping her head in both hands, she willed Odif back to consciousness. The druid's eyes fluttered back open; and in too much pain to even take a breath, she opened her mouth in a silent scream.

The demon searched into the bitch's mind for ways to hurt her. She relived some of Odif's favorite memories. One thing caught her attention—the woman was sister to Lord Tayan. Very clearly, she impressed into Odif's mind a vision of sending his soul to the abyss in exchange for a demon. She let Odif know the death of Tayan was her own people's fault. She let her know she had sent the vision to the wizards and had poisoned King Alderlan's mind against humans. Every way she could, she told Odif she had arranged everything, and that Odif had never had a chance to win.

The helplessness in the druid's eyes was glorious. Later on, she would have those eyes mounted to a small plaque in her chambers so she would always be reminded of this moment.

"I know you can hear me," she said with an evil smile. "We are just getting started. I would love to hurt you more, but I need to trade the souls of your friends for demons. I know you don't want to miss that."

To help keep the pain alive, she had Lash pin her arms behind her and pull her up to her knees. Lash grabbed her hair and hauled her to her knees to make her look at the altar. Looking down at the tattered remains of her shirt, he licked his lips. He reached down to grab a handful of breast and gave it a hard squeeze.

"Master has promised me these for a water bag. I think I'll take my time collecting my prize."

Aliana turned to him briefly. "Lash! Play with her later, we have work to do."

"Yes, Master," Lash said and jerked Odif's head back up.

Tears ran down Sam's face as she looked at Odif. She knew Lash made no idle threat. Odif would be slowly taken apart, yet be forced to live on until nothing else could be done to her. Why hadn't she

listened? Why did she have to lead them all to their deaths? Suddenly, her mother's will filled her.

"Now, my sweet child," Aliana said in a musical voice, "Get yourself ready for the altar."

Sam turned and started walking. Inside, she screamed. She tried to flee the body her mother was controlling. She tried to faint, so at least she wouldn't feel it when she was killed. All her efforts were in vain. Her hands came up and opened her shirt. Stopping before the altar, she turned around and climbed onto it then lay down and pulled her clothing aside to expose her chest. Her arms settled to her side. Inside her head, she cried and screamed. On the outside she quietly waited for death.

Aliana took her place beside the altar and lifted the long dagger over her head.

"All-powerful Lucifer! Into your hands I give my firstborn. Take this soul to open the gate. Accept the souls of your enemies that I offer and send forth the demons I need. Let your unholy reign begin..."

"I can't believe this is happening," Tayan groaned. He eyed Captain Angler as if being angry would change the facts. "You told me all the wagons were working."

The sky was painted in pre-dawn colors as the wagons sat in a line. On the contorted remains of one towed wagon the dead were being piled for a funeral pyre.

Captain Angler looked out the window, pointing to the wagon to their left. "That one has a holed water tank—they might have enough water to reach the city." Pointing to the right, he said, "Their whole command crew is dead, and the steering gear is inoperative. Our cannon crew is gone; and even if we had one, only one cannon works. Three of the tractors can probably make it, but without the battlewagons they'll be picked off by spears in no time."

Tayan glared at him. "Then take our water and give it to them," he said with a jerk of his thumb, "and we'll take the steering gear from our wagon and man the other wagon."

"We have no smiths to do that! You just can't pull parts out then stick them back in. These aren't fence posts that you can pull up and put back into the ground somewhere else! Each wagon is a bit different. It takes smiths to remove the parts then reform them to fit back in place."

Tayan was beside himself. "All right, if that wagon's steering is broken, how did they keep following us?"

Captain Angler spoke slowly. "The boilermen used wrenches. One watched out the front and yelled back to another which way to turn the valve block."

"Then they can keep doing it," he stated. "Get our ammunition and crew over to that wagon. I'm going to see what we can do with the leaking tanks on the other one."

Captain Angler's cheeks turned pink. "You can't take damaged wagons into battle!"

Ellie and others had given their lives for them to get this far. He wasn't going to stop because these damn machines didn't work quite right. The captain's attitude was too much for him. He grabbed the man by his collar and dragged him close.

“You listen to me! You will get up into that command shack and take that wagon into battle, or I will bind you to one of those damn cannon barrels!” He gave him a shove that made him stumble into the wall. “We will be moving by sun-up.”

Tayan flung the door open and jumped to the ground. He stomped over and climbed into the wagon that was dripping water from underneath. The only person in the command shack was the driver. Upon seeing Tayan, he stood up.

“Welcome aboard, Lord Tayan.”

Tayan eyed him. “Russ, right?”

“Yes, M’lord. We have a problem with our wagon, Captain Stark is below.”

Tayan nodded and went in. Weaving through the interior crowded with machinery, he found Stark squatting next to the right-side water tank. The seam of the large square tank had split open from top to bottom.

Captain Stark looked up and pointed at it. “We can’t repair this, M’lord. Unfortunately, we were drawing heavily on the other tank, holding this one in reserve.”

“Take all the water you can from Captain Angler’s wagon and any other supplies you need. How’s your crew?”

“We lost a few boilermen, and most of the bowmen,” Captain Stark replied. “Can you spare any?”

Tayan nodded. “Come with me, and have your crew start transferring water.”

Soon, Captain Angler’s wagon was being stripped. As Captain Stark’s crew formed a line and passed buckets and rocks to his own wagon, Tayan went over to check the one he would be riding.

The first thing he noticed as he walked around the front was that the steel plates on the front of the command shack were twisted out in a V. On closer look, the dark lines looked like claw marks. Through the ragged gap, he could see Captain Angler pacing inside. He walked around the outside, inspecting for damage. Except for a few deep dents and blast marks, it looked intact. Satisfied, he went to the ladder and climbed up into the ruined shack.

The inside mirrored the outer appearance. Blood covered just about every piece of metal. The driving levers were bent to the sides almost to the floor, and all four speaking tubes were bent or crushed. On one tube he clearly saw five deep rips--claw marks.

“Lord Tayan,” Captain Angler said briskly. “As you can see, this command shack is totally useless. The breach in the forward plating exposes the entire cabin! It is suicide to stay up here with the things we’ve been facing.”

Tayan nodded absently, paying no attention to him. Two men in gunner’s coveralls were trying to mop the blood off the floor. “Are either of you part of the crew that was here last night?”

The men looked up. The shorter blond man nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“What did this?”

“Not sure, sir. We saw a large animal, kinda boxy. It had wings, so we shot it. Next thing I know, it flew over us and all we heard from command was screaming.” He nodded at the interior door. “Greg tried to get up here, but the door was jammed. We knew we had to keep going, so a couple guys figured out how to steer from below.”

The gargoyle had done this. When the spears hit the wagon he was riding, it must have come out to fight off its own evil forces. When these men shot at it, it went for them.

A plan formed in his head. “Go get the men who were steering last night.”

“Yes, sir.”

Clasping his hands behind his back, Tayan addressed Angler. “Captain Angler, my plans have changed. You are to stay with your wagon and any crewmen not needed here or with Captain Stark. As soon as General Cooper arrives, get your wagon repaired. All units are to follow me into the city.”

“You are going into battle without a command crew?”

Tayan went to the hole in the wall. From the center of the rip, he had a clear view and was completely exposed. He planned on keeping that damn gargoyle busy. “I don’t need a command crew. The cannons work, and we can steer.”

Angler pleaded with him. “M’lord, what you propose is insanity. The command crew keeps the wagon functioning as a single unit. You will need that edge.”

“I’ve got my own edge. Let me know when Captain Stark and the others are ready to move.”

“As you wish, M’lord. Should I inform Captain Stark he will be taking the lead position?” Angler asked, thinking Tayan would want some form of cover.

“He will follow me until this wagon no longer functions. I will brief all the captains the moment they are ready.”

Angler nodded sadly. “As you wish.” He started to leave then stopped to add, “May Odin be with you, M’lord.”

Tayan had his crew gather, and they worked out how to operate. The speaking tubes still worked, so he would give steering commands straight to the engine room. The next best place to see in front of them was the sighter’s chair in the turret. If he could no longer give commands then the sighter became acting captain. Amber would not be left behind, so he gave her the task of finding evil. He did manage to plant her in the turret, reasoning she could direct the cannon sighter from there. In the turret, she was also as safe as he could make her under the circumstances. Their main objective was to destroy as many sources of concentrated evil as they could find. If no targets were found then they were to flatten every building they could.

The captains gathered as the sun was still hanging low over the horizon. Four tractors were ready to roll, each pulling four towed wagons filled with men. Stark’s role was the same as his--get in and wreck the city. The tractors were to serve a more tactical purpose, clearing and holding the area around the gates. He made sure everyone knew what their job was; then they climbed into the wagons and set off.

The sun had risen full in the sky as the wagon topped a rise. Ahead, Tayan saw the city. The walled portion looked to be the area of an average town. A mile away he could see, beyond the walled portion, shacks and the activity of a busy farming community. On the outside, it looked like every other town he had seen. Fearing he might be attacking the wrong place, he went to the turret tube.

“Amber! Is that the place?”

No answer came right away. The speed they were going, they’d be on it in a few minutes. He could see people shielding their eyes and pointing his way. “Sighter! Get Amber, I need to know if that’s it!”

“Lord Tayan! Amber says yes, that’s the place. She says the worst evil is to the left. M’Lord, the tall building on the left is where we have to go.”

“Start shooting down the walls around the gate as soon as you can.”

Tayan concentrated on shouting directions. With his bird’s-eye view, he easily kept the wagon on the road. As they rushed towards the city, the people that had been watching moved cautiously to the sides. The cannons blasted out a load, and they ran screaming.

The first rounds hit low on the wall to the right. Three holes and crumbling stone told the sighter exactly where he had hit. They closed the last five hundred yards, and bowmen appeared on the walls as the gates started to swing shut. The cannons fired again, this time hitting the gates. The one on the left shuddered and swung open with a gaping hole in it. The one on the right lost the whole bottom half as the rocks blasted it apart.

“Higher!” Tayan screamed at the sighter. He saw they were starting to drift off the road, so he shouted down and aimed the wagon right at the open gates. They crushed an abandoned hay cart then smashed the porch off a stone-and-log hut. Tayan watched the bowmen on the wall take aim and wait.

The cannons fired again. This time as they passed through the haze, he saw their shots hit high on the walls. A whole section of the top crashed down, spilling men and rock.

Arrows came in a cloud. He ducked out of instinct as the shafts ticked against the steel plates then covered his head as some clattered about in the command shack. He struggled back up to see they were drifting to the right. “Left! Steer half a turn to the left! Now, straight!”

Animal roaring came to his ears. Looking up at the walls, he saw the gargoyle moving along the top, pitching off men who couldn’t jump or outrun it.

“About time you were useful,” he grinned. Seeing the left edge of the gate opening coming at them, he yelled, “Right, a full turn right!” They turned as they passed through, clipping the edge with grinding and crunching sounds. “Straight!” The back of the wagon slammed into the gate, knocking it over to fall on them. It caught on the command shack roof and stuck. It bounced along behind them for a few seconds then slid off onto the ground.

Arrows were coming at them from all directions. The cannons went off again, smashing holes in buildings. The middle cannon fired down the street, digging a large rut and throwing fleeing bowmen off their feet. He stole a look behind him to see the second wagon roll through the ruined gate. Right after they were in, it turned sharply, flinging dirt, and went down another street.

Small bangs like a hammer got his attention. A louder one sounded right in the shack and an arrow flew

past, making another bang on its way out. The bowmen in this city had arrows that could penetrate steel! Suddenly, he felt like they were sitting on an open buckboard. Amber was no longer safe inside the turret when they had arrows that drove through solid plate.

“Engine room, maximum speed! Kick this thing in the ass!” he screamed down the tube. He made another course adjustment then looked to see where the gargoyle had gone. It appeared to the right and ripped into bowmen who had shot at them from a side street.

Up ahead was a square. More bowmen were rushing to gather behind a large circular wall in the center, probably a well. From a speaking tube, Amber yelled, “Tayan, we have to go left!”

“When I tell you, two turns left!” he called down to the engine room. There was a street that ran to the left from the square--he had to time it right to keep from running into the well. The bowmen stood up, bows pulled back. The second they were in view, the cannons went off.

They were closing on the square, and he couldn't see anything but white steam. A low rumbling sounded, vibrating the whole wagon. The shaking concerned him, but at the moment, he needed to get into that side street. As long as the wagon was holding together, he would keep going. He thought he saw the corner of the last building coming up. Just before it passed by, he yelled, “Left turn now!”

The wagon started to turn slowly then slewed hard to the left and rammed into the corner of a stone building. They slid to the right in a lurch as the building came down on them then thrust forward as the belted wheels caught solid ground.

“Straight!...Right!...Straight!” he yelled as they tore through the structure. The wagon was pitched up on the left then dropped down. Rocks bounced over it, and a section of roof slammed against the command shack, breaking up as it was pushed to the side. Catching glimpses of the street through the vapor and smoke, he got the wagon back in the street and they began to pick up speed again.

“Straight ahead!” Amber called. “I sense the strongest evil there!”

The street was long. At the end, he saw another wall. Beyond that rose the higher walls of a palace. “Sighter! Start shooting that palace!”

“The sighter is dead. We're doing the best we can!” Amber cried.

Looking at the turret, Tayan saw a number of small holes dotting the wagon casing. The wagon had been a useful weapon, but now it was nothing but a very large target. “Amber, there's a hatch in the bottom, get everyone out!”

“We're not leaving you! We'll be ready to shoot in a minute!” she yelled back.

He slapped the tube, thinking somehow that Amber would feel it. “Damn it Amber, get out of there!”

“No!” she screamed back.

A line of buckboard wagons had been tipped up to form a wooden wall across the street. Behind them, bowmen shot a volley then fled to the sides as the wagon bore down on the thin barrier. Tayan barely felt the bump as they crashed through, splintering the hastily made defense. Right after they ran over the blockade, a single cannon shot out a load. The mist parted to show a shower of dirt fly up in front of the palace wall.

“Too low!” he called to Amber.

“Hang on, we’re going to try another!”

Again the banging of arrows driving through steel sounded, this time from behind. They started to drift to the right. “Left!” he called. The wagon started drifting farther, breaking off posts and tearing loose overhangs of the buildings they passed. “Left!” he cried again.

He braced himself as the right side gouged into the front of a building. They tipped up sharply and started to dig in deeper. The man steering must have been killed, he realized. He went to the door below to take the man’s place.

He felt like he got punched from behind as he reached for the door. Looking down, he saw an arrow protruding from just under his ribs. The wagon shifted to the left then pitched higher to the right, tossing him against the wall. Metallic screeching noises and the hiss of steam filled the command shack as the wagon ground to a halt. He tried to struggle up, but moving was becoming difficult. All he could think of was getting to Amber as his vision faded.

Chapter 24

Thump’s eyes snapped open. Something had just happened. In a rush, he remembered about the attack on the caravan, his son Tayan and the pact. All of the memories that had been stripped from him came back in a flood. He also knew the pact had been broken. The thing had killed his son. His lips curled back into a snarl as rage filled him. Lifting his head, he saw it. The thing was standing in front of the altar holding a dagger over its head. He reached for his battleaxe.

Sam felt a change in the air. Above her, Aliana’s face suddenly acquired an expression of surprise. She ceased her incantation and looked down as if Sam had done something. For a moment, silence hung in the air. Then Sam heard a soft sound, the sliding of steel against stone. Aliana slowly turned to look, and Sam saw something she never thought she would on her mother’s face--fear.

As Aliana shifted her attention away, Sam felt an easing of the force that held her. Slowly, she turned her head enough to see what was going on.

Thump stood up, snarling at Aliana as he lifted the battleaxe. His eyes bore a maddened gleam, a visible portion of the pure rage that radiated from him. The beast within Odif had been contained under a normal, reasoning soul. There was no such damper in Thump.

Aliana stood motionless for a second then shouted, “Kill him!”

Hoarcs rushed at him with their clubs. The first one slammed him hard on the back. He swung the axe, chopping it deep across the middle. He let out a bellow as he swung into the second then the third, chopping off its arm and a good portion of shoulder with it. The others backed up, looking for more substantial weapons.

Sam watched as Thump charged the hoarcs, swinging the axe in a blur. The last survivor picked up Scorpio's sword and drove it into his stomach. He chopped off its arm then beheaded it.

"Lash! Kill him!" Aliana cried. There was fear in her voice.

Lash tossed Odif to one side. He threw the morning star at Thump then drew his sword. Thump stumbled as the ball of the weapon struck. Shifting his hate-filled gaze to Lash, he gritted his teeth and pulled the blade from his body.

"You're a dead man," he growled.

"You are weak and unarmored. We'll see who's dead!" Lash snapped. He moved and feinted. Thump parried the sword with the one he held then swung the axe into Lash's side. It slashed through his armor, and Lash screamed.

Thump worked the axe free and kicked him to the ground. Lash rolled over and tried to crawl away. Thump stepped on his back then drove the axe deep between his shoulder blades.

Aliana ran around the altar to the far side. "Stop or I will tear your child apart and make you watch!" she screamed.

Thump started for the altar. His head was lowered slightly, and his eyes bore the look of madness. "Ain't nothin' gonna stop me from killin' you."

Sam focused on her mother's words. His child? This was her father? All the years he had been tortured now made sense. Aliana had kept him all this time to gloat over his failure. The tables were turning now, and she was going to do everything she could to help him.

"I still have magic," Aliana snapped.

A bright flash of magic hit Thump and lit his body. He stumbled back a step then resumed coming at her. The glow died, and the wound in his stomach was gone.

"No!" Aliana screamed. "Lucifer, help me!"

Sam knew what was different now. The heavy feeling of evil was no longer so heavy. Lucifer's presence was no longer here. Aliana was still holding her, but the bonds were very weak. Sam could ease out of them, but she had to be sure Aliana wasn't paying any attention to her.

Thump ran up to the altar and swung across it, falling on her. He pushed her towards the edge as he got up and chased Aliana down one of the room's arms. Sam obscured her presence and slipped to sit on the floor.

In the narrow tip of the room, Thump caught Aliana with a blow from the axe, slashing down the length of her back. Aliana pitched forward then turned and grabbed both his arms, screaming in terror. In an awkward dance, she worked her way around him. Before she could flee, he ran her through with his sword. She jerked loose and stumbled back. The axe fell again, slashing down her torso. She was thrown back and used her mind power to float away from him. The long cuts sealed.

Aliana let out a cackling laugh. "You can't kill me!" She looked down at the floor and pointed to a

chunk of black rock that had fallen. Whipping her arm towards Thump, she willed the rock to fly at him. He didn't dodge it, and the chunk hit him square in the chest, knocking him backwards. She threw another at him, this time knocking his right leg from under him. He went down hard but sprang back up with a growl.

"I will roast your child alive and make you eat her!" Aliana screamed in triumph. She sent another rock at him, then another.

Thump began to smash the rocks aside with his weapons as he came on. Aliana drifted away. When she knocked him down again, she drifted in back of him. He rose and charged on a few steps before realizing she was no longer in front of him. She hit him from behind with a large flat rock, sending him sprawling.

Sam focused on her mother, using her will to hold her in place. She felt like she was grabbing at nothing. Focusing, she tried again then realized her mother was not in front of her. The form she saw was just something to let Aliana see and act. The essence of her mother wasn't coming from the form, it was coming from under the altar. Searching the shelves there, she found her in a clay jar.

Thump staggered to his feet and snapped up his weapons. "I will kill you!"

Aliana spread her arms wide. "There is no way you can kill me, you fool!" she cried happily.

Sam held up the jar and spoke with both mind and voice. "Oh, yes, there is." And as Aliana looked, she smashed the jar.

The form floating in the air convulsed as Aliana's spirit slammed into the only vessel available. When she hit the floor, her body and spirit were once again fused together. Her mouth hung open in shock as she gaped at Sam.

Tears ran freely down Sam's face. "Go back where you belong," she whispered.

Aliana screwed her face up in anger. "Not without you!" she growled. Rising to her feet, she flung rocks at Thump as fast as she could. He knocked a few aside, keeping his axe near his head as he stumbled forward under the pounding.

Aliana concentrated on the ceiling, planning to bury him in stone. As the rock started to crack, she was suddenly pushed from the side. Ramming into the edge where two walls met, she spun as she fell. Regaining her feet, she looked to see who could have thrown her.

Sam stood by the altar, her hard gaze boring into Aliana. "No more," she choked.

"Much more!" Aliana growled. Her attention was diverted from Sam as Thump charged her with a long, hard swing of his axe. She jerked back, and the blade slammed into the corner, taking out a sizable piece of wall. Knowing she could do nothing to him, she concentrated on his weapon and forced it away from her. He held on to it and sailed across the open area to hit the opposite wall. He slid to the floor, and this time he didn't get up.

Aliana started towards Sam then stopped to inspect a new sensation. Her side stung where the axe had grazed her. When she touched the wound, her fingers came away bloody. She was bleeding!

"This is impossible," she whispered. Only humans, people who could be killed, bled. She also felt other odd things. She was sore from her fall, and the arm that had hit the wall when Sam pushed her felt stiff.

She had heard of these things happening to lesser demons. The pact was broken, and now her soul was bonded to her form. Slowly, she raised her head and looked at Sam.

“You little bitch,” she spat.

Sam shook her head sadly. No matter how badly she hated her mother, she didn’t want to be the one to kill her. “It’s over. Let me collect my friends and go.”

Aliana advanced towards her, holding up a bloody hand for her to see. “You do this to me, and you think you can just walk away?”

Sam backed around the altar to keep her distance. “Please, I just want to leave this place!” she sobbed.

“No!” Aliana barked. “You will never leave!”

She ran around the altar, hands reaching to grab her daughter by the throat to choke her to death. Sam circled to the other side, keeping the altar between them. Aliana tried climbing over it, and Sam used her mind to keep her away.

Now in a fit of rage, Aliana summoned up the last of her power and shoved Sam with everything she had. Sam’s arms windmilled as she flew backwards through the air. Arcing down, she hit the floor on her back. The impact took her breath away. She gasped for air as she struggled up to her hands and knees. Casting a look towards the altar, she saw her mother picking up the ceremonial dagger.

“You will be sacrificed,” Aliana growled as she started towards her. “And it will not be a clean death!”

The arm of the room Sam backed into had no exit. Once again, she summoned her strength and lashed out with her mind at Aliana. Her mother was ready, and countered just enough to keep her pace.

Aliana started past the spot where Thump lay. He quietly crawled to his feet and swung his sword into the back of her knee. She stumbled and turned to see what had hit her. Growling, he leapt and drove his axe into her leg. Her agonized scream filled the chamber as she hit the floor. He struck again, this time driving his sword into her other leg.

Aliana pushed herself away, only to run into the wall. The lower part of one leg lay on the floor, the other was bleeding furiously. Eyes wide in terror, she cried, “Please don’t kill me! I’ll be your slave,” Turning her head to look at Sam, she cried, “Lucifer will eat my soul if I go back. Please don’t let him kill me!”

Seeing her own mother helpless and bleeding was something Sam had not prepared herself for. There was no evil in the demon’s eyes now, only the fear of death. Sam knew what it was to be afraid. She watched her mother’s pleading eyes as Thump lined himself up to take her head. Her mind raced to think of a way they could trust her and let her live. From everything Sam knew about her mother, there just wasn’t one. Sooner or later, she would find a way to wiggle or twist out of any pact she made.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Thump lifted his axe high. Her own face melted into an emotionless mask. “Goodbye, Mother.”

Thump swung hard. Aliana’s head spun as it flew away from her body. Her limbs twitched then her body fell limp. A terrible wail rang out all through the room, fading away as the soul of Aliana was sucked back into the abyss.

Silence once again filled the chamber. Sam got up and started towards the lone man as he looked down on the corpse. Stopping across from it, she waited nervously until he looked up. "Did you hear what she said?"

Blank-faced, he focused on her. "What?"

"She threatened to tear me apart, remember?"

He gazed at her for a few seconds. "Umm, you mean she was talking about...you?"

Sam nodded, not knowing whether to cry or jump with joy. She began to ramble, spitting out everything she thought. "Long ago, she seduced you. When I was young I wished that you would come and save me. I've always wanted to meet you, and even if you go now and I never see you again, I will be happy. We are free, and we did it together."

"You're my kid?" he asked in disbelief.

Sam nodded as she wrung her hands. "I think so. I hope so."

Gaping at her, he swallowed. He again heard the thing tell him it was going to rip apart his child, and Sam was the only one left, besides him. He remembered it had tried to seduce him. By what he saw, it had succeeded at least once. "Well, I, uhh, never back out on family. It ain't right."

A smile lit her face. "Thank you, Father."

Many things about her bothered him. He wasn't fond of her horns, or those wings; but there was one he could change. "And it ain't right, you having a man's name. How about if I call you...Samantha? That okay?"

She mouthed the word then smiled broadly. "That's great. I like it."

A moan got their attention. Shilo was holding his head as he lay propped up on one arm. Sam looked at him then turned to Odif lying on the floor. She still felt a trace of life in the druid, but it was very dim.

"Quick! Wake up Frieda--Odif is dying!"

She ran to Odif as Thump ran to Frieda. She fell to her knees and cradled her friend's head. "Please, stay with us!" she begged.

Odif was very weak. Sam could feel the last bits of energy slipping away from her body. Thump was shaking Frieda's shoulder and calling to her. With a desperate blast of mind energy, she snapped, "Frieda, wake up!"

Frieda groaned. Shilo stumbled up, holding his head. "We won?" he asked.

"Shilo, help Dad with Mother Frieda before it's too late!"

"Dad? Wow, I must have missed something," he huffed. He groaned again as he went to help Thump.

Thump and Shilo helped Frieda to her feet and steered her over to where Odif lay. Frieda, still groggy, laid her hands on the druid and started to pray. Sam kept contact with Odif's mind, trying to keep her

away from the brink. It was beginning to work--she felt energy coming back into the shattered body.

Odif's eyes flew open, and she sucked in a long breath. Shaking, she struggled briefly until she noticed who was around her. "What happened?" she asked weakly.

Sam looked at Thump and smiled. "We sent her back to the abyss. It's over."

Thump returned Sam's smile. "We did," he agreed. Looking down on Odif, he patted her hair. "You all right?"

Odif winced as she tried to move. "I feel like I've been beaten by a dozen hoarcs," she groaned. She was still heavily bruised, and one eye was swollen partway shut.

"You were," Sam told her.

Frieda looked at the others lying on the floor. "Let's go see who else is still alive."

Scorpio came around, and they were able to wake Jo-Jo and Theo. Helping Frieda heal everyone so they could walk and fight tapped all of Odif's energy. They said a prayer for Gloredaniel, Entaurus, Hutch and the remaining elf. They found Lura was still alive; and despite Mother Frieda's opinion, they didn't kill her.

Mother Frieda said a prayer as she poured holy water over the altar then Aliana's remains. Except some rising wisps of vapor, the altar didn't look any different. The body melted away with a hiss, leaving nothing but a skeleton.

The door they had used to enter was jammed shut. Sam knew of the stairs that went directly from the temple up into the palace above. Straining her memory, she led them down one of the arms and found the stone to push that opened up the stairwell.

Thump led with Shilo as Scorpio and Sam helped Odif along. Mother Frieda stayed beside Theo as he shed tears for his lifelong friend.

They emerged into an underground storeroom where guards milled about. Thump ran ahead with Shilo, killing the few who didn't flee. They got to the steps the remaining guards had fled up and stopped.

Shilo waved his sword at the fleeing men. "Why would guards be down here?"

Shrugging, Thump said, "Don't know. Maybe they were coming to help the demon."

Looking at the tattered man, Shilo gave him a pat on the back. "That was good work down there, Thump. You saved our asses."

"Name's Eric," he said, not appreciating Shilo's form of affection.

Shilo grinned. "Eric, as in Eric Redman?"

"Some people called me that. What of it?"

By the look on his face, Shilo concluded that Eric didn't have a very good sense of humor. Looking back at Odif, Shilo had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. "Wow," he croaked.

“That’s funny?” Eric asked, scowling at him.

Shilo shook his head and started up the stairs. “Better scout ahead,” he said tightly.

He took the stairs in twos and threes. Wait until Zit found out about this!

The tunnel of light Tayan was floating in opened up suddenly. Seeing who was waiting for him, his soul cried with glee. In the bright woodland, his mother stood beside Lucinthia. Willy, his best friend until a pilgyn axe killed him, stood behind them, as did many others he recognized. Ellie smiled brightly at him, waving to him with the hand she had lost in life. He opened his arms and hugged his mother and his dead wife. Never had he felt so much joy and peace.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he sighed.

“We’ve missed you, too,” Lucinthia said lovingly. The essence of her soul caressed him softly.

His mother pulled back and smiled. “I am so proud of you. And I am sorry, but you have to go back.”

“I can’t go back,” he said firmly. “I belong here with you.”

“Helena is right, my love,” Lucinthia moved away, her face more beautiful than he ever remembered. “I know you will always love me, as I will always love you. We will be here waiting for you.”

He shook his head. This was his reward; all his battles were over. “I want to stay with you.”

Helena touched his face with the gentleness only a mother could manage. “Your work is not done yet, my son. Know that we love you, and will always be with you.”

Lucinthia touched her soul to his. “Until you return, I don’t want you to be alone.”

He wanted to tell her no, he wasn’t leaving. Then, as quickly as he had come up the tunnel, he was racing backwards down it. The last vision he saw was Lucinthia’s face. Her thought echoed in his mind. *I don’t want you to be alone.*

Tayan gasped for breath as he woke up; his chest felt like fire. He was cradled by Amber, who was crying as she prayed. When he moved, she opened her eyes and hugged him, still sobbing.

They were in the command shack, or what was left of it. Partially buckled, it held loose planks and stones that had once been a building. His arms went around her automatically. He remembered the wagon ramming into the buildings and reaching for the door. Everything after that seemed fuzzy.

“I’d thought I lost you,” she sobbed.

Holding her close, he felt like something had just happened to him. He didn’t know what it was, but a latent feeling of joy stayed with him. It was with complete conviction he told her, “It’s going to be all right.”

He didn’t worry about where they were, or what was going on around them. He just enjoyed the feel of

her in his arms.

On an impulse, he started kissing her ear. She shifted around and brought her lips to his in a long deep kiss. Their embraced tightened as they tasted each other's breath, savoring the moment.

When their lips finally parted, Amber blushed. "I can't...do this."

Combing his fingers through her tangled hair, he said, "Yes, you can. Well, you'll be able to once we're married."

She shook her head. "No, I..." She stopped as it dawned on her what he had just said.

Holding her face in his hands, he asked, "Amber, will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

The squeak of glee and how hard she hugged gave him his answer. Even though he ached, he still laughed. It was like he had finally been freed of something he never realized was holding him. In his happiness, he felt passion for her rise within.

"We better get married fast," he chuckled.

The door by their heads squealed open and Zit appeared. "Tayan, Amber!" he cried merrily then his smiled dimmed. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Um, no," Tayan said quickly. Amber helped him to his feet, her face flushed with joy. He helped her out then climbed down the ladder, ducking past the roofing timbers. Exiting the rubble, he saw Sylvanari elves packing the side street and moving along close to the buildings. "How'd you get here?" he asked Zit.

Zit frowned at him. "You think you were the only one that went to get help? We want it to be known we were here, too!"

Tayan had seen the manned walls, and he had charged in quickly with the wagon. There was no way they could have followed him in. "How'd you get into the city?"

"We've been sneaking in on hay wagons for the past three days," Zit said proudly. "I'm awful glad you showed up--I was beginning to think we'd have to do it alone."

Amber pointed towards the palace. "We have to get in there."

A large explosion sounded, and the ground shook as part of the city ahead lit up in a blinding bluish light. Tayan ducked with Amber behind a pile of rubble, shielding her as a powerful blast of wind toppled buildings and filled the air with debris. A large ball of orange fire rose up, trailing thick smoke behind it. As it climbed, the fireball turned into dark smoke, making the plume look like a giant mushroom.

Once the explosion was over, they got up. Across the street, brown-clad elves were helping their injured fellows. The streets were filled with pieces of timber and rock. Moans and cries for help came from all around them.

Zit looked up at the ascending cloud. "Now that was a big bang."

The palace wall facing the explosion had crumbled. Both towers had lost their tops, looking like giant

broken bottles. Tayan pointed to the breach. "There is how we get in."

Waving his bow at the mangled wagon, Zit asked, "How many of those things do you have here?"

The second wagon had taken another street. By his guess it was just about where the explosion was. "Only two. I think the other one was over there, in the middle of the big bang."

"So much for that idea," Zit remarked then ran over to his friends.

The side door of the wrecked wagon was forced partway open and a boilerman squeezed out. Seeing Tayan and Amber, he pointed back inside. "M'lord, both engines are broken and we're out of water."

The wagon was buried so deep in the rubble he didn't see how they would free it, even if it had been working. "Get everyone out, and bring all the weapons you have."

Tayan led the collection of Sylvanari and a half-dozen wagon men towards the palace. On the way, they found more wounded peasants than soldiers. The few soldiers they met either surrendered or dropped their weapons and ran.

Amber insisted on helping each peasant. He would have been more upset over her delaying them, but by the time the elves had checked the area clear and tied up the captives she was finished, or close to.

Halfway down the street, they ran into nothing but wounded as they got closer to the blast site. Not one building was intact, and the streets were so littered they had to wind their way through the larger piles of debris. Amber put up a fuss, but he made her move along with them. He reasoned that the longer they delayed, the more time the enemy had to recover from the shock of the blast. Pain for the people was on her face, but she didn't argue with him.

They had gotten within a hundred yards of the palace wall when they had to take cover from weak arrow fire. Cover was plentiful, and with return fire from the elves they quickly made the top of the breach. The defenders put up a counterattack; but being inside the courtyard and unprotected, most died before they got even partway up the rubble. The survivors who didn't throw up their hands in surrender escaped into the palace.

The palace doors and windows were shuttered and barred, keeping the elves out but also allowing them to freely take the courtyard without being fired on. By the time they had control of the courtyard, chugging noises came from down the street. Tayan looked to see a line of five tractors approaching, followed by a battlewagon. Behind them rode knights flying banners for Tolina and Paladnia. He had the gates opened and ran out with Amber to keep them from shooting the elves by accident.

Zodiac was in the lead tractor. Tayan told him the situation then went back to the courtyard with the knights as Zodiac passed word back to send up the battlewagon. The elves, although expert bowmen, wore no armor nor were they as good at hand-to-hand fighting as the knights were. They needed the knights for an assault into the palace.

Sir Parson knelt at the base of the steps with his men as the battlewagon and two tractors leveled their cannons at the doors and windows. Between the machines, Sir Tartan stood ready with a company of Paladnian knights to join the rush once a breach was made. Tayan stood to one side, holding his sword aloft. Before he could drop it, commanding the cannons to fire, the palace doors burst open.

The defenders ran out, arms over their heads, screaming that they surrendered. The knights began to

funnel them to an empty area of the courtyard that still had the walls intact. Hoarcs came out also pleading for mercy, then Slavonic men and women and other servants emerged. The courtyard was filled to overflowing with prisoners.

At first, Tayan had thought they had seen the battlewagon and that was why they had given up, but the palace had no slots in the shuttered windows and the doors were also quite solid. They hadn't seen anything outside that could have caused them to give up. As the last few servants ran out, he went up to the doors.

The next one to appear wasn't a guard. Eric stepped out into the sunlight, battleaxe in one hand, sword in the other. Behind him was Shilo then a woman with stubs of horns on her forehead and small leathery wings on her back. The remainder of the group with them came out and faced the assembled armies.

The only one Tayan saw was Eric. He had come, and he was just as ragged and bloodied as he had even been. Beside him, Sir Parson was yelling for everyone to hold their positions. He barely heard him. Eric watched as he walked towards him.

Odif, covered in bruises and sporting purpled eyes, saw him. "Tayan!" she cried happily. Pulling loose from Scorpio and Jo-Jo, she limped over and flung her arms around him. "I thought you were dead," she sighed.

To the side, Shilo waved Zit over and put an arm around him. Grinning broadly, he said, "Buddy, you're gonna love this!"

Zit grinned anxiously. "What?"

Shilo patted him on the chest. "Let's just stay back and listen."

Tayan hugged Odif, but he and Eric had fixed their eyes on each other. Sensing the battle was over, the others formed a loose circle as the two men continued to stare. For a few moments, they just stood silently.

"I know you," Eric said softly. "I thought it killed you."

"Lots of people thought that," Tayan replied flatly. "Did you kill it?"

"Yeah." Tipping his head to the woman with wings, he said, "Me and Samantha finished it."

"Samantha?" Jo-Jo asked.

Eric turned to give him a hard gaze. "I gave her a proper name. You got a problem with that?"

"No problem, I like it," Jo-Jo assured him.

Odif pulled back and stood before her brother. "Tayan, before anything else happens, there is something I need to tell you."

"That you're my sister?" he asked.

She nodded and gave him a half-grin. "We've been bad. Please don't hate me."

Grasping her shoulder, he was sincere when he said, "I don't." Not wanting to talk about it further, he nodded towards Eric. "Where did you find him?"

She looked back. "Thump? We found him chained to a wall in the caves below. If it wasn't for him and Sam--I mean, Samantha--we'd all be dead."

Tayan raised an eyebrow. "You call him Thump?"

"Well, do you know his name?" she asked defensively.

Tayan cleared his throat. This was something that before this moment he would never have done. Eric had saved Odif and his other friends. The least he could do was admit who he was. He did keep his voice low. "Odif, that man is Eric, he's our father."

Odif gaped at him for a few seconds then turned to do the same at Eric. Looking back at Tayan, she smirked. "I've been real bad."

It only took Tayan a second to realize what she meant. "You didn't," he breathed.

Seeing his stern look, Odif tried not to smile. "Well, yes."

He flung an arm at Eric. "You did that with your own father?" he cried. "Is there any man you will not bed?"

Amber scowled at Odif. "Apparently not," she snorted.

Eric's face turned white. "What did you say?" he breathed.

Odif shrugged. "I guess I'm your daughter."

Eric's weapons clattered to the ground. Sam helped him sit down, or rather she controlled his fall as he sat to hold his head in his hands with a loud moan. Trying to comfort him, she said, "Dad, you didn't know!"

"You, too?" Tayan and Odif cried together.

Sam looked up at them. "Yes," she said in a small voice.

A peal of laughter rolled out from Zit. He held onto Shilo as he laughed so hard he cried. Shilo was chuckling but kept a close eye on Eric. He held Zit up as the elf doubled over, holding his sides. One foot kicked the ground in his mirth.

"It ain't funny," Eric growled as he looked up at Shilo and Zit. Louder, he said, "It ain't funny!"

When he grabbed for his axe and shot to his feet, Shilo took off with Zit, who was still laughing hysterically. Shilo banked around and flew behind the palace. Just before he disappeared from sight, he yelled, "It is too!"

Eric gripped his axe hard. "I'll kill both of them!"

"No, you won't!" Tayan snapped. "It's not their fault, it's hers!" he said, jabbing a finger at Odif.

“Hey!” Odif yelled back at him. “He needed it! You should have seen the shape he was in when we found him.”

“So you had to go and...,” Not wanting to finish his sentence, he gave her a shove. “Keep your damn legs shut!”

She shoved him back. “Don’t you push me!”

“Don’t be such a slut!” he barked.

Odif’s face reddened as she jabbed a finger at him. “You know how the ritual is done, so quit calling me names!”

“It’s a name you deserve!”

“You’re a snob, but I don’t go telling that to everyone, do I?”

They continued to yell at each other as Zodiac walked around them. He shook his head and faced Eric. “Anything left in there to fight?”

Still reeling from what he’d just learned, he mumbled, “No.” Tayan and Odif were now yelling at the same time with an occasional flail of an arm or a smack on each other’s shoulder. “They gonna kill each other?”

“No, this is normal,” Zodiac assured him. “They’ll scream at each other for a while then one will walk away. It’s nothing to be worried about.” Extending his hand, he introduced himself. “I am Lord Zodiac.”

Eric shook his hand. “I’m Eric, and this here is my other daughter, Samantha. You know the rest of them?”

“We’re all in that same Company,” Zodiac told him. “We could really use you, if you would like to join us.”

Loudly, Tayan announced, “That’s it!” as he threw up his arms. “I want nothing more to do with you!”

“Fine by me!” Odif yelled. “I don’t need your shit-assed attitude!”

“My attitude?” Tayan wailed. “You are the one who has to piss off everyone you know! Go back to the woods where you belong!”

“Great!” she spat, “I’m outta here!”

Odif turned to leave. Eric walked over and grabbed her arm. She stiffened and cocked back to punch him, hesitating long enough to see it wasn’t Tayan holding her. He waited until he was sure she wasn’t going to hit him then asked, “Before you go, could you tell me where to find my wife?”

“Sure,” she squeaked, her voice hoarse from yelling.

“Do you remember Lady Salinthia’s estate, in Tolina?” Tayan asked him.

Eric thought hard. “Think so. Real big house, with white stone columns in front.”

“Right. She’s still there waiting for you,” Odif told him.

Amber moved towards them, eyeing Odif and Tayan in case they started in again.

“No, she’s not. Belenaris Tolham took her to his estate. If she didn’t go, he was going to send Erica to an orphanage,” she explained.

Odif whipped her head around to stare at her. “He did what?”

Eric frowned at them. “Who’s Erica?”

Amber explained everything as well as she could. As she did, she noticed his eyes become harder. Although she knew she wasn’t in any danger, his penetrating gaze was enough to make her back off a few steps.

When she was finished, Eric was breathing heavily and quaking in rage. His voice was dead calm, though, when he shifted his eyes from Odif to Tayan. “If you two are done, could we go get my wife and daughter?”

Chapter 25

The after-dinner wine was spectacular. Aged properly, it was a delight to his pallet. The fragrance was as smooth as its taste and the color was a bright, clear burgundy. Heady with the superb drink, Belenaris tipped his head back and closed his eyes. If only everything were as perfect as his wine.

“Stephan, fill it again.”

“Yes, M’lord.”

Belenaris lazily raised his head and looked at Jeni, sitting in the upholstered armchair beside him. She sat bolt upright, not paying him any attention, as usual. Her radiant blonde hair was put up in wide, flat braids, each tied off with silver ribbon threaded loosely enough that they swayed gently when she moved her head. Her emerald-green gown was laced with silver, and her bracelets were the most expensive wrought silver money could buy. He bet that each of the stones on her ruby-encrusted wrists would go for five gold. With all that, her angelic face and her perfectly shaped elven ears, she should be the most beautiful creature in the world.

She wasn’t. The picture was ruined every time he glanced down and saw those large mounds that seemed to grow every day. The locket around her neck didn’t even lie flat on her chest. The gown cinched her breasts tightly, causing a deep cleavage the locket balanced on. It was beginning to look like she had her backside on her chest, which was not at all becoming for a lady of nobility.

“How can you stand to look like that?” he asked harshly. He waved his goblet so the liquid threatened to jump out. Stephan had learned to fill it only a third of the way full, or he would have splashed wine over himself and Jeni.

“Look like what?” she asked vacantly as she stared into the fire.

“Those things are horrid!” he said, poking a finger into her chest.

The instant he made contact, she raised an arm and knocked his hand away. She glared at him for a few seconds then returned her gaze to the fire. “I need to feed Erica. How I look is none of your concern.”

The entire first month since becoming her consort he had taken pains to be decent to her. He didn’t send her half-breed daughter away, and he had put up with the occasional sight of her feeding the mongrel just as an animal would. She still ran a good portion of his coach line as well as the stone quarries. She was even allowed out of the palace from time to time, with the appropriate guard. He tried, and yet she refused to even be polite to him, let alone show any gratitude.

He settled back and lifted his goblet, taking a deep breath as he savored the bouquet of the wine before gulping half the contents down. He decided right then he would make her look like the lady she was supposed to be. Fine women, like a fine wine, had to be molded.

“Lady Jenesalinthia,” he slurred, “I have decided that tomorrow we will seek the services of a wizard. I don’t care if he can shrink those things or removes them completely, but you will look like a lady and not some human beast.”

She was looking at him now, and her voice was as cold as her stare. “No.”

“No?” he repeated, amused that she was defying him.

Jeni stiffened. “Not before Erica is weaned,” she told him firmly.

He chuckled at her. She really meant it! He sobered as he remembered that “no” was one of her favorite words, especially when it came time to turn in at night. She kept her room locked up tight as a fortress. She even put a chair against the door handle. He was her consort, and bedding her was one of his rights.

Not that he was insanely attracted to her, but she did have a nice form, from the back. It was too bad she insisted on behaving like an animal. Then again, if she wanted to act and look like an animal, maybe he should mount her as one.

A sly grin came to his face as he slid up on the edge of his seat. He set the goblet down and envisioned taking her the only way she would understand.

“Stephan, that will be all tonight.”

“Yes, M’lord,” the footman said and walked out.

Jeni saw the look on his face and swallowed nervously. “It is getting late, I should get to bed,” she said formally.

When she stood up, he grabbed her arm and yanked her back down. “I think we need to be alone for a while,” he said, grinning broadly.

Shying back in her chair, Jeni cast him a hard look. “You are not my husband.”

He looked around the sitting room to be sure they were alone. The servants were all gone. They were on the second floor, so no one would be listening at the window. Leaning towards her, he asked, "Would you like to know what I know?" She didn't respond, so he took delight in telling her. "Your husband is imprisoned. He cannot escape, and there is only one thing that will free him." He raised a finger to stress his point. "I know what that thing is, and I will keep it from ever happening."

Leaning close enough that she shrank from his breath, he grinned. "You will give yourself to me, or your precious Erica will find herself on the steps of a slave trader before dawn breaks."

Jeni opened her mouth in shock. "You wouldn't!"

"I've been looking for a reason. Defy me, and she will live her life with a collar around her neck," he said as resolutely as he could with the slur in his voice.

Her face turned pale. She began to shiver and a tear rolled down her cheek. "You are a monster," she whispered.

"You are a freak," he stated, "and I shall take you as one." He grabbed her and tried to twist her around to face the back of the chair. She slipped down, and somehow forced him to lean over the back as she ducked out and away.

"Do you have no decency?" she cried. "At least force yourself on me in private!"

"It is my right!" he said, struggling up. He wavered a bit, but did stand on his own two feet. He walked over and tried to slap her. She pulled her head back and he missed. He tried again and she ducked. Enraged, he balled a fist. Thinking before he swung, he feinted, aiming a punch at where her head was. She ducked again, and he snatched a handful of hair. She cried out and grabbed his wrist as he hauled her around then threw her onto the couch.

The elaborate braids were now pulled out on one side. She started to get up, using the back of the couch for support. He planted a hand on her back and shoved her into it. "This is a much better view," he sneered. Holding her in place, he tore at the fine lace belt that gathered her gown. Ripping it loose, he flung it to the side. She started sobbing as he began shoving her gown up towards her waist.

"I'm glad I'm not you."

He froze and looked toward the window. On the windowsill, a tattered, bruised woman squatted, watching him. Mostly naked, she looked like she had just crawled through the dirt. She looked familiar, and as he thought about it he did remember seeing her before.

"I know you!" he announced. He eased his grip on Jeni, who turned back around to sit, pushing her gown back in place. "You are that druid woman. Get out of my home, you have no right to be here!"

"You have no right trying to rape my stepmother," Odif replied evenly. She looked over at Jeni. "Are you hurt?"

Jeni gave a weak shake of her head as she smoothed her hair back with shaking hands.

Belenaris puffed up his chest and yelled, "I'm going to call the guards and have you removed."

Odif cracked a twisted grin. "Have at it--they won't answer. Neither will your servants. I'm afraid they

are...indisposed.”

The footman had left the bottle of wine. He snapped it up by the neck and broke it against the edge of the table. Brandishing it at her, he sneered, “I am not afraid of you!”

Odif snorted. “It’s not me you have to worry about.” She got down off the sill and moved to lean against the wall, arms folded over her chest. “All I had to do was find Jeni.”

He tipped his head to the side slightly. “There are more of you here?”

“The whole family,” she stated.

The first hint of fear came to him. He grabbed Jeni and hauled her up, holding the bottle against one of those disgusting mounds. “Get out of my house! You have no right to be here!”

Odif’s face turned to stone. “I think we do. Don’t you agree, Dad?”

Jeni gasped. She grabbed the wrist holding the bottle then kicked backwards into his groin. He bent over in pain as she ran away, crying. He turned to chase her then stopped as she ran into the arms of the roughest-looking human he had ever seen.

Eric held one arm around Jeni as she cried wracking sobs of relief against his chest. He gently kissed the top of her head then looked up at Belenaris with murder in his eyes. His voice was a heavy growl.

“Odif, take Jeni and go get your sister.”

Odif bounced off the wall and walked right past Belenaris. She paused to look at him for a second. “I am so glad I’m not you,” she sighed. She went over and gently pried Jeni free. “Let’s go,” she said, putting an arm around her. Jeni cast a mournful look at him, as one might a condemned man.

He noticed the wicked-looking battleaxe the Red Man had. Every story he had ever heard, every tale he had scoffed at, came back in a rush. His bottle dropped to the floor and his bladder emptied. There would be no mercy.

Eric started towards him; and somewhere in his brain, he found the presence of mind to run. He fled to the other door, pawing at the handle. He got a grip on it and jerked it open then fled down the hall for his life. He heard the door crash back open as Eric chased him. Not wanting to see how close death was, he fled to the anteroom at the end of the hall. There, guards congregated for their rest breaks by the top of the stairs. If he could make it that far then he could put some men between him and the Red Man. He had to get to the stables and find a horse.

He charged into the anteroom, barely missing the wall as he turned for the stairs then stopped short. His guards were sitting placidly on a wooden bench. The woman who stood on the landing eyed him. She had hornlike stubs on her forehead, and bat wings rose from between her shoulder blades. She raised her arm towards him, and he felt something start to crawl around in his mind. In a flash, he remembered the fake Tayan’s warning.

If the Red Man gets free, it is best he finds you before we do.

Blind terror filled him. He turned and bolted the only remaining way to go. Running for the windows, he leapt up and launched himself out with a shriek. It was only after he was diving through the air that he

noticed the hard courtyard was far below him. Another shriek pealed out until he slammed into the stone-covered ground.

"I swear I didn't kill him," Eric told Tayan as they descended the stairs. He held Erica. Jeni was beside him, with Samantha beyond her. Tayan walked on his other side with Odif.

"He jumped out the window," Samantha explained. "I tried to stop him, but he'd lost his mind. There was nothing left to grasp."

Jeni walked close to Eric, her arm hooked in his as she gave Samantha nervous glances. She had never seen anyone who looked like her before. She looked scary, at best.

"You are one of my husband's children?" she asked again, not quite believing it.

Samantha looked over at Eric and smiled. "Yes, we saved each other."

"That's a very good way to put it," Odif told her. "Think positive, we've had enough negative to last the rest of our lives."

Tayan gave Odif a nudge. "Maybe even we can stop fighting for a while."

Odif nudged him back. "I'll try."

Seeing Eric again was a godsend, but Jeni hadn't been prepared to find out he had yet another child. Tentatively, she asked, "Should I expect any more surprises? This is...everyone, correct?"

"I guess," Eric said. He tickled Erica under the chin. She giggled and slapped at his hand as her arm waved up and down.

"Not exactly," Odif offered. Everyone stopped and looked at her.

"What do you mean, not exactly?" Eric asked.

"I--or rather, we--have another brother. My mother's son, Rogan. He'll be two this fall."

Jeni, looked up at Eric, not at all pleased by this news. "When did this happen?"

Eric didn't quite look at her. "When I was, umm, looking for those hoarcs in the Jude," he explained quietly.

"Cheer up! The more, the merrier," Odif said brightly. "I can't wait until he grows up. I want to teach him everything I can."

Eric gave her a stern look. "Yeah, but leave him alone, know what I mean?"

"Really," Tayan snorted.

Odif planted her hands on her hips. "You needed that. Besides, how were we to know--"

“Stop!” Jeni snapped. Holding a hand to her head to block out a most disgusting vision, she said, “I really *donot* want to know anything about it.”

Eric cleared his throat. “Yeah, drop it.”

“Please,” Samantha added. Changing the subject, she asked, “So, is everyone going back to the city?”

“Well, yeah, but I want to spend some time with Jeni and Erica first,” Eric told her. “I’ll come back to help rebuild.”

“General Cooper will be repairing his wagons for weeks, and there are hundreds of wounded,” Tayan told him. “It will be a while before we can move towards Elrad. Don’t feel rushed about returning right away.” Giving Eric a nudge, he added, “You did good. You deserve some time alone.”

“Why don’t we all go?” Jeni asked. Giving Eric’s arm a squeeze, she said, “I’m not letting you out of my sight again.”

Eric loved the idea of Jeni’s staying by him, but he also knew she was used to finer things in life. As far as he was concerned, she deserved them. “It will be rough. The place is wrecked, and just finding food will be tough for a while.”

“And who knows what kinds of things are still wandering about,” Tayan added. “It’s not the safest place to be. You have to think of Erica.”

Jeni surveyed their faces. “I think Erica needs to be with her father. I can help out, and it sounds like you’ll need all the help you can get. Everything here, Mom and Dad can tend to.”

“You sure?” Eric asked hopefully.

She beamed him a smile. “Absolutely.”

Samantha smiled at Erica as she chortled. Watching the child, she began to realize that Eric hadn’t been held as long as she thought. Odif’s brother was born only a couple years ago. Her heart sank as she realized that meant Eric couldn’t be her father. She let her eyes drift over to Odif, who looked back at her.

“It doesn’t matter,” Odif said. “You are one of us now.”

Everyone looked at the druid.

“What doesn’t matter?” Eric asked.

Odif motioned to Samantha. “Sam is having doubts whether or not you’re her real father. It doesn’t matter, I’ll always consider her my sister.”

Tayan eyed Samantha and gave a slight shrug. “Seems to me she needs a family pretty bad. I’m not going to let her down.”

“But what about me being half-demon?” Samantha asked. “That could cause trouble for all of you.”

Eric frowned at her. “Anyone wants to hurt you, they gotta get by me first. Odif’s right, you’re one of

us.”

Jeni reached over and clasped Samantha’s hand. “I have learned to deal with some very strange things. I think we will do just fine as long as we keep a good outlook and work together.”

In that touch Samantha felt acceptance. The years of loneliness were over for her. The sadness was being replaced by love, the yearning for a single friend filled by an entire family. She swelled with joy as she looked at the impossible collection of people she knew would always stand by her. It was from the bottom of her heart when she said, “Thank you.”

The End

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