

Part II: Journeys

Laraniros

Princess Fiora stood outside her wagon, exchanging pleasantries and gratitude to all the ones who saved her life. She seemed especially interested in the five strangers who had been traveling with the young man, Keirus, as well as his two fox companions, Tikala and Tamor. Once all was said and done, the five strangers were invited into the wagon, while the other three were given horses whose riders had fallen. And then, the images in the looking glass changed.

This time, it was really just flashes of the travelers as they went along their journey. They hadn't been there all that long, but so far, they had turned out to be exceptional fighters, especially the young woman who seemed to be the heart of the group.

"Who are they?" a low voice asked as the images flashed before him.

“I know not, my lord,” Morgia’s voice sounded. “...I came to report the whereabouts of the *nogo* and his Kuruuk pets. I know nothing about the others they travel with though.”

“Well, there must be *something* about them, or *Keirus* wouldn’t have taken an interest in them.”

“Are you so certain of that? You know he has a compassionate side for these mortals, just like his father.”

“Yes, but he’s never been so, and I hesitate to use the word, *devoted*, to them.”

The images still continued to change like a picture collage, but stopped when Geri appeared. “To *that* one especially,” the man responded.

“He fancies her,” Morgia answered casually. “...Just like he did his Isabelle.”

“Yes, but this one is a lot *stronger* than that pathetic woman. I don’t think she yet realizes it though.”

“So what are you going to do, my lord?”

There was a moment of silence between them, and then he began to chuckle maliciously. “I think we need to run them through a test,” he responded. “...Tell Rodin to prepare his army. I think we’re going to pay Federain Kingdom a little visit.”

“Yes, Crodin,” the sorceress responded.

* * * * *

-i-

Federain Palace appeared before everyone as they traveled. Keirus and the Kuruuks were just casually riding along with the other guards, but the five friends were just awestruck by it and they were taking turns sticking their heads out the windows to see it.

The palace did appear white, but as they drew nearer to it, they noticed that the bricks were just a very light gray color. They saw a few towers now that they were so close and each tower brandished Federain's flag. At the moment though, none of them had time to really speculate, so they just went on their way.

The travelers followed the guards until the party split into two groups. One of the groups then escorted the wagon in a different direction, while the second group took the eight travelers up the great steps. When they got to the top of the steps, the doors opened.

Once they were inside, again, the guards split up. Two of the men then escorted everyone into the throne room.

The throne room was a large, majestic hall. The great walls were adorned with tapestries bearing the blue and white colors of the kingdom, as well as the kestrel symbol in the center of each. (Federain was most noted for their birdmastery, which is why the kingdom adopted the symbol of the brilliant bird). As the eight entered, daylight shined in through the great windows on either side. And the light reflected off the polished floor. At the head of the room, they saw the regal King Fellan as he sat on his throne.

The guards approached the king first and gave a bow. As the five friends bowed though, Keirus and the Kuruuks went to their knees. And feeling out of place, the five then decided to just follow suit. As they remained down on one knee before the king, the guards explained the situation as their monarch listened.

King Fellan was an aged man with a graying beard and hair. And though he was an older gentleman, his demeanor was still very proud. His daughter, Princess Fiora, stood at his side, her long brown hair falling over her shoulders. Fellan put one arm on the armrest of his chair and slowly began to get up. “Forgive me, young Keirus, for I’ve been ailing these last few years and am unable to move as I once used too,” he said.

Keirus looked up at him and shook his head. “You don’t have to,” he responded.

“But it should be I, who bows down before you,” Fellan pressed, rather surprised by Keirus’s modesty.

“I do not ask it...” Keirus said. “...Not of anyone. There is no need for it.”

Fellan settled back in his throne again. “I am indebted to you twice then, Keirus, but please...” and he put a hand out. “...You’ve no need to remain on your knees. Rise up,” and he brought his hand up.

“Only if my companions be allowed to stand up as well. They helped to protect her highness as much as I did.”

“Well then, you may all rise,” he said and everyone stood up. “...I am indebted to all of you, for saving my daughter’s life. So please, join us in the celebration of her return tonight. I can offer all of you lodgings for the night, should you choose to stay.”

Shauna clasped her hands. Her green eyes dazzled. “Does that mean we get real beds tonight, you’re majesty?” she asked hopefully, tiring of sleeping on the ground, even after their stay in the Nevrye land, Eamalie, *and* the forest of Ai’Leanin. Among a great many other things at home, she really missed her bed.

Fellan let out a small chuckle. “Yes, Lady Shauna, it does mean you all get real beds and our best accommodations.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, *thank* you.”

“Ireni,” Fellan said to one of the servant women who was standing there. She gave a small bow.

“Yes, you’re majesty?” she asked.

“Please show these good travelers to comfortable rooms for the night. And get them some garments to wear to the celebration.”

She bowed her head again. “Yes, sire,” she said and walked over to them. “...Please, follow me, Lords and Ladies.” And she began walking.

“Boy...” Chris said. “...I think I could get used to this.”

“I think we all could...” Shauna said and her eyes sparkled delightfully. “...So we should enjoy it as much as possible. And did you guys hear?” and she shoved Geri playfully in the arm. “...We’re getting garments! Dresses! We get ballroom dresses! How cool is that?”

Geri forced a small smile at her friend’s excitement. “It’s cool,” she said.

Tikala was following after them, but she saw Keirus still standing next to Fellan and then turned to her brother. “Tamor, I’ll be along in a moment,” she said to him. Tamor gave a small nod and then followed after the others.

“Keirus?” Tikala said as she walked back to him and he glanced at her. “...Are you coming?”

He put a hand up. “Yes, just a moment...” he said. She gave a small nod and then went to rejoin the others. With a nod,

Keirus turned back to the king. "...You're majesty..." he began. "...I do have a request."

"You've only to name it," the king responded.

"Good..." he said. "...And please, heed my request. I think that you should try and contact all of your allies throughout Lirosial and join forces. The attack on her highness is not going to be the worst of it. As we speak, I have no doubt that Crodis is preparing an army to march all over the land, destroying everything in its path. And he will stop at nothing."

"But surely, the Gods will grant us strength enough to fight him," the king said.

Keirus shook his head. "The reason I am here is because the Gods are unable to interfere. They are powerless right now. And until that power is restored, Crodis will wreak havoc on you and your neighbors. Why do you think that Teribtrus, as well as other villages keep calling for aid? The attacks have started and eventually, they will reach the palace..." and he shook his head.

"...And once they get here, if you stand it alone, I don't know what will happen. Call for aide, you're majesty. You will get it. Federain is the most influential of all the kingdoms and if something were to happen to it, all of Lirosial would fall."

Fellan nodded. "I have an audience with King Dram of the seaside kingdom, Caloon, this evening. He should be arriving here momentarily. And when he gets here, I shall tell him. Thank you, Keirus. Is there anything else?"

He paused for a moment and debated. “Yes...” he said after the brief silence. “...I ask that you not tell anyone else that I’m here. If the wrong ears hear, I fear it might only put you in jeopardy.”

“It is done,” Fellan said and gave a small nod.

“Thank you,” he said and with that, he retreated to his room.

Keirus got to the top of the steps and stopped. All seven of his traveling mates were gathered in the hallway, but the five friends were badgering both Kuruuks with questions. Tikala's head was down and she had her hands on her temples. Tamor was keeping his hands up in his own defense to ward off the barrage of questions that were being asked. He knew very little about what was actually happening, but the others still held him equally as responsible as his sister and Keirus.

A strong surge of relief came over both the Kuruuks when they heard and saw as Keirus had just joined them. When the foxes glanced over to him, the other five turned as well.

Tyler crossed his arms and leaned against the wall next to one of the rooms. "Dude..." he said. "...You have got some serious explaining to do here."

Keirus gave a nonchalant nod. "I expect that I do..." he said calmly and gestured to the open door nearest to him. "...But can we do it elsewhere besides the hallway?" And he

walked into the room. There were some exchanged comments as the others followed him inside.

“You know...” Tamor started. He really didn’t want to be in there when the five friends exploded. He had heard enough before Keirus came to the rescue. “...I think I’m just gonna remain the neutral party here and just keep watch.”

Tikala was picking up the rear of the party as they entered the room. Her brother had stopped just outside the door and when she got there, she pinched his sensitive ear. Though her touch wasn’t that hard, he let out a small yelp of pain, but he had to follow. “In...” she said. “...You’re involved in this too now, brother.” And with that, she closed the door.

Keirus took a seat on the bed and looked at all of them. Chris pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down. Tyler and Missy both sat on the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. “Okay...” Tyler said to him. “...We all told you our story, so now it’s your turn.”

“Yeah...” Chris chimed in. “...What’s all this stuff about being the ‘Son of Gods’?” he asked and then paused for a moment. “...Real gods?”

“Yes,” Keirus said with a nod. “...Aside from my name, ‘Son of Gods’, as well as Blademaster, is what mortals know me by.”

Chris’ eyes widened. “You’re not kidding,” he said.

“No,” he answered and shook his head. “...I’m a demigod.”

Missy glanced at him. “What’s that?” she asked.

Keirus turned to her. “A demigod is half mortal. My father, Hycen, is the King of Gods, the True Gods. He’s also known as the Skylord. My mother, Delana, was a mortal, like all of you.”

Chris shrugged and made a ‘T’ sign with his hands. “Time out for a moment, huh? Okay, you...” and he pointed to Keirus. “...Are half god, right?”

He nodded.

“Okay...” Chris went on. “...So, what’s the diff between you and a True God?”

“As a demigod...” Keirus started. “...I’ve been granted certain abilities that only the Gods possess. For instance, like all Gods, I too am immortal. However, I am not immune to illnesses that plague the mortal world, but my tolerance for them is a great deal higher than a mortal’s. I am faster than any mortal, stronger, and I am granted a limited amount of power.”

“Like what?” Shauna asked.

“Shapeshifting is the one I use the most.”

“Shapeshifting? As in like, morphing into something completely different?”

He nodded. “I can shapeshift in the blink of an eye.”

“No way...” Chris said and couldn’t hold in the chuckle. “...I think you’re smoking something now.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Come on dude, shapeshifting? Get real. We’re not that gullible.”

“Give me something to turn into then.”

Chris looked at him. “Okay...” he said and thought for a moment, as did everyone else. The one time they needed random things to pop into their heads, was the one time they all went blank in their minds.

“As long as it’s living,” Keirus added.

Chris tapped on his chin and then had an idea. “How about a dragon?”

Keirus shook his head. “A dragon is too powerful for me. I could do it, but I would weaken myself considerably, if not kill myself.”

“All right...” Chris said. “...We’ll let that one slide. We don’t need you to be doing anything *that* extreme. Hmmm, how about...” but then his voice trailed.

“A squirrel,” Shauna said randomly.

Chris turned to her. “A squirrel?” he asked.

“...Hundreds of animals in the world and you pick a squirrel?”

She gave an innocent shrug. “Well, it was the first thing that popped into mind, I’m sorry. Can you come up with something better?”

“I can do a squirrel...” Keirus said to keep them from arguing and they all turned to him. In an instant, he became enveloped in a swirling whirlwind. Just as quickly as the

whirlwind began, it was gone. In Keirus's place on the bed, there was a fluffy white squirrel sitting on its haunches. Its blue eyes stared at all of them and he put his tiny forearms on his haunches. "...Would you prefer something more convincing?" he asked. He was well able to talk in his squirrel form, but his voice was very high pitched and tiny.

Tikala and Tamor were used to Keirus shifting shapes so they both merely shrugged it off. The others though, were just awestruck at how Keirus could turn from a strong, capable person into something so small.

Chris leaned down closer to the bed until he was at eye level with Keirus. "That is so, weird," he said.

"I can do more too..." and then he shook his head. "...But we're not going to get into that right now."

Geri turned to him. "Why didn't you tell us the truth? I mean, we told you ours and that wasn't easy to do," she said after a moment. "...Did you not trust us?"

Keirus turned to her. "It isn't that..." he began. The whirlwind reappeared and expanded, rather than condensed as it had before and he was sitting back on the bed in his human appearance. "...It more has to do with the wrong ears overhearing it. I was hoping that Crodis wouldn't find me yet, but now that that witch has seen me, she'll tell him..." he let out a huff. "...She probably already has and now he'll send someone to hunt me down before I can get any further." Even

after he said it, his tone remained steady, as if he already knew his fate.

“Yeah...” Tyler began. He put a finger on his chin.
“...Who was that chick anyway?”

Keirus and Tikala exchanged glances and he gave a nod, then the Kuruuk turned to Tyler. “It was some time ago...” she began. “...But do you remember when we mentioned Morgia?” Everyone nodded, as did she. “That was her.”

Tamor was gently caressing his sensitive ear lobe where his sister had gotten a hold of him. “I swore Morgia had been destroyed after...” and he stopped himself in mid sentence. It really wasn’t his story to tell, though he was very much a part of it as Keirus and Tikala were, but he didn’t want to get into more trouble. “...*It* happened.”

Tikala gave a nod. “As did we all, but she seems to have recovered from it...” and her gaze met Keirus’s. “...And that’s the only way Crodis could have sealed the Gods in that trap.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he agreed.

“Wait, wait...” Geri said and put a hand up. “...After what had happened?”

Keirus exchanged glances with the Kuruuks and then took a deep breath. “To understand everything that is going on, you must be given some background.”

“Yeah,” Tyler said dryly. “...That would be nice.”

Keirus took a deep breath once more before he explained. “In the Realm of Gods, or Iomilaris...” he said and

gestured between himself and the Kuruuks. "...Where we come from, mortals are not highly thought of. They're always asking for help even about the simplest things. They don't think for themselves, and that's what we don't like..."

And then he shook his head. "...Though we prefer to stay out of mortal affairs, if the need is dire enough, we will step in and aid them..." and he cleared his throat. "...Anyways. Though it is preferable by most, myself included for a time, to avoid the mortal realm, if ever we need to seek sanctuary from our own world, we come into this one. We take on alternate forms and walk among them, with none of them the wiser. There have actually been..." he said with a deep breath.

He clasped his hands and let out a sigh. "...A few instances where one of the Gods..." and he softened his voice. "...Have fallen in love with mortals. And my father..." he began a little louder. "...Is no exception to that. That's how he met my mother. To make a long story short, my father's love for her absolutely infuriated his brother, Crodis..."

"...Crodis does not believe any mortal has a right to be permitted into Iomilaris, no matter what they've done. And when my father took a mortal woman to be his bride, Crodis would not stand for that, and it sent him into a rage. And that's when he decided to make Hycen fall and in the process, hoping to kill me off as well. Then he could take over. That's why he stole my father's circlet. Crodis may only be a *Lesser* God, but that circlet grants him supreme powers."

There was a silence among all of them. None of them knew the difference between a 'Lesser' God, and a God like Keirus's father. But either way, they all shared the same thought: that this journey of theirs' was only going to get harder. And if the end of this journey meant facing a God more powerful than Keirus, they weren't sure if they could do it.

"Well, that's a problem..." Chris said. "...But, if you're a God, and your dad's a God, can't you two just go in there and kick the shit out of this guy?"

Keirus looked at him. "My father is powerless right now, as are the other Gods. Crodis and Morgia have somehow trapped them in an alternate world where their powers are nothing. And until my father's circlet is returned to them, they will remain in that world."

"Well, can't *you* just go in there and destroy them, then?" Tyler asked.

Keirus shook his head. "Not alone."

"But you're a God..." said Chris. "...You've got to have *some* other powers besides shape changing."

Again, Keirus shook his head. "My powers aren't even close to those of the higher Gods. Crodis may only be a Lesser God, but he's more powerful than I'll ever be. I'm only half god, whereas he is full. My powers are nothing more than festival tricks when compared to his."

"And you all have forgotten that Morgia is against us as well..." Tikala interjected. Her ears flopped back and forth as

she shook her head. "...This is no small task that you've all joined."

Tamor leaned against the wall. "Well either way, this task must be finished, or all of Lirosial will suffer..." and he pointed to them. "...Which does include the five of you as long as you're here."

-iii-

“Oh my God!” Shauna exclaimed as she twirled around in a circle. Any doubtful thoughts lingering in her mind since their discussion with Keirus were gone. The strapless green, satin gown she wore quickly changed her mind. And as she moved, the gown swirled around with her. “...This dress is absolutely *gorgeous!*” She smoothed her hands along the skirt, just to feel the shimmering fabric under her fingers. She had a large white ribbon around her waist. And now that her brown hair was a little longer, two small white ribbons adorned it on either side above her ears. She also wore white gloves that went up to her elbows.

She walked over to the full mirror in the bedroom and put her hands on her cheeks. “And this green totally matches my eyes.”

“You like it then?” one of the seamstresses in the room asked.

“Like it?” Shauna said and took a step back, glancing down to the bottom of the dress as she did so. “I absolutely *love* it!” She turned around and put her arms out. “...Well girls, what d’you think?”

“You look great...” Geri said as she sat on the bed. Her dress had two frills where the sleeves would be and she had a silvery sash around her waist, and also wore white gloves. Some of her long, dark brown hair was pulled up in the back. The hairpiece *she* had was decorated with two roses. She smoothed a wrinkle out in the skirt as she looked on her beaming friend.

“Really?” Shauna asked and spun around again to look back in the mirror.

“Really...” Geri echoed. “...Chris is gonna die when he sees you.”

She cocked her eyebrow furtively. “I certainly hope not, because...” and she turned back around and glanced at the rear of the dress. “...I think we’re gonna be bailing outa this party a *little* early.”

Missy looked over at her friend. She was standing on a footstool to boost herself up while one of the other servants fixed up the hem in her long, blue dress. “With you in that dress...” she said. “...You’d better hope he can last *that* long.” Aside from the hem, she was pretty set. One side of her curly blond locks was pulled up with a soft lavender ribbon to match the sash she was wearing. She also had the long white gloves on as well.

The seamstress took one last look at the dress when she was done. She gave a nod of approval when she was satisfied. "That should do," she said and looked up at Missy. "...How does it feel?"

Missy looked down the long blue dress. "It feels good," she said.

"Good..." the seamstress said. "...Then I think you're done. Step off, dear."

Missy jumped off the stoop and joined Shauna by the mirror to look at herself. "How do I look?" she asked.

Shauna turned to her and studied her up and down. "Girl, you look fabulous..." she said and gave a thumbs up. "...You're gonna have Tyler by the balls."

"Well..." Missy said with a timid shrug. "...I don't know about *that*..." but her voice trailed as she gazed into the mirror. Then, she and Shauna turned to Geri.

"Hey..." Shauna said and gestured to Geri. "...Get over here," she said.

Geri walked over to them and Shauna looped her arms around both of their shoulders. The three felt and looked just like princesses in their party gowns. It also brought back some pleasant memories from when they had been in high school, getting ready for the big dance and they absolutely loved it. "Girls..." Shauna said as they looked into the mirror. "...We're gonna kill'em."

* * *

The grand hall was alight with the bright, crystal chandelier in the ceiling. Golden sconces with candles lined each wall of the ballroom. The room was crowded with chatter from all the courtiers in attendance, as well as the musicians playing their string instruments, their pipes, flutes, and even a golden harp. There was one section of the floor cleared for dancing and that section was crowded with dancers. A buffet of cheese, bread, sweet rolls, fine cuts of meat, poultry, hors d'oeuvres, and fine wine was set up on one end of the room. King Fellan was seated in his throne with another monarch at his side. The two men quietly conversed among themselves as the party went on.

The three girls were all flushed with delight at the sounds, the smells, and the fact that they all looked like goddesses in those dresses. They saw Chris and Tyler at the base of the steps chatting with each other. They looked pretty good in the outfits they were wearing too, both having a loose, white shirt underneath a tunic. Chris' tunic was a dark green with intricate embroidery to decorate it. Tyler's tunic was dark blue and it too had intricate stitching to decorate it, but his pattern was different from Chris'. Both also wore a pair of breeches tucked into their boots. The girls exchanged glances with each other and then made their way down the steps.

A smug grin spread across Shauna's face. "Hey boys," she said when they got there. Chris and Tyler turned around and both of their reactions were the same. And if their eyes had gone any bigger, they might've rolled right out of the sockets.

"Wow, you girls look great," Tyler said to them.

"Yeah..." Shauna said, grinning from ear to ear. "...We think so too..." and she gave him a little swat on the chest. "...You boys don't look half bad either." She walked over to Chris. "Well?" she asked smugly, thoroughly enjoying teasing him.

He took her hands. "*You* look amazing," he said to her.

"Thank you."

Missy looked around as she held onto Tyler's hand. "Where're the others?" she asked in regards to their absent traveling companions. She turned to him.

He shrugged. "Don't know..." he said. "...Maybe they think they're being punished or something."

On her rounds, Princess Fiora spotted the five of them and walked over. "Oh, you five look *wonderful*," she complimented and clasped her hands. "...I trust the outfits are tailored to your fit."

"They're great," Shauna said. "...I've never had my own seamstress before."

“I have to admit...” Fiora said. “...It is nice...” and she turned to the two young men. “...And you two look so handsome. The outfits suit you as well?”

“They’re nice...” Tyler said. “...Pretty comfortable actually.”

“Good...” she said. “...Then come. Let us mingle.” She gestured for them to follow after her.

The princess took them along on her rounds and introduced them to some of the courtiers who were in attendance. Once that was done, they helped themselves to the buffet and wine and then joined in some dancing. Though none of them had the slightest idea of how to do any of the moves, after watching a few dances, they picked up on it fairly well.

Keirus stood at the top of the steps and looked over the party. It was a relief to him over seeing the celebration underway. It was a dark time for the whole of Lirosial, but at least the people weren’t letting it get their spirits down. He nodded to himself. It was nice to see.

The demigod had managed to keep himself scarce up until now, but he wanted to go down there. It wouldn’t hurt for him to cut loose for an evening either.

Keirus’ gaze wandered over the room before him and then it landed on the dancing circle, specifically to the three girls. He watched as Geri and Shauna had partnered up, doing their own dancing to the music. Missy, Tyler, and Chris were

near the front of the circle just laughing over Geri and Shauna's display. Keirus couldn't hide the grin that came to his face either.

Just then, Tikala approached him from behind. "We're going to the barracks," she said. "...If the two of us are in attendance, it will only attract attention. I would imagine that your name is at least a common one among the mortals, so I don't think it will be given much notice."

"Probably..." he said as he watched Geri. She and Shauna continued to do their version of swing dancing to the fast melody of the music. All the people around them were now clapping along with the beat.

The Kuruuk followed his glance down to the floor. Her ears went back in irritation because he was paying more attention to Geri than to her. "Keirus, are you even listening to me?" she asked and then Tamor stepped in.

"Tikala, dear sister of mine..." he began. He put his hands on her shoulders and started urging her towards the hallway. "...Perhaps we should head up to the barracks. Keirus is young and there's a party to be had."

He turned to the two Kuruuks. "What?"

Tamor glanced at him, but then quickly turned to Tikala. "Case in point," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Keirus asked again.

The male Kuruuk shook his head. “It’s nothing to worry about. You, go and enjoy yourself while Tikala and I go to the barracks.”

Tikala turned to him. “Keirus, I thought-” she began.

“Tikala, barracks,” Tamor said. He urged her down the hallway while walking alongside of her.

“I thought he was going to tell her,” she began.

“Tikala...” Tamor said. “...Leave the course be. It is set out a certain way, and it will end a certain way. Let him enjoy himself before that course does come to an end.”

Keirus watched as the two foxes disappeared down the hallway. He couldn’t quite make out what they were saying to each other so he didn’t pay it much mind. He was already dressed to join the party so there was no reason why he shouldn’t. Without another thought, he walked down the staircase.

-iv-

The demigod made his way through the crowd, courteously stopping for small talk if anyone approached him. As he finished a handshake with one gentleman, Keirus saw four of his companions standing by the buffet table refreshing themselves and walked over to join them.

“Hey, there he is,” Tyler said and took a swig of the wine.

“We were wondering where you and the other two had gone,” Shauna said to him and then she looked around.

“... You’re here, but where are they?”

“They both went to the barracks. They don’t want to attract any attention to us.”

“Probably a smart idea,” Tyler said. He and Chris turned to each other and nodded.

“Ooo...” Shauna then said to Keirus and took a few steps towards Missy. “... You’re the expert here. How do we

look? Do we fit in?” The two girls struck a pose in their dresses.

He nodded as he looked at them. “You girls look enchanting,” he said.

“Enchanting? Wow...” Shauna said, her eyes sparkling with delight, and her cheeks flushing at the compliment, especially coming from him, but then she turned to her affianced and grinned. “...That’s a new one...” and then she glanced back at Keirus. “...Do we really?”

“Very much so...” he answered. He put a hand out. “...May I?”

“You may...” she answered and put her hand in his and he kissed it. He turned to Missy and did the same thing.

“Enchanting...” Shauna mused as she walked over to her fiancé. She gave him a playful nudge in the arm. “...You’ll have to log that one away for later.”

“Enchanting, huh?” Chris asked with a nod.

“Yup...” she responded and turned back to Keirus. She then stepped aside to fully expose the food. “...Hungry?” she asked.

“Actually...” he began. He put his arms behind his back. “...I’m good, but thank you.” And then he looked around. “...Where is Geri?” he inquired and then turned back to her.

“Uhhh...” she started and looked around, but she didn’t see her friend. “...Where did Geri wander off too?”

Tyler was holding onto his wine glass and aimed it towards the terrace across the room. “She said she was going out to get some air,” he responded.

Shauna put her hands on her hips. “She didn’t tell me that,” she said.

“You were in idle conversation when she said it, so she told me,” said Tyler and then he took a drink of the wine.

Keirus glanced towards the terrace and saw a few people out there, but Geri’s white gown really stood out against the dark background as she stood at the railing, and he turned back to them. “Thank you,” he said and then started making his way through the crowd to get to the terrace.

Shauna watched as Keirus walked outside. She was positive that they all knew something was going on between the two, but she felt just awful. She shook her head and let out a small sigh. “I hope they know what they’re doing,” she said.

“What d’you mean?” Missy asked and glanced towards the terrace as well.

“I mean that once we have to leave, those two are both gonna go through some serious hell. I mean, I think we’ve all come around to Keirus...” Shauna said and turned back to them. She put a hand on her chest. “...*I* consider him to be a friend now.”

The other three gave their nods. None of them had really stopped to think about it, but it was actually true. Shauna

looked back to the terrace. “And it is gonna be hard saying good bye to him, but it’s gonna kill Geri to have to do it.”

“What? Are you saying we should sabotage things for them?” Chris asked her.

Shauna turned to him. “No, no. I’m not saying that at all. I’m just...worried, that’s all.”

“Well you know...” Tyler said and looked out onto the terrace. “...They’re both adults, they can both make their own decisions. I mean, if they’ve got a good thing going, why ruin it, you know? They both know that this is all going to end eventually, but it’s obviously not stopping them. Most likely, they won’t see each other again after this is over, ever. Let’em enjoy what they’ve got, while they still got it.”

“But Tyler...” she began and walked up to him. “...You *know* it’s really going to hurt her. You two have both been friends since you were in diapers practically. You know how she gets.”

He nodded. “I know that, but it’s going to hurt her even more if we all get in the way...” and then he shook his head. “...You can’t force a person to deny their feelings. Geri and Keirus have each other *now*, so I say just leave’em be.”

*

Geri was leaning on the railing taking in the fresh night air. Behind her, she heard the noises from the celebration mixed

in with the humming of the insects outside and it had her thinking. The very last dance that she had ever attended, her then boyfriend, stood her up and since then, she hadn't gone to one until now.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard a woman's light laughter and she turned. On the other end of the terrace, she saw a young couple standing there talking. As she watched the expressions on their faces and their body language, she could tell that they were truly in love. Their eyes sparkled lovingly in the moonlight as they gazed at each other.

Geri watched as the young man bent down and kissed the woman. It wasn't a quick peck on the lips, but a deep, meaningful kiss. After their kiss, the young couple linked hands and then walked back into the ballroom. And she was once again alone.

A sigh escaped her as she looked over the land before her. She saw the palace gates and beyond that, was the path that they had traveled earlier in the day. She had all of her friends there with her, but she still felt lonely. And for the first time since their breakup, Geri found herself thinking about her ex, Matt, and they had broken up nearly eight months ago.

But when she and Matt were together, she recalled having some crazy times with her friends. And now that he wasn't there, Geri knew that her friends were taking it easy with each other's affections, pretty much for her sake, and that

bothered her. *But*, she thought and gave a small shrug. ...*What can you do?*

Geri rested her chin in her hand. She didn't know if it was really Matt who she wanted anymore, but she wanted someone there with her. She had a longing to hold someone and gaze into his eyes, as the young couple that had just been out there had done. Shauna had Chris and Tyler had Missy, but Geri had no one, until Keirus came to her mind.

As he came to her mind though, she recalled Tikala's warning. When she thought about it, it felt as if her heart sank down to her feet. She couldn't just ignore her feelings.

It didn't even matter to her who he really was. He was still the same person and he had still won over a part of her. Knowing who he really was hadn't changed anything that she felt, not now, not ever. She was a little disappointed in him for not telling them sooner, but disappointments could be worked out.

Geri leaned on the railing in front of her and she found herself back in her fantasy world (where she *wouldn't* be reprimanded by anyone), wondering what it would feel like to be held in his strong embrace. She hadn't had anyone, not even a fling, since she broke up with Matt, *but forget him*, she thought. What *would* it feel like to have Keirus's arms around her? To have him hold her as he whispered sweet, yet sultry, invites into her ear.

Keirus had his arms behind his back as he walked out onto the terrace. Geri's back was to him, but he could tell that she was deep in thought. About what though, he didn't know. He stopped walking, just to watch her. She was so beautiful, standing against the railing like she was. In her white gown, she seemed so angelic, standing there, glowing against the indigo night sky. He half-expected to see white, feathered wings sprout from her shoulders. He lightly cleared his throat and walked out to her.

Geri turned around with a start when she heard the soft noise behind her. "*Oh...*" she squeaked, both from embarrassment at her red cheeks and from being startled. She put a hand on her chest. "...You scared me." Her cheeks were already flushed as it were from some of her adult rated thoughts (that were still running through her mind), and it didn't help the situation to see him standing there, looking especially appealing in the outfit he was wearing.

"Jeez," she squeaked when she couldn't get those thoughts out of her mind right away. She turned around and put her hands on the railing.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded and a muffled 'mm hmm' sounded from her

"I apologize..." he said, still standing in his spot. "...I didn't mean to scare you."

Geri let out a few breaths and fanned herself with her hand. The cool air had suddenly grown a little heated. "Oh,

that's okay..." she said and cleared her throat. She re-composed herself and turned to him. "...Uh, what are you doing out here?"

Keirus gave a small shrug. "I was actually wondering the same thing..." and he nodded back towards the ballroom. "...How come you're not in enjoying the celebration?" He leaned on the railing next to her.

"Oh, I was just...taking in the fresh air..." she stammered and looked over the ground below her.

There was a brief silence between them and he turned to her. "Do you mind if I say something?" he asked after a moment.

She turned to him. "No, go ahead."

He turned around and leaned his back against the railing. "I think that you look absolutely radiant tonight," he said.

Geri's cheeks flushed again and she glanced at him. She felt like she could just melt, but she was able to at least fake a hardened expression. "Are you trying to charm your way out of the doghouse? For keeping secrets from us?" she asked.

"I don't know..." he answered and a small grin spread across his face. "...Is it working?"

A small smile came across her face and she purposely paused to leave him hanging, but she couldn't stay silent for long. She put her back to the railing now too. "Yeah..." she said. "...It's working."

"How far do I have to go to get completely out?"

She glanced at him. If there was one thing with blue eyes, they could always dazzle their way out of trouble, and Keirus was no exception to that. His deep azure eyes especially captivated her. “If you keep that charm of yours up, you won’t have very far to go at all.”

“Really? Well then, I suppose I should keep working at it.”

“You really don’t have to work very hard at it at all. I really have no reason to be angry. You didn’t do anything wrong, just took things at your own pace.” She gave a small shrug. “...And I can understand why you did it too.”

“Eh, it would have come up sooner or later,” Keirus responded.

“You could have said something sooner. None of us would say anything. I mean honestly, who are we gonna tell?” Geri went on.

He turned to her. “I could have said something sooner. It wasn’t you and your friends whom I didn’t trust; it was everyone else. It was never something I wanted to get out in the open, that’s all...” and he snorted. “...Not that it matters anymore.”

“Well even so...” she said and glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “...Your secret would have been safe.”

Keirus gave a nod. “I know.”

The music and the party kept on behind them as they stood at the railing. The stars shined and twinkled as they kept

watch over the celebration from their heavenly domicile. Keirus looked up at the sky just as a star shot across it and he looked down in thought. “Geri...” he began after a moment and they turned to each other. “...Would you care to dance?”

Geri’s eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. “Dance?” she asked as her stomach turned into knots. Keirus nodded. “...Oh, I...” and the knots were now joined by butterflies. “...Don’t dance very well,” she said slowly.

“Really?” he asked. “...Because when I saw you and Shauna dancing before, I was just as intrigued as the audience was.”

She let out a chuckle. “That was just goofing around,” she said.

“One couldn’t tell...” and he gave a small shrug. “...But if you’d rather not-”

“Well...” she said before he could finish. Part of her longing was about to be filled, she realized. To her, he looked absolutely irresistible anyway, even *more so now* though because of how he was dressed. He was typically dressed for a formal occasion, wearing a loose, white shirt, with a black vest over it, and black pants and boots. The ensemble was both lavish and simple at the same time, and it was so perfectly fitted to him.

“...I...suppose I could give it a shot...” she said. “...But...you’d have to lead, I...don’t really know the steps.”

“I’ll show you,” he said. He nodded his head towards the crowd. “...Would you prefer to go inside, or do you want to practice out here?”

On the terrace, it would just be the two of them, Geri realized. And she realized that no one would be there to reprimand them for it. And since that was the case, she didn’t mind at all. It wasn’t crowded out there and it was cooler outside, temperature wise. “I think...” she said. “...That out here would be okay, to start,” she added quickly.

“That’s fine...” he said. He put his hand out and she held onto it. He took her other hand and put it on his shoulder. And when he slid his hand around her waist, lightly touching the small of her back, pulling her just a little closer, Geri felt a tingle in her stomach, but it was a nice feeling. She had never felt like that before, with anyone.

They had the entire terrace to themselves and they took full advantage of that. They waltzed the entire stretch of it and when they got back to the center, he spun her out. “You said you don’t dance well?” he asked when she came back to him.

“Well, you’re the one doing the leading. You obviously know what you’re doing, I’m just going along with it,” she responded.

He shook his head. “I’m hardly doing anything at all. You’re a wonderful dancer.”

“Well...” she said. “...I try.” They danced around some more and Geri didn’t want to stop. It had been so long for her

without having someone to hold onto. And to have someone hold her in his arms, even if it was only dancing, it was something she really yearned for.

Everything that was happening seemed like a dream to her. She was at a fancy party in a beautiful gown and she had her ‘prince charming’ holding her as they danced. For a moment, she didn’t even know if any of this was real. But how she felt at that moment, *what* she felt was very real, and she fully intended to keep it going as long as she possibly could.

When the music stopped though, they did as well, then bowed and curtsied to each other. “I don’t think that was very hard...” Keirus said. “...Do you?”

“No...” she answered. “...I guess it wasn’t as bad as I thought it might be. I’m really not that talented when it comes to dancing.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think anyone would be able to tell. *I* couldn’t and I was the one dancing *with* you.”

Another melody had started, but this one was a little faster paced than the last one had been. But Geri was just as eager to learn the steps to this one as well and so they kept dancing until they decided to go inside and refresh themselves.

While they were dancing, she hadn’t meant to kill the mood, but she saw when Shauna and Chris retreated from the celebration. And they were going up the stairs rather quickly. She couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped her lips.

“What is it?” he asked.

She let out a small sigh. "Oh...Chris and Shauna. Those two are characters..." she said. He turned around and saw when they disappeared down the hallway. "...Anytime, anyplace..." Geri went on and shook her head. "...They don't care."

"Well..." he shrugged. "...There are many ways to show someone you care for them-" he put his arm on her back and she dipped "-Some just prefer certain methods to others..." and then he brought her back up. "...There's nothing wrong with that."

"I know..." she said. "...Those two are just so amusing at times, but I love them both to death. And you can just tell that those two care for each other..." but then her voice softened subconsciously. "...I don't know, I guess I just envy them sometimes. Even Tyler and Missy..." and she looked into the ballroom. She saw Tyler and Missy as they danced right along with everyone else and she let out a sigh. "...I just wish it would happen to me too."

Keirus let out a sigh as he held onto her. "It will..." he said and she turned to him. A small grin spread across his face. "...And when you're least expecting it to."

She smiled. "*Will* it now?"

He nodded. "I'm sure of it." He so badly wanted to be the one to show that to her, but he was still so hesitant. Every part of him was about ready to burst with the desire to do so, but he still held back. *But why?* he asked himself.

The two had stopped dancing, but still had their arms around each other. Geri glanced up at him and he met her gaze, but then his eyes strayed away from her. He had suddenly grown very tense-she could feel it in his shoulders, but neither of them said anything.

Keirus was noticeably flustered and as she gazed at him, Geri knew why too. She was in the same boat as he was, but that boat wasn't going anywhere. It was just leaving the two of them to drift aimlessly in a great sea of confused emotions. Was this as close as they were going to get, even though they both wanted so much more?

Geri let out a sigh as she entwined her fingers in the folds of his shirt. "Keirus?" she squeaked.

Then he turned back to her. "I know," he said. "...I'm every bit as flustered as you are..." and he huffed. "...But the truth is, it can never go anywhere."

Her tongue clicked against her teeth. "Yeah..." she said with a sigh. Her heart at been lifted to the skies for a moment, until grim reality reared its ugly head, and she felt a lump in her throat, but she didn't cry. "...I know. But just once, can we--"

Their gazes met, and both of them were locked into the other's eyes. They both knew what was going to happen, and though a part of them was screaming for it to stop, they didn't. The two leaned closer to each other until they kissed. Both of them wanted it to happen so badly and the temptation was too

great for either of them to resist. They wrapped their arms around each other and just got swept away in the moment.

* * *

-V-

Geri opened her eyes as the sun rose into the sky, its warm, gentle rays shining through the window. Her eyes were burning a little from not having gotten much sleep the previous night, but she didn't feel like falling back asleep. She rolled onto her side and clutched onto the pillow as she gazed out at the new morning, though she was thinking about yesterday evening.

Last night had been so wonderful for her. She couldn't have picked a better night if she asked for it. The company was pleasurable, the drinks were great, the food was great, the dancing was fun, oh yes, the dancing. The dancing was so magical. In those few hours she and Keirus danced, Geri felt whisked away into another world. A world where it was just the two of them. A world where no one could tell them what to do or how to act. It was just them.

She could even escape into that world right now if she really wanted too, but it would be more fun to have him there with her. She sat up and put her arms around her shoulders as

she thought about the kiss. That had been replaying in her mind since it had happened. Geri closed her eyes and thought about it, nearly getting lost in it a *second* time. But then, there was a knock on the door.

Geri didn't even remember changing out of her dress, but as she glanced towards the door, she saw the wardrobe and the dress hanging beside it. She was back in her tank top and undergarments. Her pants were lying on the floor, so she just grabbed them and slid them on, then sat back on the bed. "Uh, come in," she said.

The door creaked open and Shauna peered in. "Are you decent?" she asked.

Geri's shoulders slumped. "Ye-ah," she said.

"Just checking..." Shauna said as she and Missy walked in. "...So, did we have fun last night?" she asked.

Geri took a deep breath. "I had a wonderful time last night," she responded.

"Yeah? I saw you and Keirus dancing last night. Did you guys wind up getting to the horizontal tango?" As she said it, she snapped her fingers and wiggled back and forth.

Geri smiled at her friend's gesture and shook her head. "No, we-we didn't."

Shauna widened her eyes. "No?" she asked in surprise. "...Boy, *you* are really in control of yourself, and so is he."

Geri let out a sigh and nodded. “Yeah, I guess,” she muttered as she looked down at her hands. She folded them in her lap.

Shauna put a hand on Geri’s shoulder. “Boy, you don’t sound very thrilled at all...” she said. “...Did something happen?” And then Missy sat down on the bed next to them.

Geri put her hands on her forehead. “Yeah...” she muttered. “...We kissed.”

Missy and Shauna exchanged glances with each other. “Well...” Missy began. “...Is that a bad thing?”

“Yeah...” Geri said and then shook her head. “...We shouldn’t have done that...” and she began to feel a lump in the back of her throat. “...It only makes me want him more, and...” A few sobs escaped her and she sniffled. “...I know...that I can’t have him.”

* * *

Keirus hadn’t rested last night that well at all. He was still half asleep as he walked down the stairs. He heard Chris and Tyler’s voices as they were quietly conversing in the dining hall over the party last night. He also smelled breakfast and his stomach was growling, so he walked in to join them.

“And speak of the devil...” Chris said when Keirus walked in.

From his appearance, one couldn't guess that he was up half the night. He was already dressed for travel, but his clothes weren't wrinkled or creased and his shirt was neatly tucked in like it usually was. Even his hair was combed. His shoulders were slouched though and he wasn't in any hurry to get anywhere. And as he got closer to them, he just looked tired.

"No offense, Keirus..." Tyler began and took a sip from his mug. "...But you look like shit."

Keirus gave a tired nod. "Yes, I probably do," he answered sleepily.

Just then, one of the kitchen hands came out to refill Tyler and Chris' beverages and then poured Keirus a glass. And then she disappeared back into the kitchen to get another breakfast order in.

"Did someone get lucky last night?" Chris joked.

Keirus took a swig from the chalice the scullery maid had poured into. Right now, he really wished it had been something stronger than a mild breakfast wine. "No..." he answered, a little disgruntled. His annoyance wasn't so much directed at Chris (though that could very well have attributed to it, and he really wasn't in the mood for humor at the moment). His irritation was mostly from his lack of sleep.

Tyler cocked his eyebrows. "Did someone *want* to get lucky last night?" he inquired.

Keirus turned to him and then looked away. "What I want, and what I can do are completely different from each

other. Geri's a wonderful woman, but that's all she is. I can't allow myself to get close to her, nor she to me. That wouldn't be fair to either one of us..." and with that, he stood up and pushed the chair in. He walked out of the room.

Chris turned to Tyler. "Dude..." he said. "...I feel kind of bad for him."

Tyler nodded. "For both of them. It's really got to suck to really like someone and see'em every day, but you just can't get close to them. And you know it's because you'll probably never see that person again when you part. It's one thing to break up when you're not happy with someone, but to never even get the chance with that person, that's got to suck even more."

Tikala was walking through the great hall when she intercepted with her charge. "Keirus?" she asked in surprise when she saw him. He glanced up at her, but she saw the dark rings under his eyes right away. He was dressed decently, but his shoulders were slumped and he was moving so sluggishly. She stopped walking. "...You look terrible."

He nodded. "And I feel no better..." and he shook his head. "...So what's going on?"

She gestured over her shoulder. "I just came from the map room to find you. King Fellan and King Dram are both in there waiting."

"For what?" Keirus asked.

“For you. You said yesterday that you wanted to see a map of our present course to try and single out where Crodis may be.”

His eyes stung slightly when he widened them and he had to blink himself out of it. “Oh...yes, I did, didn’t I?”

She nodded. “You did. Are you able enough to go?”

“Yes...” he said with a nod. “...Though I don’t know where it is.”

“That’s all right. I can take you.”

When they got the map room, Tamor was already in there with the two kings. Both of the men, as well as a few of their generals were bent over the table glancing at the map. The Kuruuk glanced up when he heard the two enter. Tikala stopped in the doorway, but Keirus joined them all at the table.

“You look awful,” Tamor said as Keirus joined them.

The demigod stopped turned to the Kuruuk. “I know,” he responded.

Fellán looked across the table at the young man. “Are you sure you want to proceed with this?” he inquired.

“I am, sire,” Keirus answered with a small nod.

“All right...” Fellán said. He turned and gestured to the man next to him. He was a tall, sturdy man with tanned skin, dark brown hair, and a neatly kempt mustache and beard. His eyes were light blue, and he definitely had a regal air about him. “...Keirus, this is King Dram from Caloon.”

The two men reached across the table and shook hands. “The Warrior King?” Keirus asked and gave an admirable nod. Dram was reputed for going into battle with his army, which earned him the nickname. “...I’ve heard a great deal about you, you’re majesty,” he said.

King Dram gave a small nod. “Just the same Keirus, King Fellan was telling me a great deal of you and *your* party. And since you’re here now, I may as well say this...” and his glance shifted from person to person in the huddle around the table. “...Caloon has also been attacked by these strange forces...” he said and continued to explain the occurrences to those sitting around him.

Tikala stepped into the room and tugged on her brother’s shirt and Tamor glanced back at her. “I’ll go check on the girls to see that they’re awake...” she whispered. “...And then I’ll bring all of them down here. Fill me in on what I miss.” He gave a small nod and then she left.

-vi-

The Kuruuk walked down the hallway where their chambers had been for the night. She had chosen to sleep in the barracks last night, so she had no idea where exactly the girls were, but then she heard their voices in Geri's room.

Geri shook her head sadly. "It shouldn't have happened..." she said. "...That was just plain stupid."

Shauna gave her a reassuring rub on her back. "No, hon..." she said and shook her head. "...I don't think so at all."

"You were just curious..." Missy said. "...There's nothing wrong with that."

"I know..." Geri sniffled. "...I know, but...I guess I was hoping it would change something, that maybe if it happened just once...that would be it. But, I only succeeded in walking myself deeper into the hole," and she buried her face in her hands.

Shauna leaned her head on Geri's shoulder. "I know this is hard for you, but all of us are here to try and help. We'll all be here to support you in whatever decision you make."

"I know..." Geri said, her voice a little muffled by her hands. "...But I'm so scared that it's going to be the wrong decision. I've been hurt so many times before and I don't know if I can take it again, not with Keirus. I don't want him to have to go through it either. We've both been heartbroken once already and that's something I don't want to have to go through again."

Shauna wrapped her arm around Geri's shoulder. "I know you don't and, not that I'm egging for you to take that chance, but, you have him here. You have him right now. If you don't do something, you're going to be in misery the entire time that we're here. You..." and she brought her other hand down on Geri's thigh.

"...Take the plunge now, and then you'll have something to take home with you. If you really feel that strongly for him, you can't force yourself to ignore it, that would just be horrible, for both of you."

Missy nodded in agreement. "And then when it comes time for us to leave, it'll be easier to say good bye. Yeah, it will be hard, but you'll at least have memories to take home with you, as opposed to regret over what *could* have happened. And memories will last longer than anything."

“Yup...” Shauna nodded. “...Missy’s right. At least if you *try* it, you won’t be going home regretting that you didn’t take the chance. This is like...one of those once in a lifetime deals. He’s a God for crying out loud, a *God*. How many girls get that lucky with their men?”

Geri huffed. “Yeah, and how many girls would get committed for saying something like that, all of them...” she said sardonically. She was already starting to feel a little better now that she had talked. She gave a small shrug and sat up. “...You know, I don’t really care *what* he is...” she said. “...He had already won me over even before we found out.”

“Okay...” Shauna said and gave a small shrug. “...So what are you waiting for then? Go for it, hon, you’ll never get another opportunity like this again. I mean, okay...you said that it doesn’t matter if he’s a God or not, but are you telling me that that’s *not* a turn-on? Even in the slightest bit? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love Chris so much, but if I wasn’t with him, *girl*, I’d be *all* over Keirus-”

“You know...” Missy mused as the same thought occurred to her. “...Now that you mention it-” and then she stopped. “Oh God, is that wrong of me? I shouldn’t even be *thinking* like that.”

“Hey...” Shauna said to Missy. “...In the golden rule book, it’s okay to look, just not to touch. It’s perfectly normal to have a fantasy, even if it’s not about the person you’re with.

That doesn't mean anything. I mean come on, we're only human."

Geri thought for a moment and then she nodded. "You know, Keirus really is a great guy, just all around."

"He is..." Shauna agreed. "...And you know what else?"

Geri turned to her. "What?" she queried.

"In all honesty, Ger, I think he'd do anything for you if you asked him. And right now, for whatever reasons though, he's trying to fight his feelings too, but..." and she shook her head as a small grin came to her face. "...It's a battle he's not winning. Whatever reasons that're causing him to be so hesitant, he's gonna overcome them. He just might need a little bit of peer pressure to help with that."

Geri smiled. "You're such a sweetie, Shauna, but I think...that we'll let this take its natural course for now. We'll see what happens."

"All right, but if y'need help, don't be afraid to ask."

"Yeah..." Missy added teasingly. "...If things get too hard to handle, we got your back." And then the three girls had a good laugh together.

To lighten the situation even more though, Shauna crossed her legs and leaned on the bed. She turned to Geri. "So tell us..." she added furtively. "...How was it?"

Geri innocently looked at her. "How was what?"

“Come on, Ger. You know what I’m talking about, your little nuance. How was it?”

She couldn’t keep her cheeks from flushing. She probably turned five different shades of red in just the few seconds it took her to answer and she let out a sigh. “In a word...” she started. “...*Damn*. That boy knows what he’s doing. I don’t think I’ve ever been kissed like that. It was like-”

Just then, a knock on the door interrupted them. “Come in,” Shauna said.

Tikala opened the door and cleared her throat. “Are you girls ready to go? You’re going to want something to eat before we continue, I think.” She tried to hide the harshness in her voice, but she wasn’t sure how good of a job she was doing. The girls talking about kisses was fine, but when it involved Keirus, it went too far.

“Yeah...” Shauna answered. “...We’ll be down in a minute.” The fox gave a nod and ducked out of the room. The three girls exchanged glances.

“I wonder how long she was standing there,” Missy said.

“From the looks of it...” Geri began. “...A while. I’m already on thin ice with her and I *don’t* need it to get any thinner.”

Shauna let out a raspberry huff and shook her head. “Who cares? If she’s got issues to resolve, then she should do it on her own. I know Keirus doesn’t like her interfering like she

is, her own brother doesn't like it. I don't know why she's so opposed to this, but it's like: get over it."

"Yeah..." Geri said. "...But I would rather stay off her bad side if I can. She might be opposed to this whole thing, but she's helped us this far and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Yeah..." Shauna said. "...But I guess all we can do is just take it one day at a time yet. We'll just have to see how things turn out. She may choose to leave, but that could still be a ways away and by then, we might not need her help anyways." She put the pack over her shoulder as she stood up. "You gonna be okay to pack on your own?" she asked.

Geri nodded. "Yeah, thanks. I'll see you gals downstairs."

"All right. We'll be waiting." Then, she and Missy left.

Geri packed up the few things that she had left and took one last look at the gown she had worn as it hung by the wardrobe. She walked over to it and touched the skirt. Everything that had happened last night was absolutely wonderful, and she didn't regret any minute of it. She let go of the fabric and then turned to follow after her friends.

*

Geri walked downstairs and into the dining hall where all her friends were sitting. Sunlight poured in through the large windows that lined the walls of the room. There was a long

dining table in the center of the room and it still smelled of polish. Two golden candleholders were on each end of the table. Her friends were gathered on one end and she walked over to them. Only Keirus, Tamor, and Tikala weren't there.

Geri greeted all of her friends and then took a seat next to Shauna. The two men were pretty much done with their meals by now. There was a basket of rolls set in the center of them all. Shauna and Missy were helping themselves to one of the rolls while they waited for their main course. "So..." Geri began as she took a nibble of the roll. "...Everyone have fun last night?"

"Oh yeah..." Chris said. He put his hands behind his head and kicked back in the chair, fully satisfied with the night *he* had.

"Dork," Shauna said to him. "...She's *talking* about the party."

"I know that..." he said with a nod. "...I'm just choosing to focus on *one* aspect of the party..."

She chuckled at him. "You're such a dork," she muttered.

"I may be..." Chris began. "...But you don't seem to mind it all that much."

"Yeah..." and her tongue clicked against her teeth. "...I've kinda grown attached to your dorkiness."

"Yeah..." and he nodded. "...I kinda figured that. I suppose that's why I keep it up." They leaned in and gave each other a small kiss.

Tyler and Missy were holding hands under the table and he was leaning his head on her shoulder. "Oh yeah..." he said in response to Geri as his eyes began to droop shut. "...Last night was a blast."

Missy leaned down and kissed him on the temple. "You falling asleep on us?"

"No, no, just resting my eyes."

Her bright blue eyes danced as she looked across the table at Geri. "Last night was so exciting..." she said. "...I mean, it's not every day that we're invited to a cordial ball."

"Tell me about it," Geri said.

Shauna's gaze danced between her two friends. "Ooo, and those dresses that we got to wear..." she said enthusiastically. "...It was like we were in some kind of fairy tale."

Missy nodded. "I know..." she said. "...It'll definitely be something to remember." And then three servants walked out of the kitchen carrying plates of food. Each plate was set down in front of one of the girls.

"Oooo, this looks *delicious*," Geri said and picked up her fork. She was practically drooling over the sausage and biscuits, the potatoes, the pastries and sweet rolls. The mixed smell of all the food just dazzled her nose.

"Mmm, hmmm," Shauna agreed. She took a forkful of the sausage and biscuits and ate them. "...Oh my God..." she

muttered with her mouth full of the food. She pointed down at the plate with her fork. "...This stuff is just *awesome*."

Keirus then walked back into the room. Chris and Tyler were still where they had been seated before he left. But now, the three girls were all in there too, hungrily eating their breakfasts. He walked over to them. "Good morning, ladies," he greeted. His voice was still a little lulled from tiredness.

"Morning," Missy greeted, daintily eating her breakfast.

Geri and Shauna were both eating like horses and when they heard him, they quickly wiped their faces off to cover their embarrassment. "Morning," they both said in unison.

"You three seem in high spirits today."

"After last night..." Shauna began. "...I'd think anyone might be in high spirits-" but she stopped herself when she realized that Keirus didn't exactly have the chat that Geri did. He was probably still a little upset, but to her surprise, he just nodded in agreement.

"I'd think that they would," he answered calmly.

Tyler cleared his throat to ease up the tension that he felt was starting to build. "So, where'd you run off to anyways?" he asked.

Keirus turned to him. "To the map room..." he said. "...I wanted to see what we have yet to cover."

"And?"

He leaned on the table and let out a sigh. "And I've a rough idea where we're headed. I pretty much retraced every

area Tikala and I traveled before you five got here, and then I retraced the steps that we've taken *since* you arrived. There's not many places left that he could be hiding."

"But what if he's moved?" Chris questioned.

Keirus shook his head. "No, I don't think so, that would require too much effort on his part. But I do believe that I've found the area where he's currently residing."

"Where?" Tyler pressed.

"I will show you all when you're finished eating."

-vii-

The five friends followed the demigod to a small map room on one end of the palace. It was still the same crowd that had been in there when Keirus left. And both of the Kuruuks were now in there as well. There were maps of Lirosial splayed out all over the table.

“...The attacks seem to be spanning out from the north...” one of the generals said and pointed to a spot on the map. “...At least these last two were.”

“There’s been more attacks?” Geri asked Keirus quietly as she glanced down at the parchment on the table.

“Two more villages were attacked last night...” he explained to her. “...And we’ve found out that there’s been a lot more attacks than just the ones we’ve encountered.”

“By those lizard thingies? Or the other ones?” she asked in regards to the demonic *onikage*.

Then an unfamiliar voice sounded and they all turned to the speaker. He was standing beside Fellan at the head of the

table. The expression on his face gave off the impression that he knew what he wanted and wouldn't be denied. They recognized him from the celebration last night. "Lizard warriors and raiders in masks, with a strange insignia marked on their clothing," he said.

Then he shrugged as he glanced back down at the maps. "Or so I've been told," he finished and looked around the table again. "...Though I've never seen it for myself."

"I don't think any of us have, Dram," Fellan responded.

"Strange insignia?" Tyler asked.

"That's what the villagers say," the Caloon king responded.

"Well..." Tyler began and glanced at his friends. "...Those men who attacked the princess yesterday, didn't they have a weird mark on their clothes?"

Keirus turned to him and nodded. "They did..." and he looked at all the others who *hadn't* seen the attackers yet. "...It's a black serpent entwined around *Ara Siliel*."

"The legendary sword?" one of the generals asked.

"Yes," Keirus nodded.

Dram's eyes narrowed in concentration as he studied the young man before them. "And how would you know that?" he asked. "...I've heard tell that the insignia is a serpent wrapped around a shining blade, but...*Ara Siliel*? No, that sword disappeared *ages* ago...didn't it?"

“No,” Keirus answered. “...Because of its magical properties, after Palmenor, it was taken to the *only* place it would remain secret. *Ara Siliel* is the single most powerful weapon on Lirosial. If it ever fell into the wrong hands...” but his voice trailed as he thought for a moment. “...Well, let’s just say that we don’t want it in the wrong hands.”

“Where was it taken?” one of the generals queried.

“It was taken to Iomilaris.”

Fellan nodded. “The Realm of Gods,” he mused.

Dram eyed the demigod cautiously. Fellan had made good on his word to keep Keirus’ true identity a secret, even from Dram and the generals until he had been told otherwise. And since Keirus *was* a common name, no one thought it much out of the ordinary, until now. “And...how do you know this?” Dram asked.

“Because...” Keirus responded. He unsheathed the immaculate blade at his side and set it on the table for everyone to see. “...It was guarded by my father first, and then he turned it over to me.”

Fellan didn’t even know that Keirus carried *that* sword, and he, as well as Dram, *and* the generals went into shock when they saw the shining, silver, long sword before them. No one in the room knew if the blade was actually crafted of silver, or if it just shimmered because it was magically enhanced and touched by the Gods. The candlelight in the room glinted off the three azure gems on both sides of the hilt.

Then Dram shifted his astounded gaze to the demigod. “By the powers, you’re...*Keirus*, the *Blademaster*,” he said in realization. He knew that the demigod was frequently among the mortals, especially fighters, though the king had never actually *seen* him until just today, and he hadn’t even realized it. There was some murmuring among the others in the room, but then Dram bowed his head submissively. “...Forgive me, you’re lordship, I truly had no idea.”

“It’s fine, King Dram. I didn’t want anyone to know I was here, but...” Keirus responded and then slid the sword back into its sheath. He glanced around at the awestruck crowd. “...Yes,” he answered simply. “...I am the Blademaster, in the flesh. My party and I are on a mission of utmost importance, to retrieve Lord Hycen’s stolen circlet from Crodis. The black serpent entwining *Ara Silel* is Crodis’ way of challenging the world. He would like to believe he’s the supreme power of Lirosial, and he plans on demonstrating that soon, I think.”

“So tell us then, you’re lordship...” Dram began. “...If Crodis is launching an attack on all of Lirosial, how are we to stop his forces?”

“King Dram, you and King Fellan have already allied, which makes your forces even stronger, but not quite strong enough. You must both ally with the other Lirosialen Kingdoms to stand against him.”

Dram slowly started nodding. “And I suppose that his final attack will be his most brutal.”

“Yes...” Keirus said with a nod. “...And his army is going to swarm all of Lirosial like a plague. He will show no mercy to anyone and if every Kingdom tries to go it alone against him, they will surely fall.”

“Will you stay and help us?” one of the generals asked Keirus. Anyone who had heard the demigod’s stories knew that he was a very well-accomplished swordsman. And in this time of need, his skills could really be used, especially if he was the *only* one of the Gods among them.

The demigod shook his head. “Unfortunately, I cannot. Our path goes a different direction. This mission *must* succeed, or the consequences will be unspeakable.”

Tyler looked at all the maps scattered on the table. The largest one covered the entire table. It was a full map of Lirosial. All the Kingdoms were marked, but compared to the whole of the continent, they were nothing. There was a broad mountain range that spanned through the center of the land and it intersected with another on one side.

The Kutowan Sea was marked on every side, and each mountain range or forest throughout the entire continent was also marked. But his attention was focused on a spot on the map that was surrounded by mountain peaks and it made a circular shape. Tyler shook his head. That spot just looked weird to him. “So...” he began as he looked over the map and his gaze landed on the ‘Forbidden Forest’. “...Where are we supposed to be going anyway?” he asked and turned to Keirus.

“We’re heading to the Saldigosh Wastelands...” he responded and pointed to a barren area of the map and moved his finger along the path they would take. “...Which will lead us here, into Laraniros...” and then his fingertip tapped on the circular area. “...And that’s undoubtedly where we’ll find him.”

Fellan gave Keirus a wide-eyed look. “Laraniros?” he repeated. “...No offense Lord Keirus, but are you daft? Do you know what dangers lurk in that cursed place?”

Keirus turned to him. “I know, and I’m prepared to face them. I have to be.”

The five friends exchanged glances and then Chris turned to him. “Uh...what kind of dangers?” he asked.

“Laraniros...” one of the other men in the room began. “...Is a dark place. It is filled with ancient dangers, dangers that came during the First Era of Lirosial, over a thousand years ago, during the time of Palmenor.”

“What *is* Palmenor?” Tyler asked as his glance shifted around the room.

“Palmenor was a powerful mage, who served King Sedigon...” King Fellan explained. “...The First King of Lirosial.”

“But Palmenor grew too power hungry for his own good...” Keirus added and gave a small nod. “...And he started to delve into the ‘black arts’ of *Shayol*, the Realm of Demons. And in doing so, he was able to harness the very powers of the demons. According to the legend, Palmenor struck a bargain

with Skorak, the Demon Lord. A bargain that, when it came full circle, it would cost the lives of every living thing on Lirosial.”

“Well...” Tyler asked as he looked at all the disturbed expressions on everyone’s faces. Even Keirus and the two Kuruuks had very solemn looks as the ancient story was dredged up. “...Did it ever happen?”

“Almost...” Dram mused and nodded to himself. “...And very similar to what’s happening right now, the Gods could not get in to destroy him.”

Geri then turned to Keirus. “Not to knock the other Gods...” she said boldly. “...But how is that even possible? Aren’t they the ultimate powers in this place?”

Keirus had his palms placed on the table as he looked over the maps, but he couldn’t take his gaze away from Laraniros. “I understand what you’re saying, Geri...” he replied calmly. “...But hear my words now. In this world, there are the True Gods, and they *are* the supreme Guardians of Lirosial...”- and he shook his head-“...But they are *not* the ultimate power in our world. There is only one ultimate power in every world, and powerful though they are, even the Gods must respect it.”

“What power?” Geri asked.

“Life,” he answered. “...And the *life balance*, the greatest power in any world at any time, is always evened out. It can never be tipped, and that’s where good versus evil comes in. One cannot exist without the other though, and Gods cannot exist without Demons. That is how the *life balance* is kept.

Demons are the only beings that can counter the Gods' powers, and vice versa. And with Skorak's aid during that time..." the demigod continued. "...Palmenor was able to put up a barrier that prevented the Gods from entering Laraniros."

"Well, then what happened?" Tyler queried. He had been so intent on what Keirus was saying that he had to hear the end of it.

The demigod was at the end of the table and in the brief pause that followed Tyler's question, all eyes went towards him so he would finish. So, Keirus took a deep breath and went on.

"...After many futile attempts to flush Palmenor out, all the people of Lirosial, as well as their Guardians, began to lose hope that his evil would stop. The Gods would be safe from his wrath because they're not in this Realm. But all the men, women, and children of Lirosial would not be so fortunate, and the Gods wouldn't let that happen..."

And he took another breath before continuing on with the story. "...And while the Gods were in council over what was to be done, a young man approached them. His name was Randorin, but everyone else, save for a very small amount, know him more commonly as the *Great Warrior*. He was not a God, but a mortal man. A lone individual who had more courage than a thousand armies. He knelt before the Gods and volunteered to go into Laraniros alone, and face Palmenor. And the only thing Randorin asked of the Gods was a single weapon..."

“...The Gods admired his courageous spirit and they granted him a long sword called *Ara Siliel*”-and he placed his hand on the hilt at his side-“Before giving it to Randorin though, every God gave it a blessing. Randorin embarked on his mission into Laraniros and defeated Palmenor...”-and then he put a finger up-“...But even after the mage’s death, his power heavily lingered over Laraniros, and it’s been condemned ever since.”

Shauna turned to Keirus. “What happened to Randorin?”

The demigod shrugged. “That’s one of the greatest mysteries of our world. No one knows what happened to him. He gave *Ara Siliel back* to the Gods, and then he disappeared.”

Fellan nodded. “What we wouldn’t give to have his strength and courage now,” the king mused.

A silence fell upon all of them. “So...” Chris said after a moment and slowly turned to Keirus. “...That’s our course?” he asked.

“As it stands,” Keirus said and then his glance shifted between the five. “...And I will not ask any of you to follow me past the Forgotten Pathway, which leads into Laraniros.” He pointed to the route on the map.

“Keirus...” Tikala began to protest. He had already been very close to death, but if he traversed into Laraniros alone, he’d surely meet his end there. But she stopped when he gave her a ‘don’t-argue-with-me’ look.

“You know what?” Tyler began and pounded his fist on the table. Everyone turned to him. “...I love this plan. It’s dark, it’s unknown and it’s packed with danger. I love it. Bring it on. We’ll be known as the mechanics that saved the world.”

“Oh yeah...” Chris said and turned to his friend. The two of them slapped fives. “...*Hell* yeah.”

Shauna’s brow furrowed as her glance darted between the two. “You two have lost it,” she said.

Chris shook his head. “Nah, it was never there to begin with-”

All of a sudden, they heard warning bells ringing throughout the palace. “*To arms! To arms!*” a voice shouted outside the room.

The door was pushed open and one of the sentries appeared in the doorway. “You’re Majesty!” the panicked man said to King Fellan. “...We’re under attack!”

Keirus, the two Kuruuks, and a few of the generals bolted out the door as soon as they heard the sentry. They took the small staircase just outside the map room up to the top of the palace. Beyond the turrets, they all could see it. The dust was being kicked up as the army marched towards them.

The army itself wasn’t all that big. At most, it was several hundred or so strong. And given the size of the army, that only roused Keirus’ suspicions.

Tamor was standing next to he and Tikala when he turned towards the demigod. “That army doesn’t look very

big...” he said, and then glanced towards his sister. “...Does it?” He too thought that was strange.

Tikala shook her head in confusion. “No...” she said. “...It doesn’t. I don’t understand.”

“It isn’t the army that worries me,” Keirus added solemnly.

“What do you mean?” the she-Kuruuk questioned.

“I think there’s more to this army than meets the eye...” he responded and then turned away from the window. “...Come on.”

* * *

-viii-

The armory was a crowd of guards getting their armor and their weapons ready for the battle that was almost upon them. The five friends were pretty lost as to what they were supposed to do. Everyone else seemed to know their duties as if it were a regular routine.

Then Keirus came walking up to them. He had five leather scale tunics slung over his shoulders. "This was all they could spare for armor on such short notice..." he explained to them. "...It isn't much, but it should offer you some degree of protection, so I would recommend staying behind the palace walls. You'll be safer that way."

"Look..." Tyler said as he took one of the tunics. "...We have virtually gone without armor the entire time we've been traveling, and we have been able to evade injury everytime something came at us-"

Keirus shook his head. "But Tyler, this isn't like any of the other obstacles we've come across. This is a real battle. It's

far worse than anything else we've encountered..." and then his glance shifted to all of them. "...For your own safety, you should stay behind the protection of the palace walls."

Geri eyed him up and down. He wasn't very heavily armored either, save for the leather tunic he was wearing, as well as the bracers around his wrists. "You don't have a lot of armor either. Are you staying behind the palace walls then too?" she asked.

"No..." he answered. "...I'll be on the front with the soldiers. My combat skills are a lot more useful in melee."

"Uh, huh, and what if something happens to you?"

"I am well able to handle myself in combat, believe me."

"Keirus..." Tyler started. "...Trust me on this. Nothing can be worse than getting lost in the ghetto of a downtown city at two in the morning, and I stress, *nothing*..." and then he gestured to all of them. "...And we've all been in that situation. Trust me, we can handle this. And though you may be confident, it doesn't hurt to have someone covering your back. Besides, what was the point of all those combat exercises you guys had us practicing, if you're not even gonna let us utilize what we've learned?"

He let out a sigh and then gave a small nod. "You're right..." he answered. "...Do as you will, but mind all that you've learned, because this will be a real test. And if you fail, it will result in death. So just...be careful."

* * *

Since Keirus had pledged his allegiance to King Fellan, the demigod was near the head of the army with the monarch and his generals, as well as King Dram and his close retainers. Tikala and Tamor followed after Keirus, and the five friends followed after the two Kuruuks. The rest of the soldiers were behind them.

Now that the five were on the battlefield with the armies, they were beginning to get nervous. And now, they were at the point where they didn't have the option to turn back around. And all of them were as somber as they could be. None of them said one word to the others. They just marched along with everyone else, until the company came to a halt.

Once they stopped moving, they heard King Fellan's voice ring out above everything. "*Federain, form up!*" he commanded and then was joined by Dram's voice.

"Caloon! Form up!"

The five friends then watched as the soldiers began stepping forward to join their kings and form a blockade. The blockade of men stretched at least the length of Crodis' army, if not more.

"What is this?" Geri asked as she looked both ways down the line.

“Standard battle procedure...” Tyler put in. “...I think it’s a face off. The armies will face each other and wait until one strikes first.”

“That could take forever...” she said. “...What if neither of them does?”

Tyler shook his head. “It won’t take forever. One of them will make the first move, or they’ll strike at the same time. That’s how battle works.”

Keirus was in the front line and he watched as a middle aged man on the opposing side stepped forward. He was heavily built and armored, and he carried a sturdy, double tipped falchion. Keirus wasn’t sure who this man was, except that he was the one leading Crodis’ army.

“By the Gods...” he heard Fellan comment and turned to the king. “...It can’t be.”

“Who is that, you’re Majesty?” he asked. It was obvious that the king knew who this man was, which was odd, considering that Keirus was probably even older than he was.

Fellan was in shock for only a moment, but that shock had turned into anger as he recognized the one who stepped forward. “That’s the man who killed my father. His name is Rodin.”

“I’ve heard of that one...” Tikala commented and glanced at her charge. “...You weren’t a regular visitor to this

Realm at the time, so you probably don't remember him," she said.

Keirus shook his head in response, and the she-Kuruuk nodded. "...He was the leader of the most infamous bandits throughout Lirosial, the *Daivelor Arkem*. His band was stopped, and though he was never caught, by all accounts...that man should be dead by now."

The demigod sighed. "He must've struck a bargain with Crodis, or Skorak, or *something* to keep that from happening."

"Yes..." Tikala said. "...And it disturbs me at how much power he might have because of it."

And then Rodin began walking towards them. "Well Fellan, it's certainly been awhile, hasn't it?

"So help me, Rodin..." the king began as he unsheathed his sword, *Nairanol*, and pointed to his opponent. "...You may have cheated death once, but it won't happen again..." he threatened. "...This is going to end once and for all."

Keirus glanced back at the friends behind him. "Get ready," he said.

A twisted grin spread across Rodin's face as he stopped walking. He pointed his weapon at the king. "Then let it begin..." he said and then called out to his retainers. "...*Charge!*"

At the same time as Rodin called his army forward, so did Fellan and Dram. And right away, Fellan engaged Rodin in combat.

All around them, the five friends heard the sounds of a battlefield. Swords were clashing against sword and shield. Battle shouts rang out all over the field, and cries of pain were everywhere. There were so many people on the field that all the friends could see, and they were able to stay together for a while. But gradually, as they engaged in combat, they were being separated, each one taking care of their own problems, and not even realizing it.

The battle in the center of the field was the one between Fellan and Rodin. All others were fighting around them. Rodin was a little stronger, and though Fellan was older, he had no problems keeping up.

“Give it up, old man!” Rodin shouted as their weapons clashed together once more. *“...You’ll never win!”*

“Nor will you, Rodin!” Fellan retorted. *“...You killed my father! You will die by my hand!”*

Rodin chuckled maliciously. “Let us see about that. I killed your father, and I will kill you as well...” he threatened. And their fight went on. Fellan raised his sword to strike at his opponent when suddenly, a pain shot through his arm. The pain was so intense that it caused the king to drop his sword and he slumped to the ground, holding his arm.

“As I said...” Rodin went on and struck the monarch, though he didn’t kill him with that blow. So, Rodin brought his sword back to finish the job. And just as he was about to hit

Fellan, Keirus jumped in the way and blocked Rodin's sword with *Ara Siliel*.

A few others had followed after him to help, but he wouldn't allow it. "Help King Fellan!" he shouted and blocked against Rodin again.

"Foolish boy..." Rodin chuckled. "...Do you honestly think you can defeat me? Ha! *Never! I am immortal!*"

"As am I..." Keirus said. "...And I know full well that immortals are not immune to steel blades-" and the swords clanged together once more.

Again, Rodin let out a malicious laugh. "We'll see about that..." and then he caught Keirus off guard and forcefully pushed him away.

Keirus lost his footing and fell back to the ground. He lost his grip on *Ara Siliel* when he impacted, but then quickly rolled to retrieve it and avoid being hit by Rodin. He rolled to his feet and grabbed the sword, then turned to face his opponent, but stopped.

Rodin had suddenly become engulfed in a light green, swirling whirlwind and disappeared. The winds that were swimming around him were so strong that they were throwing corpses *and* living bodies into the air. Dust and debris was flying everywhere and those who didn't get caught in the whirlwind had to dive out of the way, or suffer being struck by the moving fragments.

Keirus was able to hold his ground and not get sucked into the whirlwind, but he had to shield his head and close his eyes. When he risked a glance up though, he saw as the whirlwind rose high above him. As it began to dissipate, a gigantic ogre with reddish hair and green flesh now stood before him.

Two great horns protruded from the ogre's head, and he was now heavily armored in solid bone armor, suited to his enormous size. "Well, Son of Gods..." the ogre sneered in his booming voice. "...You will do well to heed your own words about immortals and steel blades," and then he brandished his giant sword.

Keirus widened his eyes as Rodin's humongous shadow engulfed him.

-ix-

Geri slowly opened her eyes. She at first thought everything had been a dream, until she heard the clanging of metal behind her. She could hear all the men who *hadn't* been swept away, though their battle cries seemed so far in the distance. She didn't know which direction they were coming from.

She had never been in a real war before and if this was what it was going to be, she wanted no part in it. Men were dying left and right, both sides taking an equal amount of losses. She didn't even know any of these men, but she felt all the pain and sadness that these soldiers' wives and children were now feeling. She didn't want to be, but Geri and her friends were all fighting alongside of these men. The soldiers were their comrades and every time one of them fell, it was like losing a friend.

She was now regretting Keirus' offer for them to stay behind the safety of the palace walls because of their

inexperience, but they all refused. They had given their word to help Keirus accomplish his mission and they were sticking to it. He wasn't just some guy they met by sheer luck who offered to help them, no. Now, he was just as much a friend to all of them as they were to each other. And as a friend, she would never desert him *or* anyone else.

Every person on the battlefield was fighting for their freedom from tyranny, including King Fellan. Last Geri remembered of the king, was seeing him fall to Rodin, and as she looked around at the sea of corpses, she saw the king lying there, his armor still shining in all the gloom. He had died to protect his kingdom.

Keirus had sworn an allegiance with King Fellan to protect Federain, and therefore, so did Geri and her friends. The battle wasn't over yet and they were still in allegiance, and Geri wouldn't allow herself to break it.

She was still dazed from the impact of Rodin's transformation, but she had been one of the fortunate ones who survived through it. And then she remembered last seeing Keirus confront the ogre, but after that, everything was a blur. She put a hand on her forehead as she heard a loud clanging behind her and she turned.

All of the soldiers were still battling their opponents, but the fight that was sticking out above the rest was the one she faced. The loud clanging she heard had been the clashing of

Rodin's falchion against *Ara Siliel*. Keirus and Rodin were in a ghastly battle with each other.

She had never realized it before, but Keirus's strength went way beyond that of a normal man. He was so small in comparison to Rodin, but the two were equally matched in strength and skill. But what really hurt the demigod was the size difference. No living creature of Lirosial, even the Nevryes' 'Jbruda', could compare to the ogre.

The ground suddenly shook as Rodin stomped his foot and advanced on Keirus. The impact from his foot caused Keirus to lose his balance as he flew into the air and dropped the sword. Rodin was quick enough to grab him before he hit the ground and as Keirus reached for the sword, the ogre pulled him away from it.

Geri watched as the shimmering blade plummeted to the ground. Even in the dreary surroundings of the battlefield, the sword still shined. And as she watched *Ara Siliel* fall, Geri suddenly felt a second wind of strength sweep over her. Her eyes became entranced with the shimmering blade, and her ears heard the ringing as the sword fell. Keirus and Rodin weren't very far from her at all and it suddenly seemed as if all the pain in her body disappeared. *Ara Siliel* was calling to her and she wanted to answer it.

A loud, malicious laugh erupted from Rodin as he lifted Keirus to eye level. “Well, Son of Hycen...” the ogre boomed and chuckled again. “...Not so mighty without that mystical sword of yours, now are you?”

Keirus shook his head and glared at the ogre. “Do not underestimate me, Rodin...” he threatened, hoping his bluff would buy him a few extra moments to figure something out. “...I’m far more powerful than you think.”

The ogre laughed again. “...Is that so? Well, we’re just going to have to remedy that, now aren’t we?” He could squish Keirus like a bug right at that moment and he almost did, until...

“Let him go!” Geri shouted as loud as she could muster. She firmly held the hilt in her hands as she looked up at him.

Rodin looked down at her. He could sense that she was fatigued and scared, but there was a power about her that he couldn’t recognize.

Keirus looked down at her as she stood there, facing the ogre alone. For the first time since he met her, he could feel a strange, yet overwhelmingly strong aura radiating off her. “Geri,” he said, as if it were the first time he had ever spoken her name.

“Well, little girl...” Rodin taunted in his booming voice. “...Let’s see just how well you do.” He raised a foot to step on her, but she got out of the way quickly and rolled to her feet, still gripping the sword.

“That’s *it...*” Rodin said and then he looked at Keirus. “... Well, little prince, let’s see just how well you can fly.” He threw Keirus to the side.

“*Keirus!*” Geri shouted when she saw him fall, but in a split second, she saw as he transformed into a white hawk to keep from hitting the ground. While she was distracted, Rodin reached down and grabbed her by the waist and pulled her up.

“*Ahhh!*” she screamed and dropped the sword. She tried reaching for it, but as the ogre lifted her, *Ara Silel* fell further and further away. “...*No!*”

“You’re finished, little *mouse*,” Rodin threatened.

Keirus caught sight of the blade as it tumbled to the ground. He pinned his wings as flat against his small, feathered body as he could to gain speed, and he dove after it. Just before the weapon hit the ground, he caught it in his talons and flew back up to her. He let out a screech to catch her attention and when she looked up at him, he dropped it and then flew off to avoid being swatted by Rodin.

Geri put her hand in the air to receive the sword and caught it just as the ogre wildly swung at Keirus, but missed.

She hung over the ogre’s palm as she stared at the sword. Now, she noticed something that she hadn’t seen before. Now, *Ara Silel* had a soft blue glow to it. She let out a sigh and tightened her grasp around the hilt.

When he missed whacking the bird out of the air, Rodin focused his attention back to his captive.

Geri brought the sword behind her to catch the momentum of her swing. "Say goodnight," she said and before he could do anything, she swung and cut his throat.

Dark green ogre blood splattered all over her as the wound gushed open. She turned away and shielded her face to avoid anymore of it. And then she felt as his grip loosened around her. She screamed.

Keirus saw as she fell from Rodin's grasp and he dove towards the ground. Once he touched the ground, he transformed back and got ready to catch her. She fell right into him and they both hit the ground. The ogre suddenly fell backwards, kicking up another cloud of debris as he collapsed.

Keirus put his arms over Geri's head and rolled both of them out of the way to avoid being hit with anything, and Geri curled up beneath him. There was a loud crash and the ground shook as Rodin impacted, but then, all was still.

A dead silence fell over the battlefield after the ogre fell. And then suddenly, the silence was shattered by the sound of metal hitting metal on the ground as Crodis' army surrendered their weapons and fled. A chorus of cheers filled the air as the soldiers rejoiced over their victory.

Keirus got up and helped Geri to her feet. "Are you injured at all?" he asked as he looked her over.

She shook her head. "No..." she said. "...I've got a couple of cuts and scratches, but other than that, I'm fine..." and then she looked up at him. "...Are you?"

“I’m all right...” he said with a nod and then checked her over to make sure she didn’t have any really deep cuts. “...You sure you’re okay?” he asked again.

She nodded and then put a hand on her head. “I think...” She didn’t know what had come over her just moments ago, but as long as it saved all of them, she couldn’t complain.

“Keirus! Geri!” they heard Tikala’s voice shout and turned to her. The Kuruuk still had her katana drawn as she hurried over to them. Her white face was smudged with dirt from all the dust that had been kicked up and dried blood from the gash on her forehead, but otherwise, she was fine. “...Are you two all right? I saw what happened, but...” and she shook her head. “...I couldn’t get here to help.”

“We’re fine, Tikala, thank you,” he said. “...How about you?” and he saw the gash.

Tikala let out a snort. “It takes more than an ogre and an army of Crodis’ puppets to get rid of me.”

He nodded. “I know...” he said and then walked over to where *Ara Siliel* had fallen and picked it up. The blade was still glowing for a moment, but when he held it, the glow disappeared. He went back over to Geri and held the sword out to her.

Geri looked at the shining blade. Again, a feeling of familiarity came over her. “*Ara Siliel...*” she said as she looked at the blade.

Keirus held it out to her. “...Is yours,” he picked up.

She became entranced by the blade again as she took it out of his hands. When she touched it, that soft glow returned to it. “Mine?” she asked, slightly in disbelief. As she ran her hand along the back of the blade, she suddenly felt a strange, stirring sensation in her gut; a sensation that hadn’t been there for a long time.

“There is only one being in this world who has a will strong enough to utilize the full power of that sword...” and their gazes met. “...*Ara Siliel* belongs to you, *Great Warrior*.”

Tikala then turned to Geri, her eyes widened in surprise. “*What?*” she asked.

Geri suddenly snapped out of her trance. “Me?” she asked in surprise. Now that she was broken out of her trance, it was almost as if she had changed into a completely different person. She looked at the hilt in her hands and then for no apparent reason, she passed out, but Keirus caught her before she hit the ground.

-X-

“So Geri is the *Warrior* that you were searching for?”
Shauna asked Keirus. All of them were back in the palace,
composing themselves and waiting for Geri to wake up.

He looked at her. “She has to be...” he responded and
glanced towards the bed where Geri lay. “...The only one who
is able to wield *Ara Siliel* like that, is the *Great Warrior*.”

Tyler scratched his head. “What do you mean? What
makes that sword so damn special? I don’t understand.”

Keirus glanced at him. “*Ara Siliel* is the only sword of
its kind. Together, all the Gods wrought that sword, and they
blessed it, but it’s not just the blessings that make it unique.
That sword is bound to the very spirit of the one who received it,
the *Great Warrior*. And because of that spirit link, the true
powers of that sword are controlled by its wielder’s will. The
stronger the will, the more powerful *Ara Siliel* becomes. But the
only spirit it will answer to is that of the *Great Warrior*.”

“But you’re able to use it,” Chris put in.

“Anyone can use it, but to anyone *other* than the *Great Warrior*, it’s only a long sword. Even with the small amount of divine influence that I *do* possess, I can’t utilize the tiniest extent of *Ara Siliel’s* powers.”

Tyler nodded. “Because your-ah, spirit, isn’t bound to it?”

“Yes.”

Shauna was walking around the room tapping on her chin. “Okay, Geri is this *Great Warrior* of yours reborn, fine, I understand that. But...what does that all mean? Does she like...*have* to stay here now?”

“No...” Keirus responded. “...She doesn’t *have* to stay here, not at all. But what all this means, is that Elwina was right. Geri is the key to the success of this mission because she *is* the *Warrior* reborn...” and then he shook his head and softly muttered to himself, just so he had it straight: “...No one knew where the *Warrior* had disappeared too after destroying Palmenor, and though Randorin is long since dead, the spirit that he had is very much alive inside of *her*...”

Missy shook her head. “I don’t understand...” she said. “...This Randorin was a man, but-well Geri certainly isn’t. How can that be possible?”

A small grin came to Keirus’s face. Perhaps he was just older and more weathered in such situations as this one, but he was slightly amused at the five travelers’ naivete, though not cynical. He didn’t mind in the least having to explain these

things. Maybe the reason behind it was as simple as the fact that he had been the student most of his life. And now, it was finally his turn to take the place of a mentor.

“An individual’s spirit is neither male, nor female, Missy...” Keirus explained to her. “...A body can die, but a spirit never will. Most everyone’s spirit is reborn into a different body. And as that body grows and adjusts to *its* life, so does the spirit, until that life comes to an end. Then the cycle repeats itself.”

“Boy...” Shauna said and glanced at all her companions. “...I was never really sure how Fate worked before, but now I think I understand it. The five of us were meant to be brought here, or at least Geri was...” and her voice trailed as she thought a moment longer. “...She was brought here to...change the Fate of *this* world...” and she met Keirus’ gaze. “...Right?”

He nodded. “I fully believe that,” he said. “...And because all of you came here with her, I think you all have roles yet to play in this as well.”

“Whoa...” Chris said. “...I never used to believe in stuff like this, but now that it’s actually happening to me...it makes a crazy kind of sense.”

Just then, Geri started to stir on the bed. “Oh man...” she groaned and put a hand on her forehead. “...What happened?”

“Hon...” Shauna began. She was sitting on the bedside next to Geri. “...You just saved an entire kingdom...” and she

paused for a moment, putting her hand on Geri's shoulder.

"...How do you feel?"

"I feel like an anvil just fell on top of me..." and she slowly sat up, looking into the faces of all her concerned friends in the room. "...Everything happened just like I remember it?" and then her glance landed on Keirus. "...Do you really think that I'm the one you're looking for?"

He took a deep breath and nodded. "I do, very much so."

Her gaze strayed away from him. "So, I'm this legendary *Warrior* reborn..." and then she turned to him again. "...That right?"

His head bobbed up and down again slowly and then his gaze met hers. "It has to be."

"Does...Crodis know this?" she asked.

Keirus shook his head. "No, he doesn't...not yet, anyway," he muttered.

"Then, I guess we should try and keep it that way, huh?"

"As long as we can."

* * *

The travelers were requested to stay at least one more day, so they could witness Princess Fiora's coronation, and the farewell ceremony for King Fellan. Once that was over with, the

new queen requested to see them one last time before they departed.

All of them remained on their knees before Fiora as she stood up. One of the guards next to her handed her a sheathed sword and she walked over to Keirus. “For your loyalty and allegiance to our kingdom, Keirus...my father wished for you to have his sword as a gift of thanks,” she said and held the sword out to him.

Keirus straightened up and looked at *Nairanol*. It wasn’t a blessed sword as *Ara Siliel* was, but the king’s blade was a good, strong sword. And it had carried Fellan through many a trying time, and had been with him until his very last days.

Fiora smiled down at him. “You may rise and take up your weapon, Keirus,” she said to him.

He slowly stood up and accepted the gift. “Thank you, you’re Majesty,” he said to her and gave a small bow.

She took a deep breath and glanced at the sword one last time as she remembered her father. And then she looked up at him. “Keep it well,” she said.

He nodded. “I will. I promise.”

“Thank you...” she said to him and then turned to all the others. “...As for the rest of you...” and then she called forth a few more of her guards. “...Our finest smiths have specially crafted these swords for you. They are made from the finest, strongest steel that Federain has to offer...” she said as she

handed each of the others a new long sword. "...May they serve you well on your journey."

And then Fiora got to Geri and stopped. "I do not know what sort of gift may be appropriate to bestow upon a legendary warrior."

Geri kept her head down and slowly began to shake it. "I...don't ask for anything in return, you're Majesty."

The queen nodded. "I know that you don't Geri, but you are as deserving of this as everyone else..."

Geri looked up when she heard the sound of a chain jingling. On the end of the chain, there was a bird pendant, crafted out of white gold. Two yellow crystals represented the kestrel's golden eyes, and a third yellow crystal was its beak. The pendant was elaborately crafted, each feather on the bird's wings and body was finely detailed. The feather tips on each of the kestrel's wing feathers and tail feathers, were lightly coated in yellow gold.

"It isn't much, I know..." Fiora said. "...But the kestrel is a strong, capable bird, able to withstand even the toughest obstacles it comes across. You can always look to a kestrel for guidance. Please, take this pendant as a token of our thanks to you for all that you've done."

Geri took the pendant as Fiora held it out to her. "I will take it..." she said. "...And I will always keep it with me..." and she gave a small bow. "...Thank you, you're Majesty." She unclasped the pendant and put it around her neck.

One major battle had been fought to protect the kingdom of Federain and all of its inhabitants. And as the travelers gathered up their packs, it was a mutual thought that this battle was only the beginning. Perhaps it meant that the real journey was just beginning and everything they had come across thus far, had only been mere diversions to slow them down.

As they walked across the drawbridge, now out of the safety of the palace's stone walls and its people, they returned to the uncertain wilderness. And when they all set foot off the bridge, they began to wonder about all that they would face between here and Laraniros. They had their destination, now it was just a matter of getting there.

* * * * *

-xi-

The eight travelers were walking single file along their route with Tikala and Keirus leading them, while Tamor covered the back. Geri followed closely behind the two leaders while everyone followed after her. All of the travelers appeared in Crodis' looking glass, completely unaware that they were being watched.

"So..." the God sneered as he watched them. He stroked the short, ebon stubble on his chin and his glance landed on Geri. "...They think they've found the legendary *Great Warrior*." To his eyes, the human girl looked very small and fragile. She could easily be broken when the time came, if Keirus were out of the picture.

Of course, though Keirus wasn't a True God, Crodis knew that his nephew would not come easily. And, considering the demigod's demeanor, until the girl reached her full potential, Keirus would bend over backward to protect her.

“Curse his compassion towards the mortals...” Crodis said. Until the travelers got closer to him, there was nothing he could do to get rid of Keirus without straining himself. The Lesser God had put enough power into his armies to make him a very vulnerable target. He would weaken himself even more if he tried something as drastic as taking Keirus out of the picture, even with Morgia’s aid. No, both he and Morgia needed to save themselves for what was coming up. Of course, he might be able to extract the human girl from everyone else.

“Morgia, darling,” the God began.

She was standing by one of the large open windows that overlooked the peaks around them. In the distance, she saw the flash of lightning crash to the ground. And a reddish haze had settled itself over the cursed valley they were in. If she didn’t have her magic to transport her wherever she needed, Morgia guaranteed that she would not be there.

She and Crodis had been lucky so far since they decided to set up a fortress in Laraniros. Crodis wasn’t at all frightened of this place, despite the tales. She, on the other hand, was very uneasy in their location. Morgia just hoped that Crodis’ divine influence would keep them out of conflict until their plan had been carried out.

When the sorceress heard him call her name, she turned away from the window. The God had been able to save her life after she had badly been damaged in the conflict that followed Hycen’s beloved wife’s death. And because of it, she was

indebted to Crodis and as part of her repayment to him, Morgia gave her word to help him bring a fall to all the mortals on Lirosial. Once the mortal world was destroyed, the world of the immortals would cease to exist, including all of those who had been imprisoned there. And that was just the direction their plan was heading in.

“Yes, my lord?” she said to him.

Crodis walked towards her. “I’ve another small task for you,” he said.

The sorceress turned to face him. “And what would that be?” she inquired.

A crystal sphere appeared in his hand as he approached her. Inside the sphere, Morgia could see flashes of the Kuruuks’ fighting abilities. “The Kuruuks?” she asked and lifted her violet gaze to him.

The God shook his head. “Not the Kuruuks...” he said. “...The *Huruchim*. They are very similar to the Kuruuks in appearance, but their behavior is somewhat...loutish, by comparison. They are fierce warriors though, very skillful when it comes to fighting, and they bear no respect for the Kuruuks.”

“And what would you have *me* do about it?”

“Only to deliver a message to them.”

Now she was interested. “Oh? And what might that be, my lord?”

All of a sudden, the flashes of the Huruchim changed into a close up of Geri as she walked. “Have them track and

capture this girl. She and the other two..." he said in regards to Shauna and Missy, and their pictures briefly appeared in the sphere. "...Have a tendency to wander off together from time to time."

"But what if these...Huruchim, don't agree to it?"

Crodis let out a small chuckle. "Trust me, my dear. The temptation of one young woman's blood will be more than enough to persuade them."

A twisted grin spread across her ruby lips. "I see..." she said and looked back into the globe. "...And even the *nogo* wouldn't expect that."

"Nor would his two *pets*. The Kuruuks may have sharp senses, but the Huruchim know how to find ways around it."

"And where might I find these Huruchim?"

The two of them walked back over to his looking glass just as a map of Lirosial appeared in it. The glass then focused on one area of the land. "Their territories are just beyond the Neganuma Marshes, in the Forest of Eternal Sleep."

Morgia slowly nodded. "Consider it done, my lord," she said. She pulled the cloak around her and then disappeared in the sea of fabric. And in the sorceress' stead, a black crow appeared. She fluttered around to free herself of the cloak that surrounded her and then flew up and perched on Crodis' outstretched finger.

“Go, Morgia...” he said and raised his hand. She took flight in an instant. “...You’ve not failed me yet,” he said to her. She flew through the open window to deliver the message

*

The world passed by underneath her as Morgia flew over it. Below her, she could see all the green from the many forests of Lirosial. Far in the distance to one side of her, the sorceress saw the vast span of the Badorian Mountains, the largest range throughout the continent.

And somewhere, far behind her, was Laraniros. She didn’t turn to see it, because she knew all too well what she would see. From a distance, Laraniros was a dark spot of land that was surrounded by a smoky, red haze. Occasionally, a bright flash would appear somewhere in the accursed valley, because lightning storms were regular occurrences there.

From her bird’s eye vantage point, Morgia intently watched the land below her. The marshes were easily recognizable from the air because of the yellowish haze surrounding them. And just beyond the marshes, was the Forest of Eternal Sleep. And somewhere in the bowels of the forest was Sokasiri, the Huruchim territory.

She first recognized the marshes below her and then glided downward to get closer. The marshlands were desolate lands, save for the reeds that grew throughout. As she coasted

over the marsh, the dark silhouette of the forest came into view. Morgia flapped her wings and quickened her speed as she flew into the trees.

The sorceress had no idea what she was looking for, or what other kinds of dangers lurked in the forest, and until she *had* a better idea, she would remain in her crow form. Hopefully, that would keep her alive long enough to reach the Huruchim. She navigated herself through the forest, only allowing the silence to follow her. When she didn't see any signs of life anywhere, Morgia decided to again fly above the canopy. And when she did, she saw the first billow of smoke from a civilization rising into the air.

She again dove into the trees and as she neared where the smoke was billowing from, she started seeing signs of a civilization. It was a crude civilization, but a civilization nonetheless. Thatched huts and lean-tos dotted the ground. She even saw a few homes nestled in the branches of the trees. She perched herself on a branch not too far from the crude village and saw them.

Most of them were just lounging in the hot temperatures of the swamp area. But her keen eyes spotted several scout posts in various locations of the village with the scouts keeping on full alert. She suddenly heard some small snarls and looked towards them. Two of the Huruchim pups were wrestling around on the ground, but none of the adults bothered to try and stop it. She

didn't know why, but she merely shook her head in response to their 'actions'.

Morgia's glance shifted from the pups to the rest of the village. Crodis wasn't too clear on who exactly she was supposed to deliver the message too. If the Huruchim were anything like any other tribal environment, they would have some kind of leader, and she hoped whichever Huru that was, they'd have a little more elaborate dwelling. But as she scanned over the village, she saw no such thing.

While Morgia would have preferred to go directly to the village leader, if she didn't know which one he was, she really had no choice other than to reveal herself. So, she jumped from the tree branch and by the time she hit the ground, the sorceress resumed her normal form. And no sooner than she had transformed, the fox tribe had already spotted her.

Two of them came out of the bushes around her with their short glaives already drawn. She easily could have used magic to put them to sleep, or charm them if she really wanted, but that might draw attention. And there was no feasible way that she could charm the entire village before they would be able to best her. Not to mention, the size of the glaive blades was quite persuasive to keep her in check. So, she put her hands up instead, to show she meant them no trouble.

One of the scouts made a sharp motion with his weapon to urge her into the village. The sorceress obediently followed suit and walked into the village grounds. More and more of the

lazing Huruchim got up from their seats or naps when they saw the strange visitor. Humans were not welcome among their tribe, not even beautiful ones.

Behind her, Morgia heard as the two Huru conversed in their tongue briefly with each other. And then she saw as another, larger he-Huru approached her. His appearance was rather scraggly, as were most of the others in the village, but this one also had a patch over his eye. Again, he spoke in their strange language, but he wasn't addressing her. He was reprimanding his scouts for allowing an unwanted visitor into the confines of their village.

"Please..." Morgia said just as one of the scouts hurried to defend himself against his superior's scolding. All at once, the three Huruchim stopped talking. Her tone of voice was calm and composed. The third Huruchim cocked his ears and looked at her as she continued.

"...I mean you, nor your people any harm..." she went on. "...I come with a message to give to your leader."

The Huru drew ever closer to her, his one good eye fixing on her gaze. "Then you can give it to me, and I shall deliver it," he said.

"I have been sent..." Morgia began, keeping her expression fixed. "...By my lord, the Master of Laraniros, with a preposition for you and your tribe."

He studied her for a moment. Laraniros was the one place on all of Lirosial that was known to everyone. They all

knew the tales, and they all feared it to a point. “And...” the Huru began, never having heard of the ‘Master of Laraniros’.

“...Who is your lord?”

Her icy violet gaze pierced into his eye. “My lord is Crodis, the brother of Hycen, the Skylord,” she said. The Huru’s gaze slowly went towards the ground. Crodis was as well known to all of them, as the lands that he lived in. “Ah, you’ve heard of him?”

The Huru met her stare again. “I have...” he said. He looked past her to the two scouts still keeping their weapons ready. Again, he spoke in the strange Huruchim tongue and the two scouts withdrew their weapons. “...Follow me,” he said and began walking.

The sorceress followed the one-eyed Huru to one of the huts. This one was actually a little larger than some that she had seen before. When the two guards at the door saw Morgia with the Huru, they withdrew their weapons at his word. And the two walked in.

The only source of light in the hut that she saw, was a single brazier suspended from the ceiling. But the coals were nearly dead. Otherwise, Morgia didn’t see much of anything.

Right at the door though, she did notice when the Huru immediately went down on one knee. “Chief A’sogu...” he began, never lifting his gaze from the floor. “...I have brought a guest.”

“Gor’uth...” Morgia heard another voice growl. The voice sounded like it came from in front of them, but she only saw darkness. “...How many times must I tell you, we don’t *want* outsiders in our village.”

“I know, chief, but this one is different. She comes from Laraniros, sent by Crodis himself.”

A brief silence followed after Gor’uth had said that. Morgia let out a breath and looked to the side as she stood there. She suddenly heard a soft padding noise and turned back to face where the voice had come from. The curtain of animal skins was suddenly pushed to the side and there stood another Huru.

This one was just a little shorter than Gor’uth was, and he appeared to be younger too. And now that the sorceress was seeing him up close, she didn’t recall seeing any elder Huruchim among the tribe. Most of the ones she had seen looked to be young to mid adults.

Though A’sogu wasn’t missing an eye as the other was, he had several noticeable scars along his face and muzzle. He was missing a part of one of his ears, but that was it. His expression remained still as he looked Morgia up and down.

And while A’sogu studied *her*, Morgia studied him. She figured that he had to have fought his way to the top, which would explain why there weren’t any elders among the Huruchim. They probably didn’t live past middle age. The Huruchim were indeed a savage tribe, but Crodis seemed to have

faith in them that they could capture Geri, so who was *she* to argue?

A'sogu nodded towards her. "If your lord is Crodis, then who are you?"

"My name is Morgia..." she said. "...I am second hand to Crodis."

"And what business do you have here in Sokasiri, Morgia?"

"My lord has sent me with a small task for you and your tribe, Chief A'sogu."

The Huru chief crossed his arms. "Go on," he said.

Morgia raised her hand, and the same sphere that Crodis had appeared in her palm. "Eight travelers are venturing through the wilds as we speak. Two of them are Kuruuks..." and both Kuruuks appeared in the sphere.

A'sogu studied the two for a moment. "Of the Snow Tail family?" he asked and then looked at her.

"Yes..." she responded. "...The youngest, and the eldest of Takolo Snow Tail."

The Huru chief nodded and looked back into the sphere. "Those two will be hard to get around if they're anything like their sire..." and then he lowered his voice. "...Though it's not impossible to do," he mused and then spoke normally. "And the others?"

As Morgia went on to explain about the travelers, the sphere centered on all of them. “One of them is the Son of Hycen...”

“Keirus,” A’sogu scoffed, still keeping his gaze on the sphere as the demigod appeared.

“Keirus might prove something of a challenge for us too, Chief A’sogu,” Gor’uth said.

“He might, but again, it wouldn’t be impossible to get around him either. We’d just have to be cautious,” and he turned back to Morgia.

She held the sphere up again. “And this girl...” she said as Geri appeared. “...They believe to be the reincarnate of the *Great Warrior*, but she has not yet realized her full powers, which makes her just as vulnerable as these last four...” and the others appeared. “...And Crodis wants her,” she said as Geri reappeared.

“She and the other two girls often tend to wander off together, alone, out of the sight of the others. Do you think your trackers can capture her?”

A’sogu put his fingers on his chin as he thought. “They do not know of this little interaction?” he asked in regards to the travelers appearing in the globe.

Morgia shook her head. “No. They would be completely caught unawares. They aren’t near enough to Sokasiri to consider the Huruchim a threat, good A’sogu.”

The chief turned to his one-eyed retainer. “And if we come up from behind them, it will keep our trackers upwind of the Kuruuks, which will be advantageous to us.”

“Are you accepting my lord’s task then, Chief A’sogu?”

His gaze met hers. “If we take one of them, we will have to take all three.”

“That’s fine. My lord has no plans for the others, so do what you will to them. The only one Lord Crodis wants is the *Great Warrior*. The others mean nothing to him.”

“Gor’uth,” he said.

“Yes, chief?”

A’sogu’s glance went back to the sphere again.

“Assemble your five finest trackers. The Huruchim will honor Lord Crodis’ request.”

“But remember...” Morgia said and put a finger up.

“...Lord Crodis wants the *Great Warrior* unscathed. Do whatever you wish with the others...kill them, drink their blood...whichever suits you and your people. But you know that once the girls have gone missing, the *nogo* and the others will come looking for them. And the Kuruuks will undoubtedly be able to pick up their scents shortly after.”

“I’m aware of that...” A’sogu said to her. “...But our trackers will be long gone by that time. So let the others come. I look forward to it.”

* * *

Five of the finest Huruchim trackers had already set out on the task to find Geri and bring her back to the village. Like the Kuruuks, the Hurus had extraordinary speed if given the opportunity to use it, which at this time, is exactly what they did.

They knew of various paths into Laraniros, but some of those paths could take weeks. Others could take days. The first path they chose to follow after the travelers was the quickest one they knew of. From all the estimations that A'sogu and Gor'uth made, they figured that from Sokasiri, they were roughly four days behind the party. And at the speeds the Huru trackers could reach, it would take them two days to catch up, at least to a distance where the Kuruuks wouldn't be able to detect them.

* * * * *

-xii-

It was about mid-afternoon when the travelers decided to stop for a brief break. Tikala let the pack fall to the ground and put her nose in the air when the light gust of wind blew by, but she picked up nothing. She searched around the area, but she saw nothing. And the noises around her were still.

“What is it, Tikala?” Tamor asked her as he approached.

She gritted her teeth. “This is *so* frustrating, Tamor...” she said. “...I can swear I’m hearing noises around us, but whenever I look, I see nothing. Whenever I try to smell anything, again, nothing.”

“I think you need to relax, sister...” he said to her and he looked around. “...There’s nothing here. Just us.”

“No Tamor, you don’t understand...” Tikala insisted, alertly glancing around. “...There *is* something. I can sense it. Something is wrong.”

Tamor shook his head and gave a small shrug. "I don't get the sense that anything is wrong. I've not heard, nor smelled anything that would be questionable."

Tikala flattened her ears. "Well perhaps you aren't trying hard enough..." she said. She walked towards the others. "...Keirus!" Tamor heard her call and he had to cover his ear because she was right next to him when she did it.

Keirus looked up when he heard his name and saw as Tikala strode towards him. "Yes?" he asked.

Again, the suspicious Kuruuk looked around. "Do you get the sense that something is wrong?" she asked.

"Do I?"

"Yes..." she said with a nod. "...You usually can sense things ahead of time."

Keirus looked around the still area. The wind rustled the leaves in the trees and he heard a noise in the brush around them and looked. He saw as a red doe took one look at them, but then stuck her tail in the air and bounded further into the woods. Everything else around them though remained calm. He glanced towards the doe, but saw nothing else. "No..." he said. He didn't *sense* anything right then when Tikala questioned him, but even as he responded to her, there was a small air of doubt within him.

"Well great..." Tikala grumbled bitterly. "...Either there's something in these woods, or I'm just going senile in my old age."

Keirus let out a small chuckle. "I highly doubt that, Tikala..." he said. "...There's nothing wrong with being alert, especially on a task such as this."

"I know..." she said and glanced over her shoulder. "...But I just can't shake the feeling."

"Well girls..." Shauna said to Geri and Missy. And when her voice rang out, Keirus and Tikala both turned to her, but she didn't seem to notice. "...You two ready to take a run before we get going?"

"Yeah..." Geri said as she got up. "...Let's do it," and she turned towards Keirus and Tikala. "...We'll be right back," she said.

"You girls be careful..." Tikala warned and shook her head as she looked around. "...Something isn't right."

"We'll be all right," Geri said. "...We'll be right back."

After the girls started heading off into the underbrush, Keirus turned back to Tikala. "Would it make you feel better if we scouted around the area? Just to be sure."

"It would..." Tikala said and turned to him. "...But you should stay here, just in case. Tamor and I can cover more ground faster."

"All right," he answered with a small shrug.

"Tamor!" she called to her brother. "...Let's you and I scout around the general area. I just want to make sure that this isn't anything that will catch up to us later."

“Sure...” the he-Kuruuk answered. “...But which way did the girls go? So I don’t interrupt anything.”

“They went that way...” she responded and gestured down the path the girls just took. And so, the two of them each went a different direction.

“What are we supposed to do?” Chris asked.

Keirus shook his head. “Nothing. The three of us are just going to wait for the girls to get back. By then, they will have finished their search.”

Chris gave a small shrug. “Works for me,” he said.

Tyler capped up the waterskin and looked at Keirus. “Something going on?” he asked.

“Tikala thinks we’re being followed,” he answered.

*

“All right,” Shauna said as she stood up. “...I think we’re good, right?”

The three girls exchanged glances with each other.

“Yeah,” Geri answered with a nod. “...We’re good.”

“Okay. Then let’s head back and get this show on the road,” and she took a few steps back towards their break site.

Missy was standing there looking around at the trees. It was still broad daylight so she could pretty much see everything around them. Out of the corner of her eye, Missy thought she

caught a brief glimpse of something white, but then it ducked out of sight. But then she heard a twig snap in another area.

“Hey girl...” Geri said and walked up to her. “...What is it?”

“I thought I saw something,” Missy said, still looking around.

“Where?” Shauna asked as her gaze wandered right along with Missy’s.

Missy nodded towards the direction she saw the flash of white. “I thought I saw it over there the first time, but then I heard something over here...” and she looked another way. “...I think that whatever it is, is moving.”

“Well...” Geri said. “...Let’s not wait around to find out what it is. If it’s something dangerous, I’d rather we were with everyone else when we see it.”

“I agree...” Shauna said with a nod. “...Let’s go.”

“Yeah...” Missy responded and they turned to start walking back to the party. But then suddenly, something jumped down from the tree above them and cut them off.

Geri jumped back from being startled as she looked on the fox. “Tamor?” she asked in confusion. It looked like him, but he was smudged with mud. And underneath all the grime, its fur was a dingy white, almost gray color. And last she remembered, both of the Kuruuk’s ears were intact. This new Kuruuk was almost completely missing one of his ears, and he had a long scar running across his other eye.

And then more of these strange Kuruuks got out of their hiding and surrounded the girls. They were all dressed in camouflaged jerkins and baggy pants, meant to blend in with the surroundings. Any bare part of their body that was visible was spread with mud to keep their fur from sticking out against the woods.

A total of five foxes surrounded them, and each one was armed with a short glaive. Two had bows slung over their shoulders, a full quiver of arrows on their backs.

“No...” the first fox taunted Geri. “...Not really.”

“S’ino...” another of the fox men said sharply. “...Quit playing around. We need to get out of here before the others realize what’s happened.”

-xiii-

Tikala and Tamor returned from their little scouting expedition and saw as the three men were still there, but the girls hadn't come back yet. "By the Gods..." Tikala grumbled. "...How long does it take for them to relieve themselves?" and she shook her head.

"Did you two find anything?" Keirus asked from where he was sitting.

She turned to him and again shook her head. "No..." she said with a sigh. "...And I was certain that there was something around us."

Tamor walked up to her and clapped her on the shoulder. "We may not have found anything, but it's never a bad thing to be on constant alert," he said. She suspiciously glanced at him. She knew very well that he was going to say something more, and folded her arms.

"Really?" she queried.

“Of course,” he answered with a shrug. “...Even senile old Kuruuks,” he added.

She turned to give him a slug in the arm for that one, but he was able to get out of the way just in time to avoid it. “*Slow* and senile,” Tamor added from a distance.

“I missed on purpose,” Tikala said to him.

“Sure you did-” but then Tamor was cut off when he heard a scream.

Keirus looked up as soon as he heard it. “The girls,” he said and drew *Nairanol*. He ran off in the direction they took off in.

Missy let out a scream when the Hurus first knocked Geri out, then Shauna. And after she saw both of her friends down, before she could do anything else, she too fell into blackness.

“Hurry!” one of Hurus called to his party. “...We have to go!”

The three biggest hoisted the girls over their shoulders and then they took off.

“Keirus!” Tikala called to him, but he didn’t stop. She ran after him, but with the speed she could reach, she would be able to beat him there.

Tikala got to the site first, but Keirus was quick to follow after her. Tamor and the others arrived just after he did.

“They were here...” Tikala said. “...Their scents are still strong in this area, but...” and she sniffed the air. “...Something else is lingering.”

Chris and Tyler went in two different directions and called to the girls.

Keirus knelt down and looked at the shreds of bark that had fallen from the tree branch where the first Huru jumped down. He glanced up at the limb and then walked over to the trunk.

“It smells like...” Tamor said as he intently sniffed the air, but he couldn’t quite place what the smell was. It was familiar to him, but at the same time, he wasn’t sure.

“Well...” Tyler asked as he walked back to their small party. After calling for the girls and receiving no response, he figured they weren’t going to get any. “...Where are they?”

Keirus looked all around the trunk to find any hints of what might have come after the girls. As he felt around the trunk, he came across several claw marks as if the climber had slipped a few times, but never fell. He looked up and found a limb he could grab onto and hoisted himself into the tree.

“Blast!” Tamor cursed and put his hands on his head. “...I know what it is-I just can’t think of it!”

Keirus slowly crawled along the branch, intently looking for anything that might help them. And as he neared the end of the limb, he spotted something. It was a long, whiteish strand of fur that had gotten snagged on one of the smaller branches.

From his spot in the tree, Keirus's gaze went down to the Kuruuks. The only fur on them that was the same length as the one he found, was in their tails. He knew it wasn't either of the Kuruuks, but whatever had abducted the girls bore a striking resemblance to them.

"The Huruchim..." he said as he looked at the strand of ivory colored hair. "...It was the Huruchim who took them."

Tikala heard his voice and looked up the tree where it came from and saw him. "The Huruchim?" she asked and shook her head. "No. They're too far south of us."

"Well..." he said. "...It was either the Huruchim, or you two," and he looked down at her.

"Keirus..." Tikala said and put her hands on her hips. Her ears went back. "...I am *astounded* in you. We would *never-*"

"Take a look," he said and put his arm down. Tikala walked over to him and took the strand of fur and studied it.

"What is that?" Tyler asked as they walked over to her.

"The Huruchim," Tikala echoed. "I don't understand..." and then she glanced up at Keirus again. "...They would never stray so far out of their territory, and the marshes are the only area where they live."

"They wouldn't stray..." Keirus said to her. "...Unless they were prompted too. I think Crodis knows more than we thought. It has to be the only way because true to Huruchim

nature-if it had been an army, or a band, they would have taken more than just the girls.”

“What the hell are Huruchimps?” Chris burst out.

“Not chimps...” Tikala said to him. “...*Chim.*”

“Fine, whatever. What *are* they?”

“The Huruchim...” Tamor began. “...Are just like us. They look like us, they fight like we do, but they’re a savage tribe...” and then he shook his head. “...I will not lie, I have no desire to go into their territories, but...if the girls are in trouble, then I will.”

“You won’t be alone, Tamor. We’ll all be going...” Tikala said and then she turned to Keirus. “...But it is going to throw us way off our course. And, the Hurus are probably running. Tamor and I can hurry after them, and possibly slow them down until you three are able to catch up.”

Keirus shook his head. “No,” he said.

“No?” a confused Tikala echoed.

“How long will it take you and Tamor to reach them, at a full run?” Keirus asked.

“A few days, but if we have to stay behind, by the time we reach the girls, it might be too late.”

“Two days, you’re certain?”

She and Tamor looked at each other. “If we don’t stop,” the he-Kuruuk said.

“All right,” Keirus said and took a few steps away from them. His gaze circled around to everyone. “...Watch out.” They backed away from him.

The swirling smoke reappeared and instead of shrinking as it did with the squirrel, it expanded. But just as quickly, he had transformed into something else.

“Holy shit,” Chris said when he saw it. In the demigod’s stead, they saw a warhorse-sized griffin. “...You know...” Chris went on. “...That’s *damn* convenient.”

Keirus turned to him. “You’ve *no* idea...” he said. He stretched his white wings out to get ready for flight and then his wide blue eyes glanced at all of them. “...You two...” he said to the Kuruuks. “...Go on ahead. The three of us will meet back up with you in two days.”

The Kuruuks nodded, checked their weapons, and then took off after the Hurus.

“What about all our stuff?” Tyler asked.

“We can carry it...” Keirus responded. “...The extra weight will only hinder the Kuruuks. I, on the other hand, should be able to carry it, as well as you two. By flight is faster than by foot. But quickly, we must gather our things and be off.”

They went back to the break site to quickly collect all that was scattered. Between all of them, there were only four packs and most of them were already packed up.

“How are we going to do this?” Tyler asked.

“You two each put a pack on your back and get on. I’ll carry the other two.”

Tyler was the first one to get onto Keirus’s back.

“Uh...this isn’t dangerous or anything, right?”

“Shouldn’t be,” Keirus responded.

“Come on, man...” Tyler said. They were still on the ground, but he had never liked heights. The thought of gliding through the air on Keirus’s back, with nothing to keep him from falling (except his own dexterity), was making him kind of nervous. “...My life’s in your hands here-or claws-or whatever...”

“I assure you, Tyler, you’ve nothing to worry about. I won’t let anything happen,” he said.

“Okay...” Tyler said after a gulp and wound his fingers tighter into the thick feathering around Keirus’s neck.

“...Good.”

Keirus then turned to Chris, who was slightly hesitant himself. “Coming?” he asked.

“Do you know how weird this is going to feel?”

“Think of it as riding a horse,” Keirus said.

“It’s still gonna feel weird.”

“Well let me put it this way...” he responded. “...It’s either this, or you can walk.”

“Come on, Chris...” Tyler said. “...I ain’t too keen on this either, but it has to be done. I mean, come on...I hate heights, you know that and honestly, if it weren’t for Missy...”

and he shook his head. "...There isn't a chance in hell you'd get me to do this. At least do it for Shauna."

"You're right," Chris said and got on behind Tyler.

Keirus took the last two packs in his claws and then looked up to the sky. "Hold on," he said and leapt into the air. With one flap of his wings, they were already in flight.

-xiv-

An ability of both the Kuruuks and the Huruchim was their incredible ability for speed. The two fox tribes had powerful hind legs, which could propel them forward faster than any other creature of Lirosial. Their speed allowed them to cover well over half the distance of a normal running biped. As long as their energy kept up, the two Kuruuks knew they'd reach Sokasiri in two days at the very latest. The only problem with them using their speed was that if they didn't exhaust themselves beforehand, once their energy levels had drained, they would have to rest at least a day to regain themselves.

Tikala and Tamor had both hoped that the Huruchim wouldn't run the entire way back to Sokasiri. The Kuruuks had hoped their counterparts would at least stop to rest for one night, which would give them a chance to catch up a little quicker. Much to the Kuruuks' dismay though, the Hurus did not stop their course at all. And because they didn't stop, Tikala and

Tamor had to keep in fast pursuit, which probably would exhaust them both by the time a few days had passed.

Still though, the Kuruuks kept up their chase. There was no doubt in either of their minds that the Hurus knew they were following, which probably would keep them running straight until Sokasiri. The five kidnappers could exhaust themselves if they wanted too because once they got into the safety of their own territory, all the other Huruchim warriors would be waiting. The Huruchim would be ready for a battle. Tikala and Tamor could fight, but they wouldn't be nearly as up to par as usual with having to run for so long.

The Kuruuks followed the Huruchim for two days straight. Once the sun was in the middle of the sky the second day, Tikala and Tamor caught wind of the Huruchim civilization. The two could see the smoke billows rising into the air, but they weren't quite in the territory yet. They were at least granted a few moments rest while they waited for Keirus and the others to catch up.

Tamor shook his head as he caught his breath. "I...don't know how...we're going to do this, sister..." he said, but his voice was broken between phrases as he breathed. "...We're going into...Huruchim...territory. They...they are nasty..."

"But..." Tikala said between pants. She didn't usually feel her age, mostly she felt a lot younger, but not this time. Now, as she stood there catching her breath, she was *really*

feeling it. But despite all the aches her body was in, she ignored it. "...We cannot...risk the girls...least of all...Geri. The Huruchim are bad, and...the girls will not be able to...get themselves out of this mess...without help."

"Well..." Tamor said as he rested his palms on his knees. "...I hope that...Keirus and the others get here soon...I'm starting to feel fatigued..."

Tikala looked at her brother. "Worry not, brother, they'll be here." And then she looked up to the sky and saw as a white silhouette started coming towards them. As the speck neared, they saw Chris and Tyler, both riding on the griffin's back.

Keirus's wings blew up small gusts of air as he landed himself, with Chris and Tyler gripping on for dear life. "We're here..." he said to them. First, Tyler opened his eyes and glanced around. The land where they were was very barren. Scant trees and shrubs were all around them in clusters. The ground he was standing on was soft and mushy. The acrid scent of the marshlands was all around them. And there was a dark yellowish haze settled over them. "Where the hell are we?" he asked and put his hand over his nose.

"We're in the Neganuma Swamp right now, and before us lies the Forest of Eternal Sleep," Keirus answered and looked towards the scant forest in front of them. By no means was this forest like any they had come across yet. Most of the trees were weeping willows, but even those that weren't, still looked to be

weeping. Roots growing upwards, creating more trunks that twisted into one large trunk, formed the other trees. Vines hung off all the trees' branches and reached all the way into the swamp

"Explain to me once more..." Tyler began as he looked at the forest. "...How it got its name?" He slowly slid down Keirus's side.

The demigod's glance followed Tyler as he dismounted. "It's named because the Huruchim are very territorial, and if you're fortunate enough to find their territory, Sokasiri, chances are that you won't be leaving alive. Very few have escaped this forest in one piece."

"Nice," Tyler said. He pulled his sword up a little ways to check it, but then returned it to its sheath.

Chris dismounted, but the insides of his legs were just in pain. Keirus's griffin form was probably the size of a warhorse both in height and in width. And because neither of them were used to riding something so large, after almost two days straight riding him, the two would both be feeling it for the next few days. Chris was certainly feeling it already.

Keirus retook his human form after both Chris and Tyler had dismounted. He re-appeared crouched on the ground and as he rose to stand up, he almost passed out, but Tyler was the one who steadied him. "Keirus, dude, you okay?" he asked. Keirus was back on his feet, but Tyler still held onto his shoulders to keep him from falling over again.

Keirus put a hand on his forehead and stood there for a moment with his eyes closed. “I’ll be all right...” he answered quietly after a moment. “...I just...fatigued myself slightly, that’s all.”

Tikala looked full of concern. “Did you not stop at all?” she asked. Two days of running was a lot for she and Tamor, but for Keirus to have kept up flight for two days while carrying passengers, he had to have been completely exhausted. “...Keirus, you should rest. If you exert your powers *too* much, you could kill yourself.”

He turned to her. “Not likely...” he said. “...I know when I’ve reached my limit. Right now though, what’s more important is getting the girls *out* of Sokasiri.”

“But Keirus-”

“I’m fine. Let’s go.” Before Tikala could get another word out, he began walking towards the village.

“Wait...” Tamor said and they all turned to him. “...Before we go head on into Sokasiri, we must disguise our scents. Or else, the Hurus will identify us immediately, no matter how well hidden we are.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” Chris asked hesitantly.

Tamor turned to the murky swampwater beside them and then glanced at Chris. “We have to go for a swim,” he said.

Chris’ nose crinkled in disgust. “In that shit?” he queried. On top of the musty scent of the swamp, the water

looked almost black. "...You're off your fucking rocker, Tamor..." and he grimaced as he looked at the water again. "...There ain't no way I'm going in *there*."

As much as Tyler detested the idea of plunging into a swamp, he understood the logic in Tamor's suggestion. "Are there leeches in there?" he asked.

"Not in this part," Tamor responded. "...The further into the forest we go though, then yes, I'm sure there will be."

"Okay," Tyler said with a nod. He walked up behind Chris. "...Head's up," he said and pushed his friend in.

"*Oh!*" Chris hollered when he surfaced. "...You ass rat! What possessed you do *that*?"

"Man," Tyler responded. "...Just deal, all right? Remember, it's for Shauna. Besides, I'll be going in right after you get out, so chill."

As much as none of them wanted to do it, in turn, all five submerged themselves into the murky swamp water to mask their scents. Tamor and Tikala went all out and rubbed the mud from the bottom of the swamp on their fur to keep the scent strong enough to last their duration in Sokasiri.

In a short amount of time, they had all devised a plan to get in and rescue the girls. Before they each went their separate ways though, Keirus approached the two Kuruuks for one last bit of information. "What do the Huruchim fear the most?" he asked.

The siblings exchanged glances with one another. Tamor could only give a confused shrug to his sister. She turned towards Keirus in thought though. "There isn't much..." she said. "...But if I can give you anything, it is this. They fear Lord Hycen because they know he has the power to easily destroy them if he so chooses."

"They wouldn't know of my father's captivity, would they?"

Tikala's ears flopped back and forth as she shook her head. "Probably not."

"Good," he answered.

"But Keirus, do not push yourself too hard. You are not a True God like your father. Your powers do have limitations. *Please* consider that before you take on too much," she pleaded.

"I know," he responded, and then disappeared into another whirlwind of smoke.

-XV-

The Huruchim guard stood watch at his post in the trees. A new scent came to his nose as he looked around the area, but spotted nothing. “I’ll be back,” he said to his comrade and climbed down.

As he looked around, the scent still lingered and his keen ears picked up a noise in the surrounding area. His grip tightened around his glaive as he prepared to strike at whatever came out. He heard the rustling again and turned in the direction of the noise. “Halt!” he called and pointed his weapon towards it. “...Who comes?”

“Who d’you think?” another voice answered and then another of the Huruchim came out of the shadows holding two swords in one hand, and a rope in the other. Behind him, two human men emerged with their wrists tightly bound together.

“What is this?” the guard asked as his nose crinkled distastefully. “...You *dare* bring this scum into our territory?”

“Hey!” Chris snapped. “...Who you calling *scum*, *Bingo*?”

“Did I tell you to speak?” the other Huru growled and turned towards his captive. He gave a tug on the rope, which didn’t do much really, other than put more pressure on Chris’ already bound wrists, but it was enough. Once Chris shut his mouth, the Huru glanced at the guard. “...I caught them sneaking around the swamp. And since we already have the three *females*, I thought maybe Chief A’sogu would like to toy around with them a bit first, and let them watch as their lovers’ throats are cut.”

An amused growl escaped from the guard’s throat. “Wouldn’t he indeed?” and then he nodded towards Sokasiri. “Go on then. I’m sure Chief A’sogu will be most amused by this.”

The Huru gave a forceful tug on the rope and pulled his captives along behind him. Chris and Tyler glanced at each other and then turned ahead to their captor. Chris glanced behind them as they walked, and once they were out of earshot of the guard post, he asked: “Did you have to go and mention that throat cutting thing?”

“I had to make it convincing enough...” the Huru responded. “...Or they might not have let us by.”

Tyler gave a shrug. “He’s got a point,” he said.

“I guess...” Chris said and looked down at his wrists. He could see his skin was bright red right where the rope was

tied. “Yo, Keirus, when are we gonna get these ropes off? If they chew into my wrist anymore, I’m not gonna be able to use my sword.”

“Soon enough...” Keirus said as he glanced over his shoulder. “...Just until they tell us where the girls are.”

As Keirus watched the path ahead of them, he started to see Sokasiri between the tree branches. He was able to fool one of the Huruchim with his disguise, but being in the actual village was another thing entirely.

Just as they came out of the woods, Gor’uth met up with them. When the one-eyed Huru saw Chris and Tyler, he shot a suspicious glance towards Keirus. “What is this?” he growled.

“I caught them sneaking around the swamp. I thought Chief A’sogu might have some use for them since we already have the three females.”

“You say you caught them sneaking around the swamp?” Gor’uth questioned suspiciously.

“Yes,” Keirus answered assertively. He was already beginning to doubt that this Huru would be fooled as easily as the others. He just hoped that the Huru didn’t sense his unease.

Then Gor’uth’s cynical gaze went right into Keirus’s eyes. “Did you find any others?”

“No,” he answered.

“Then I would wonder how these two man-things got here so quickly, considering that it would be a four day travel time for them on foot,” he said suspiciously.

“Well...” Keirus began, still keeping his assertiveness. “...I would suspect that their other traveling companions are somewhere nearby then. Wouldn’t you say, sir?” He wasn’t sure if this particular Huru was an authoritative figure among his tribe, but the way Gor’uth carried himself led Keirus to believe it.

Gor’uth’s one eye burned through Keirus like a fiery spear as he studied him. It was only moments that passed, but to Keirus, as well as to Tyler and Chris, it seemed like an eternity. Both Chris and Tyler were growing very nervous, but Keirus was still able to maintain his demeanor while he was under observation.

“Come with me,” Gor’uth said and began walking.

Stares from all the other Huruchim were following the three as they passed through the village. Finally, Gor’uth led them to another hut and pulled up the skin door. “Put them in here,” he said as he stood there.

Keirus passed underneath the Huru’s large stretch, still pulling Chris and Tyler behind him. As soon as they got inside, the three girls called out to them. They both tried to run to their lovers, but Keirus wouldn’t allow them to, not as long as Gor’uth was standing there watching.

He ignored the cries from the three girls as he tied Chris and Tyler to the holds in the wall. “What the hell, man?” Chris asked. This wasn’t how the plan was supposed to be going.

“Good...” Gor’uth said after Keirus had finished tying Tyler up. “...We’ll have some entertainment tonight.”

Keirus glanced at the five friends in their imprisonment. Then he turned to Chris and Tyler. *:Don’t panic, and try to rest yourselves. We’re all getting out of here tonight:* he said to them. Once he had passed through the doorway, Gor’uth let the skin door fall back into place.

“My god, how did they catch you two?” Missy asked.

Tyler shook his head. There were guards posted outside their door and if either of them heard anything, they would say something. They would probably kill all five of them right there. At least at this point, they had until nightfall. “It doesn’t matter...” Tyler said. “...The point is we came here to rescue you girls and that’s still the plan. This is just a slight backslide, that’s all.”

“Where’re the other three?” Geri asked.

“Well...” Chris started, but Tyler shushed him.

“...What?” he asked.

Tyler lowered his voice. “There’s two guards outside and we don’t know how good their hearing is. Saying too much is only going to make this harder...” and then he turned to Geri. “...They’re fine. They’ll get us out of here.”

-xvi-

Keirus was on pins and needles the entire rest of the day. Much to his relief, he wasn't questioned at all about Chris and Tyler. He was actually able to keep a low profile all day, which worked to his favor. Unfortunately, he couldn't tell Tikala or Tamor what had happened. He just hoped that they were still sticking to the plan, despite this turn of events.

He freely wandered the village and made note of any alternatives if their plan fell through. He had also been the one to take Chris and Tyler's swords to where the Hurus were keeping them. Once he was inside, Keirus noticed that there was a gap on the rear of the hut between the ground and where the logs met it. He was able to take all their swords and push them underneath the gap. That way, when he went to get the five friends later, the weapons could be easily accessed. And then all Keirus had to do now, was wait until nightfall.

Tikala and Tamor had staked themselves out in the brush that bordered Sokasiri. “*Blast,*” Tikala grumbled from her spot when she saw Gor’uth remain to hold the skin up. Then she saw when Keirus left the hut alone.

“Now what are we going to do?” Tamor whispered to his sister.

“The plan will remain as is. We just have to wait until tonight for it to finish. So in the meantime, brother...” and then she turned to him. “...Why don’t you try and rest for a few hours, and I will wake you up, so that I might be able to rest a bit too. We’re going to need our strength.”

* * *

Keirus opened his eyes when he heard voices around him. As his gaze focused, he wasn’t the topic of discussion, but the others were around him conversing in their tongue. Night had already fallen and he quickly got to his feet. Just then, he heard a gruff voice single him out.

“*You,*” the voice called to him. Keirus turned and recognized it immediately. He saw Gor’uth walking towards him and he stood to attention. “...Go and get them. It’s time.”

And then Keirus glanced past the large Huru and saw the blazing fire in the center of their village. He didn’t know what the Huruchim were planning, but he didn’t want any of the

others around when it happened. So, he gave a nod and then walked towards the hut where the captives were being held.

Chris and Tyler were both awakened abruptly at the sound of Geri's voice. "Why are you here?" she asked, her voice quivering. She feared that their time had finally come.

Keirus walked over to her. "We're getting out of here," he said. He reached up and untied her ropes.

"What?" she asked.

"It's about 'freakin time," Chris whispered sharply.

Geri turned to her friend and then to the Huru standing right in front of her untying the knots. "Keirus?" she asked quietly.

He grinned as he brought the rope down. "Who'd you think it was?"

Geri stood there for a moment rubbing her wrists as he moved to untie Shauna. Shauna just stared at him. "It was you who brought the guys in here? Why didn't you just free us then?"

"I couldn't, not while that other one was standing there watching," and then he dropped her rope on the ground and moved towards Missy. Geri and Shauna quickly hurried to free Chris and Tyler.

"Now listen to me..." Keirus started once everyone was free. He pulled them all into a huddle and explained where their weapons were, and the plan up to this point. "...And wait until I call you out before you do anything..." He took a deep breath

and closed his eyes. He wasn't supposed to do what was coming because according to the laws of the Gods, imitation of another was forbidden. Keirus couldn't turn into his father, but he did have the ability to take one of Hycen's alternate forms. "...Forgive me for this, father," he said and became enveloped in the whirling smoke.

The two Huruchim that were posted as guards began wondering what was taking so long for the captives to be brought out. "What's going on in there?" one of them asked. All he received in response was a low growl. He and his partner glanced at each other and then he reached for the skin door.

Just before the Huru touched the door, a great white bear jumped right through the door, and the entire side of the hut. The two Huruchim fell back from the impact and the bear let out a loud roar.

"L-Lord Hycen..." one of them stammered as he scurried back from the bear. "...We've angered him, *fly!*" he shouted. He scrambled to his feet and fled.

"*Go!*" Keirus growled and glanced over his shoulder at the other five. They hurried around him and ran to retrieve their weapons. Some of the Huruchim were bold enough to try and stop the five from getting away, but as soon as they got close enough, Keirus lashed out at them.

As soon as the two Kuruuks saw the white bear, they knew it was their cue to reveal themselves and help the others. They jumped out of their hiding places and as soon as any Huruchim saw them, they were already hurrying to fight them.

Upon sight of the white bear, most of the Huruchim had fled out of fear of what was going to happen. Those who stayed mustered up the courage to attack the bear. All the Gods could turn into their chosen animal form, but it was the most vulnerable form any of them had, simply because it enabled them to use their full powers. Still, though the bear form stripped Keirus of any powers, it was not an easy one to take down.

Keirus didn't want to kill any of the Huruchim, despite their savage nature. They were, after all, kin to the Kuruuks, they just led a different lifestyle. He had hoped to scare the majority of them away, which he did, but the ones that remained were still going to try and kill him. And then his gaze landed on the bonfire again. He decided to make his way towards the flames, stopping any Huru that got in his way.

The five friends found their weapons stacked behind the hut as Keirus had told them. And as they made their way to the hut, they saw the two Kuruuks also engaged in battle with the Huruchim. They each grabbed their swords and fastened the belts around their waists before jumping into the combat. And

no sooner had they gotten their belts on, the Huruchim took notice to them.

“Get them!” one of the Hurus shouted when he saw the five. Several of them hurried towards the friends. One of the Hurus jumped into the air and got ready to bring his glaive down on Tyler since he was the first one in sight. Tyler quickly drew his sword and got it up in just enough time to stop the glaive from piercing him.

Missy didn’t have time to see if her boyfriend was okay because another of the Huruchim had already confronted her.

Keirus’s senses were magnified times two when he was in an alternate animal form and his keen ears picked up on all the Huruchim gathering around him. He suddenly swiped one of his large paws and knocked a fair share of them right off their feet. Then he felt as another of them jumped right on top of him. He stood up to the full extent the bear form would reach and grabbed a hold of the Huru right away. He tore the fox right off his back and threw him towards a group that was gathering.

He kept running towards the bonfire and now he was upon it. He was able to grab one of the fallen glaives in his claws and swiped it right across the fire, knocking the flaming logs loose. Some of the logs had been knocked right into the huts that were scattered around and ignited them. Now that the logs had been scattered, the fire began to spread and once the hut caught on fire, that blaze began spreading.

More of the Huruchim surrounded Keirus, but he merely plowed right through all of them and ran towards the five friends.

A'sogu stood watch right outside of his hut. He had seen the chaos from the very moment it started. "Now pay close attention..." he said to those around him and put his hand out. One of the others placed a glaive in his outstretched palm. "...This is how we fell a God."

As soon as Keirus's side was exposed, the Huruchim chief took aim with the glaive and threw it. Like expected, the weapon pierced the bear right in the side. Keirus let out a bellow of pain when the glaive struck him and he faltered.

The demigod had to ignore the pain that shot through his side though. He and the others were almost in the clear. The fire was consuming most of Sokasiri and many of the remaining Hurus were retreating to avoid being swallowed up by the flames. He clenched onto the spear and closed his eyes. He let out another bellow in pain as he pulled it right out. He had to keep going.

Geri had locked weapons with one of the Huruchim and she was struggling to fight the fox off, when suddenly, the fox-man got knocked right off his feet. All of the Huruchim that had confronted the five friends were knocked off their feet as the white bear's large bulk plowed right into all of them.

“Go!” Keirus said to them as he kept guard over them. “...Go with Tikala and Tamor! Get out of here!” He ran alongside of the five as they ran towards the Kuruuks. Despite his injury, Keirus had to be the shield to intercept any attacking Huruchim as they ran. At least in any animal form, since animals have natural armor, he was able to withstand harder hits for longer periods of time.

Tikala and Tamor had lost their opponents and they hurried to meet up with the rest of their party. “Let’s go!” Keirus shouted as he and the others ran towards them. The two Kuruuks gave a nod and they began running. The five friends weren’t too far behind them, and Keirus took the rear as they all escaped.

-xvii-

The entire party ran until they could run no more. They hadn't gone too far, but the orange glow from the flaming Huruchim civilization seemed far in the distance. Most of the Huruchim had fled as soon as Keirus made his appearance, but those who hadn't were now too distracted by the fire that had ignited in their village.

The eight had finally stopped running, long enough to catch their breaths. "We can stop..." Tikala said through heaving gasps and her glance went towards Keirus, who was still in the bear form. "...But I don't think we should linger too long. The Huruchim may be distracted right now, but as soon as it's light, they may very well start tracking us."

"Agreed," Keirus said with a nod and then sat on his haunches.

Geri leaned against his side, but she pulled up right away when she felt something warm against her leg. "Keirus..." she said. She couldn't see very well in the dark, but she put her hand

on his side and felt the blood. "...Oh my god! You're hurt..." she said.

"Yes..." he said with a nod and let out a breath. He was beginning to feel faint. "...One of them clipped me."

"Blessed Ciralei, Keirus!" Tikala called out. "...Why didn't you say something sooner?" and she was already reaching into one of the packs for a healing kit.

"We had to get out of there," he said to her.

"I know that..." she said as she approached him with the kit. "...But you *still* should have said something. What did I say even before we decided to do this, hmm? Don't exert yourself if it's too much, which you have clearly done already. When are you going to learn, Keirus? You may have a higher tolerance for pain than most, but your body is still that of flesh and blood."

"Yes, Tikala..." he said a little irritably. He didn't like when she mothered him constantly. "...I know, but it's over and done with. Let's leave it be."

"Fine..." she said. She was too tired to put up an argument with him. "...But you need to change back so this will be easier to do, and we won't go through as many bandages."

* * *

The travelers spent the night right where they had stopped. They had no fire to sit by, but everyone was just too tired from the day's events to care

Much to their surprise, they didn't encounter any Huruchim as they continued traveling that following day. They covered much ground and had almost gotten back to where they had been before the Huruchim took the three girls. By their third day of travel though, they were back on the track they originally started.

-xviii-

Everyone was sitting around the campfire in silence. Geri's four friends were all on the brink of sleep from the hard day of travel. Those who had gone swamp swimming had been able to clean themselves off in a stream nearby, and now all of them were huddled around the fire.

Tikala was up and alert though, while her brother had already fallen asleep. A few more hours though, and the she-Kuruuk would wake Tamor up so she could get some sleep. They had been back on the trail for four days already, and now Keirus had gotten back into the habit of wandering from the party later at night.

Geri looked around the area. Because of the canopy, she couldn't see many stars. For some reason, she was feeling particularly frustrated. Why though, she didn't know. She had found out she was the *Great Warrior*, but the shock from that was over and she had accepted it. She and her friends had recently escaped with their lives from the Huruchim, and they

were now sitting quietly around the fire. Her friends were tired from all the excitement, but she was not. And, she wanted to know where Keirus had gone off too.

“Where does he go all the time?” she asked randomly, some irritation in her voice. “...He’s here during the day, but once night comes and we camp, he’s gone.”

Tikala glanced over the flames at Geri. “Don’t take it personally...” she said and then glanced at the flame. “...He’s always done this. And each morning, he’s always returned.”

Geri let out a sigh. The Kuruuk’s words didn’t offer her any comfort though. And if she were to get some sleep tonight, she’d have to work off her anxieties. Now that Geri knew who she was, she was a little more confident in her abilities as a fighter. And bit by bit, the Warrior was waking up. She had already triumphed over an ogre and there was little else that could be as threatening. And of course, she had *Ara Silel*. As long as she had that sword, nothing could stop her. As silly as it sounded, Geri found herself linked to the magical blade. It would be with her wherever she went.

She stood up and adjusted her sheath. “I’m going on a walk,” she said.

“Geri...” Tikala objected. “...Wouldn’t you at least like an escort? What if you run into trouble?”

Geri shook her head, her dark hair falling over her shoulders. “I’m not worried. Besides, I won’t wander far

enough where I won't be able to see the firelight. It's just a little walk."

"All right..." Tikala said. She was pretty sure that Geri could handle herself if she ran into trouble. And even if she had, as long as Faolan was still out there somewhere (and she was sure that he was), he would help if she needed it.

*

Geri just wandered a little ways until she reached a tiny clearing. She glanced at the path she just took and saw the dim orange glow of the firelight through the brush. The moon was overhead in this clearing and it lit up the area she was in. She sat down on the fallen tree trunk to be alone with her thoughts.

She knew why she was probably getting so agitated. She figured it was all her emotions towards Keirus that were doing it. Geri still felt strongly for him, and she had hoped that he would eventually say something to her, but so far, nothing had happened. And now, all the emotion she wanted to get out, she just couldn't and it was taking a toll on her.

Geri put her hands down at her sides and rested her palms on the coarse bark. She let out a deep breath. She so badly wanted him and she was really getting worked up over it. She let out a few breaths and heard a noise in the woods around her.

The noise wasn't frightening to her at all. In fact, Geri had come to recognize that noise easily and she looked in the direction it came from. "You can come out..." she said. "...I can hear you."

:I'm not trying to hide from you, if that's what you mean: the familiar voice said as the white wolf emerged from the shrubs. He walked over to her and sat down. *:I just walk quietly:*

She let out another breath. "I know," she muttered, still a little agitated.

Faolan cocked his head. *:You seem troubled, Geri. Why?:*

She looked into his silver gaze. "I'll give you two guesses, but you're probably only gonna need one."

He looked at her understandingly and gave a small nod. *:Keirus?:*

"Yes..." she said, a little louder than she had intended too. She let out a sigh and then lowered her voice. "...I mean...yeah. I-I wish I could penetrate that emotional barrier around him. I know he doesn't want to hurt me, but, *god*...does he know what it's doing to me?"

There was a brief silence between them when Faolan started shaking his head. *:I don't think he realized it:*

"Well..." she sniffled. "...If and when you see him again, you can tell him. Look at me, I'm a *wreck* over it..." she said. A few tears trickled down her cheeks and she took a deep

breath. "...I know he doesn't want to get close because we both know that I can't stay, and he doesn't want to be hurt again, but...I just wish he would realize that I am here, now...but I won't be forever."

Faolan glanced at her. *:Take a walk with me. I want to show you something:*

"Show me something?" she echoed and wiped the tears off her cheeks. "...What?"

The wolf sniggered through his nose. *:Well if I told you what it was, it wouldn't be much of a surprise when you see it. Please?:*

Geri let out another small huff and stood up. "All right..." she said to him. "...Just as long as I'm back in enough time to get a few hours of rest."

:You will be:

She followed the wolf across the clearing, further and further away from the firelight. They went into another forested area and though she couldn't see as well as he could, he always warned her if there was an obstacle coming up that she needed to be aware of.

Finally, he led her to a secluded spot that overlooked a natural spring. The moonlight reflected off the water and even though it was dim light, Geri swore she could see straight to the bottom. "Oh my god..." she said in amazement as she looked over the pool. "...How did you find this place?"

:...*Just wandering:* he answered. :...*Natural springs are rare around here, but when you see one, it's a sight to behold:*

“Can we go closer?” she asked as she stared at it and then turned to him.

:*Sure. Come, follow me down. I've found the safest path. But still be careful:*

Geri followed him down until they reached the very bottom and stood on the shoreline of the spring. She was just in awe as she approached it. “It’s beautiful...” she said and knelt down. She put her hand in the water. “...And so warm too.”

:*Be careful...:* Faolan warned. :...*There's a drop off if you go in too far:*

She let out a tiny chuckle. “Well it’s not like I’m gonna drown. I know how to swim.”

Faolan cocked his head and looked at her. :*Oh. Well, I don't feel so bad now. I didn't know. Most humans who I've come into contact with have all been afraid of the water. The Kuruuks don't like it either:*

Geri slowly turned to the wolf. “What did you say?” she inquired curiously.

Faolan got up from his seat and ventured towards her. :*I said that the Kuruuks aren't very fond of water either:*

Her gaze followed him all the way until he sat down next to her. “How do you know that?”

His silver gaze shifted from the spring to Geri's eyes.
:*I've seen enough of them to know:* he answered simply and then looked over the water again.

"Oh..." Geri muttered. For a moment there, a flag went up in her head and she thought that Faolan was someone else. She turned back to the water and made some ripples with her hand. After a moment, she turned back to the white wolf, but his attention seemed to be focused on the bank across from them.

She let out a sigh as she reached up and lightly stroked him around the neck. The wolf's long fur almost felt like velvet when she touched it. Faolan was like a faithful canine companion to her. And just being able to pet him, to stroke his soft fur, it seemed to take out some of her anxieties. She kept a hand on him as the two of them looked over the crystal water. When her fingers just lightly touched the fur around nape of his neck though, he flinched slightly at the unexpected contact.
:*Hey, that tickles:* he said.

Geri turned to him again, but she stopped petting him. "What did you just say?" she asked as she carefully studied him, but he didn't turn to her. Instead, he got up and walked back behind her. "Faolan," she said to him.

The wolf guiltily looked over his shoulder. *:I don't want to keep any more secrets from you:* he said and then turned back around.

"Wait..." Geri said as she stood up, but before she went any further, a swirling mist consumed the wolf and he

disappeared inside of it. But just the same as the episode with the squirrel, or the bear, the mist gradually disappeared and in Faolan's stead, she saw him.

She looked closer, not believing it at first, but then she took a few steps towards him. "Keirus?" she asked and he nodded.

She studied his features as she approached him and saw as the silver pigment in his eyes darkened to blue. She pointed to him, still not believing it. "*You're* Faolan?"

"I am," he answered with a nod.

"But, how? I've...seen you and Faolan at the same time...and when he went and got the Nevryes while you..." but her voice trailed. "...Weren't able."

He brushed past her and approached the pool. "Faolan..." he began. "...Well more appropriately, the white wolf, is my chosen animal form, or my alternate form, if you will. Because of that, I am able to control and project the image of a white wolf within one league's radius, as long as I'm conscious..." and he turned to her. "...Another one of the perks to being what I am."

She came up behind him and then stopped. "So...all the times that Faolan has rescued us-or appeared to us, it was all you?"

"Yes," he answered.

"But, why? Why transform so many times a day?"

“As a wolf, my senses; hearing, sight, smell, they all become stronger. It worked at night in case any danger approached us. And it allows me to move faster being on four legs as opposed to two.”

“Why did you wait so long to tell us?”

He gave a small shrug. “Well, no one asked and to be quite honest, I didn’t think to mention it. When I showed all of you my shape shifting, I thought you might’ve figured it out anyway.”

“So...” she started and approached him. “...You heard everything that I said?”

“I did,” he nodded.

“And what do you think about all that?”

Keirus shook his head. “I don’t know what to think, Geri. I...know what you ask of me, but...” and he let out a breath. “...I just don’t know if I’m ready to give it yet.”

“Because of what happened to the first woman you loved?”

He turned to her. “That’s part of it, yes, but more of it is the fact that, you and I both know it’s going to end. And Geri, I’ve been so devastated once, I just...I don’t think I can go through it again.”

“But Keirus...” she pressed. “...You can’t just dwell on that one little event, or it’s gonna just keep dragging you down. Don’t you want to...be able to let go of it and move on?”

He let out a sigh and again shook his head. “You don’t understand it, do you, Geri?” he asked. “...When you’re in love with someone, they become a part of you. And when you lose them, you lose a part of yourself too. Isabelle and I had many happy years together and I didn’t think it would ever end; I didn’t want it too...

“...But when a body ages, it begins to lose its liveliness, and its will to live, whether the spirit is ready for it or not. And I had to watch as it happened to her, day after day. She grew old, while I did not...but every day that I saw her, I saw as her very life essence slowly drained from her, until she died. And now, she is gone from this world, while I remain with those ghosts haunting me to this very day.”

Geri slowly nodded. “You’re right, Keirus. I haven’t had the same experience that you did, but I have been in love and I do know what it’s like to lose something so special. And it hurts, yes it does, it hurts bad and it is hard to reopen your heart, with that fear of being hurt again still festering inside of you...

And she pointed to him. “...But you’re immortal, Keirus and immortality means forever. And forever is a long time to dwell on those devastating feelings, especially when you chose devastation over what might’ve been. And when that opportunity is gone...” and she shook her head. “...It never will be again. Do you want to stick with what was, or do you want to move on to what *could* be?”

* * *

The flames flickered as the light breeze whisked around their camp. It was a full moon out tonight, and now that it was high enough in the darkened sky, its silver beams illuminated the campsite.

Now that most of the travelers had a few hours of rest, they were beginning to feel a little better. Tamor was awake now too and he was smoking his pipe as they sat around the fire.

Missy looked off in the direction that Geri had wandered off in. "She's been gone for a while..." she said and turned to the Kuruuks. "...Should we go looking for her?"

"She's fine," Tamor said as the flames flickered in his gaze.

Shauna turned to the male Kuruuk. "How do you know?" she asked, worried that Geri might've fallen and was unable to get back up, or if she got lost in the wilderness.

"He's with her..." Tamor muttered. "...He won't let anything happen."

Tikala looked across the firelight at her brother. "Faolan?" she asked.

He met her glance. "The same," he answered.

Tikala's lips curled up in a grimace. She ground her teeth as she looked at the fire, but said nothing. She had been tired before, but now, at the mention of Keirus and Geri together, her adrenaline was rushing again. She badly wanted to go find

them and interrupt their moment. But if she were to do that, it would mean she'd have to see them together again. She curled her fingers until she had balled up one of her fists and just kept it tightly clenched as she drank from her water skin.

"Tikala..." Tamor said when he saw her agitation beginning to pulse.

She took the skin down and looked at him. "What?" she snapped.

"The sky is blue, the grass is green, the sun is gold, what color is the queen?"

"What?" she asked again and flattened her ears as she stared at him. "...Don't you try pulling those riddles of yours on *me*," she retorted.

"I'm not..." Tamor said simply. He was still a little tired, but he at least wanted to finish his pipe before bedding down again. But what he really didn't need was to get into another spat with his sister. "...Just think about it for a moment."

While Tikala pondered over the very strange question Tamor asked, Tyler turned to him. "Do you really think she's okay?"

The Kuruuk nodded. "I'm sure of it. He won't let anything happen to her."

-xix-

Geri brushed past Keirus and approached the bank. “Look, I’m sorry...” she said. “...It wasn’t my place to say that. And you’re right, I don’t know what it’s like to be forced into watching as someone you love begins dying. And I guess when you can remember it so vividly, that must make it awfully hard.”

He shook his head. “You’ve nothing to apologize for. I was out of line as well in some of the things I said.”

“Well gee...” she began and turned back to him. “...Since we’re both blaming ourselves, I guess technically, neither one of us is at fault...” she added lightly. “...Now that we’ve both got it out of our systems, I think I feel better.”

“You know...” he began after a moment. “...You’re right.”

“Well...” she said and looked at him. “...Every once in a while, I hit the nail right on the head,” and then she dipped her hand in the water again.

“I can see that,” he said and took a few steps towards her, then sat on a fallen log with his back against one of the other trees. He just listlessly watched the glassy water.

Geri glanced at him, though he didn’t seem to take much notice to it as he looked over the water. They were in a bit of an awkward silence, but not overwhelmingly uncomfortable. “So, how long were you and-ah, what was her name?”

A soft smile came to his face. “Isabelle,” he said.

She nodded. “Got it,” she responded. “...So, how long were you two married?”

Curiously, Keirus turned to her. “Married?” he queried. He understood the concept of it, but marriage and monogamy were really only mortal customs. His parents had been in love and got married, but that was the only ‘marriage’ he ever knew of as far as the Gods were concerned. Then he shook his head. “...Oh, ah, we never got married.”

“No? Why?”

“Well, she was a mortal woman, just as my mother was. And if I would have brought her before the Gods, I was afraid that she would share the same Fate as my mother. So we were able to keep it a secret. The only one who knew about it was Tikala, and she wouldn’t say anything.”

“How long were you two together then? If you don’t mind me asking,” she added quickly, hoping not to offend him.

“You really want to know?” he asked and she nodded. “... We were together for...” and he looked up in thought for a moment. “...Thirty-seven years.”

Geri widened her eyes. “*Wow...*” she said and pondered for a moment. She knew Keirus was immortal, but if he had been with this Isabelle for so many years, he had to be *much* older than he appeared, and that wasn’t including how many years it had been *since* Isabelle died. “...God, how old *are* you?”

“Well technically, I don’t have an age, because I’m an immortal.”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I would, but honestly...” and he shook his head, then chuckled. “...I don’t even remember.”

Then Geri giggled. “You’re a trip,” she said to him.

“I’m serious,” he said lightly. “...If you really want to know, ask Tikala. She’s the one who keeps track of it.”

“Well now I’m curious. Maybe I will ask her.”

“Feel free,” he said.

She nodded. “All right, well...” she huffed. “...If you and Isabelle were together for so long, then, you must have a couple of kids, or...” and then she kind of grimaced at the thought that he could possibly even have grandchildren. “...Or grandkids.”

Keirus shook his head. “Actually, no, I don’t. Isabelle couldn’t bear children.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. We may not have had any children, but it wasn’t the end of the world for us. We still enjoyed all our moments together.” And he looked over the water again.

Another pause came between them, but this one was a little more relieved than their earlier silence had been. This time, the two just sat together and looked over the lagoon. Actually, Keirus felt a little better now that he and Geri had really talked. And considering that the last part of their conversation was about he and Isabelle, Keirus was surprised that he didn’t feel downheartened by it. He was glad that they talked about it, because now, he felt as if he could finally move on.

“That’s *it*, ” he said suddenly.

She turned to him. “That’s what?”

“That’s all it was, Geri...” he said to her, and she could only shrug, but he continued. “...I suddenly feel like a huge burden was just lifted off my shoulders. I never realized it before, but, I was dwelling so much on the past that I didn’t even look to the present, and that’s all I needed to do.”

“What do you mean?” She wasn’t really sure what to think about his sudden change of demeanor.

Keirus let out a sigh and got off the log he had been sitting on. He knelt down beside her and took her hands.

“Because you finally talked some sense into me, I can finally move on from the past. I was so afraid to let it go, but now it’s

like, why? It is the past, and the past is gone. All that matters now is the present. And thanks to you, I finally realized that.”

And then a grin spread across her face. “So, does this mean that you’re willing to take a chance with *us* then?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Geri, I’d be a fool if I didn’t. I already am for waiting so long.”

Now she purposely played hard to get with him. “Even after all that stuff about, oh...how we know it never *would* be because after this is done, we’re gonna go our separate ways an-”

Then he suddenly pulled her into a kiss before she could even finish speaking. And that certainly caught her attention (not to her objection, of course). When they pulled out of it, she hadn’t even realized she stopped breathing. “*Wow*,” was all she could get out.

Keirus met her gaze again. “But that time has not yet come,” he said.

And then Geri all but pounced on him when she kissed him again. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her even closer. It was only a few moments that had passed, but the two had kept their emotions so penned up that now, they were coming out full force.

When they stopped long enough to catch their breaths, they met gazes again. Geri was kneeling over him and she looked down at him. “Keirus...” she said. “...Don’t make me wait any longer for this.”

He shook his head. "I can't," he responded. She leaned down and they kissed again. He slid his hands up her shirt and caressed her back.

* * *

-xx-

The travelers continued on their way and passed through another, small forest that afternoon. But as they exited the forest, they now faced the two-day journey through the vast Rondhirr Plains.

The long grasses swept along their boots as they went on their way. All around them, the grasses swayed and swished in the warm, gentle breeze. It swept through the girls' long hair and lightly brushed their necks as they walked. Far in the distance, they could see a great mountain range spanning the horizon.

"What are those called?" Geri inquired and looked towards the mountains.

"Those are the Badorian Mountains," Keirus responded.

She looked ahead at him. "Oh..." she said in realization. "...*Those* were the ones you were talking about."

He nodded. "Yes. They mark the borderline between the Mortal Realm, and Iomilaris."

Geri's glance went back to the mountains. They didn't look any different from any she had ever seen. If they marked the border between two realms, she at least expected the sky to be prismatic or something. She stopped and stared at them. "They don't look like they mark anything. They just look like regular mountains to me."

He walked back to her and followed her glance. "On this side, yes, they do. But there's a passage in those mountains..." he said. "...That no one, save for those of us who dwell in that Realm, knows about. That's how mortals are kept out, but you all will probably get to see it when this is over."

She watched him and then looked back to the mountains, and then she realized that she had stopped, but then she hurried to catch up to him. "Really? We'll get to see the Realm of Gods?"

He kept his hands around the straps on his pack as they walked. "Of course you will."

"Wow..." she said and looked at the horizon. "...If I could actually tell this story and not get locked up in an asylum for it-it'd be one hell of a story to hear."

He chuckled at her comment. "Well, I suppose there's a downside to everything."

Geri gave a small shrug. "Yeah, close minded people suck, but what sucks even more is that they're the ones who got the run of everything, y'know?"

He nodded. "I do know. And the ones who have the greatest ideas are seldom heard by those ears without consequence."

She looked at him in awe. "Wow, you're pretty speculative," she said.

He nodded. "Yes, I've been around long enough to pick these things up."

"Oh yeah, that's right..." she said. "...You've *forgotten* how old you are," she teased.

"Hey, when you're so *old*, you tend to lose track of certain things," he joked.

She giggled at him.

"Yeah dude..." Chris spoke up. "...How old *are* you? Seriously."

Geri giggled again as she turned back to her friend. "He's so old that he *forgot*."

"What?" Tyler asked.

Then Keirus shook his head, but he couldn't help the chuckle that got out. "You are never going to let me live this down, are you?" he said to Geri.

"You know..." she said, unable to keep a straight face, but she was able to stifle her laughs. "...You're right. It isn't very nice to make fun of old people, because they can't help it when they go senile."

"Yes, that's right. Give us old folks a break," Keirus responded.

“Dude...” Chris said to him. “... You cannot be serious. You don’t know how old you are?”

And then Keirus stopped walking. “Fine...” he said. “... We’ll solve this problem right now...” and then he glanced ahead at the Kuruuks. “...Tikala?”

She stopped walking and looked back at him. “Yes, sir?” she asked.

“How old am I?”

She cocked her head curiously. “What?”

“Sorry...” he apologized. “...Going by the mortal sense of time, how long have I been around?”

“Gee...” Tamor said before his sister spoke up, unable to keep from getting his age razzes in. “... You sure you want to ask her? We’re lucky she remembers her own name at times.”

Tikala flattened her ears and turned to him. “Why, you-*brat...*” she spat. “...One of these days Tamor, I’m going to *pop* you *so* hard that you’ll be *cross* eyed for *weeks*.”

Tamor looked at her, not really taking the comment to heart at all, though he knew she probably *could* do it if she felt so inclined. “Ouch,” he said.

“That’s right,” Tikala retorted and thought for a moment. “...*Now...* Keirus has been around for...two hundred and twenty...four years,” and she glanced back at him.

Then Keirus turned back to the others and shrugged. “Satisfied?”

“Wow,” Geri commented.

“No shit!” Tyler burst out.

“*Damn...*” Chris said. “...How in the hell do you look so good? You don’t look much older than like, I dunno, twenty-three, twenty-four maybe. How do you pull that off?”

“As an immortal, I don’t age, simple as that...” Keirus answered. “...None of us do. We mature, but we don’t age. Actually, for an immortal, I’m still *very* young.”

Then Shauna turned to Tikala, recalling that she had been with Keirus since day one. “Well...if he’s two hundred and thirty and you’re older than he is, how old are *you*?”

The Kuruuk flattened her ears detestably and turned as she folded her arms. She was still a little crabby from the previous night and she didn’t particularly feel like getting into the discussion. “I do not discuss my age with anyone,” she said.

“Three hundred and ninety-six,” Tamor said.

Tikala shot her brother a glance. “*Tamor!*” she shrieked in outrage and then slugged him in the arm. She didn’t do it very hard, but hard enough to get her earlier point across.

“*Ouch,*” he said and rubbed his arm.

“What did I tell you?”

“Well it’s not like you *look* it, *ow*...and you certainly don’t *hit* like it,” he muttered.

Tyler adjusted his pack and glanced at the he-Kuruuk. “Well...” he began. “...How old are you, Tamor?”

“One hundred and ninety four,” he answered.

“Damn...” Chris commented. “...How long do you guys usually live?”

Tamor looked at him as he flexed his arm. “A Kuruuk can live to be over six hundred...” and he gave a small shrug. Tikala began walking again, and everyone else just absently followed after her. “...A few even make it to eight hundred and those who do, are held in very high regards among the rest of our society.”

“Yes...” Tikala hissed, putting her ears back, but she didn’t glanced at her brother. “...And some smart mouthed *young* Kuruuks don’t even make it to *two* hundred,” she shot back.

“Wow...” Shauna said as her gaze shifted between the bickering foxes. “...There’s quite an age gap between you two. Is that normal?”

“For Kuruuks...” Tamor went on. “...Yes, it *is* normal. We’re able to produce offspring well into our golden years, but believe it or not, our age difference really isn’t that outstanding. There’s twelve other siblings between me and Tikala.”

“That’s quite a family,” said Shauna.

The she-Kuruuk let out a sigh and nodded. “Kuruuks believe in large families Shauna, but we cannot start them until we’re mature adults. That is how nature keeps her balance in our society.”

“So, it’s like...a developmental thing?” Shauna went on, now finding herself quite interested in the Kuruuk life cycle.

They looked like foxes, but in the long run, the Kuruuks were quite different from what she knew.

“Yes...” Tikala answered slowly, at first not understanding what the girl meant by ‘developmental’.

“...Kuruuks can live a long time, but we age very slowly and because of it, we develop slowly.”

“How old is a mature adult?” Missy inquired.

“Two hundred,” Tamor answered.

“That’s kind of a long time to wait,” Tyler said.

“Not for us,” Tamor answered.

“So, do you guys like, get married or anything?” Shauna asked.

Tikala gave her a curious look. “Married?” she echoed. The term was unfamiliar to her and she looked to her brother, but he only shrugged.

Keirus cracked a small grin at the Kuruuks’ naiveté and glanced back at them. “She would be referring to mating among Kuruuk society,” he explained.

“Oh...” Tikala responded when she realized it. Even in the Realm with the Gods, the term ‘marriage’ wasn’t very common because *they* rarely chose monogamy, with a few exceptions. And the she-Kuruuk shook her head. “...No. Marriage is only a human ritual. Some Kuruuk mates choose to remain with each other from season to season, but the rest of us don’t. We have our mothers and fathers, but more often than not, we don’t have any other labels. Every Kuruuk is fair game

when it comes to the mating cycle, though we do stay away from full siblings.”

“Which you two are, right?” Chris spoke up as he glanced at both of them.

“Yes,” both Kuruuks nodded, and then Tikala spoke up. “...Our parents did choose to become life mates.”

“How long does a Kuruuk stay with their mother, who I assume is the one that rears the youngsters?” Shauna went on.

“Yes, that’s mostly what happens, but the males aren’t completely gone from the picture. They usually have a few families which they take turns staying with and helping. Male Kuruuks usually leave their mothers first, once they’re adults, while the females tend to stay until they’re able to start a family. And that’s providing a she-Kuruuk doesn’t chose a different path from motherhood, like a Kuruuk Warrior, or a Guardian. It’s really whatever we chose.”

“Is that what you chose to do?”

“Well, I went into training to be a Kuruuk Warrior, but when Keirus came along...” and she glanced at him. He and Geri were just walking along, involved in their own conversation. She turned back to Shauna. “...It was a different sort of calling. Not quite motherhood, but just someone to guide him into adulthood.”

* * *

“Tomorrow, we should be nearing the Forest,” Tikala said. At the moment, she, Tamor, and Keirus were sitting around the fire. He hadn’t chosen to turn into Faolan just yet. Later though, when the foxes decided to bed down, he would assume his wolf form.

“Yes...” Keirus responded as the firelight danced in his eyes. He looked over his shoulder at the darkened forest in the distance. “...I just hope we may go unnoticed once we enter it.”

The she-Kuruuk shook her head. “I wouldn’t count on it. Those *moghrim* will be alerted to us as soon as we set foot into their territory. It’s just a matter of when they’ll make themselves known.”

Tamor’s gaze shifted between the two as he puffed on his pipe. “Is there no alternate way we can take, to avoid the *moghrim*?”

Keirus turned to him. “Not one that will be any faster. With Crodis’ attack on Federain, and the interference with the *huruchim*, we’re already behind where we should be. Time is growing short. I just hope we might reach him before his final attack.”

“And what of Morgia?” a hostile Tikala asked through gritted teeth.

He shook his head. “I do not know, nor do I know which one we should worry about more. Morgia and Crodis are both very powerful. Even with Geri’s help, I would not underestimate either one.”

“First...” Tamor began. “...Let’s concentrate on getting past the *moghrim*. Once we reach the other side of that forest alive, than I’ll worry about other problems.”

Keirus gave a nod. “You’re right, Tamor...” he said and then his glance went to Tikala. “...The *moghrim* are our biggest threats right now...” and he looked towards the five friends, all of whom were sound asleep. “...They’ve already been in one heavy battle, and they’ve confronted the Huruchim *and* the *onikage*, but I think the *moghrim* will be the worst challenge yet.”

Tikala nodded. “Fear is our worst enemy...” she said and her gaze shifted between them. “...I do not fear the *moghrim*, nor should you two.”

Tamor gave his sister a wide-eyed stare as he turned to her. “Tikala, have you not heard the stories?” he asked.

“I have heard the stories, but as long as we fear them, they will overpower us. We three must at least be brave when we enter that forest and not let the others know what sort of dangers are in there. Because if they are afraid...” and she solemnly shook her head. “...We will not make it.”

-xxi-

That day was cold and clammy. Fog had settled over the plains, completely blocking the skies. An unsteady silence had accompanied the travelers for most of their trip that day. Though Tikala had said she wasn't afraid of what lay ahead of them, she, Tamor, and Keirus were all relatively uneasy as they walked.

"Oh God, somebody *say* something..." Shauna said suddenly. "...Jeez, you could cut the tension with a knife here."

"I got it..." Geri said and glanced at her friend.

"...Remember the Pops Concert senior year?" she asked.

"Yeah," Shauna nodded.

"And what'd we sing?"

A grin spread across Shauna's face right away. "*Like a Prayer*, baby..." she said. "...Still remember the words?"

Geri chuckled. "Do I ever? How many times a day did we practice that song?"

"At least a hundred," Shauna answered with a small laugh.

Missy's glance shifted between the two girls. "By Madonna?" she asked. She had just met Shauna and Geri through Tyler, so she wasn't sure what their 'Pops Concert' was, other than assumptions when the girls mentioned they sang. "...Was that like, a talent show or something?" Her school didn't have a 'Pops concert', but they had a talent concert.

"Yeah..." Geri answered. "...Shauna and I figured, hell, it was our last year, so why not go out with a bang, right?" And Shauna nodded in agreement.

"Get outa town..." Chris said to his fiancée. "...I didn't know you could sing."

Her tongue clicked against her teeth as she shook her head at him. "Oh shut up, ass. Yes, actually, I can..." and she looked ahead at Geri. "...And if I may say so, we did a damn good job too."

"Right on," Geri answered.

"Yeah..." Tyler added and looked at Chris. "...They really did, and trust me, pop isn't exactly my style of music, but I even enjoyed it."

Then Shauna turned to Geri. "What do ya say? Should we give it a try?"

"Please, do..." Missy said. "...I love that song."

"Wanna sing it with us?" Geri asked.

"Oh..." Missy said and gave a timid shrug. "...I don't know. If you two did it for a talent show, you probably got it down to a tee. I wouldn't want to mess it up for you."

Geri waved her hand at Missy. “Don’t be silly. Do you know the song pretty well?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s one of my favorites.”

“Then that’s fine. You can sing the refrain with us to start, and then we’ll like...give you a cue or something. How’s that?”

Missy’s blue eyes lit up. Before they all wound up in this entire mess, Geri and Shauna had just been acquaintances with her. Now, after everything they’d been through, all three of them had become great friends. “Sounds good. I gotta try and remember the verses though.”

“Hey, singing is like riding a bike...” Geri went on. “...Once you start singing the song, the words’ll just come to you, trust me.”

Missy’s eyes lit up. “Okay,” she said with a nod.

“Okay, okay...” Geri said and cleared her throat. She had to hum a few times to try and get the right note, even checking with Shauna to make sure. And then the two of them hummed together to match notes. When they were ready, Geri began singing the first verse. Together, with Missy, all three of them sang the refrain of the song, and then they alternated verses until the song was over

For being out of practice for a few years, the girls all did pretty well, even getting applause from everyone, including Keirus and the Kuruuks.

“You girls are just full of surprises, aren’t you?” Keirus asked them when they were finished. All three of them were equally blushing at the compliment.

“Yes, yes...” Tamor said as his ears perked up.
“...Please, sing another one.”

So, the girls came up with a few songs that all three of them knew, usually alternating verses and singing refrains all together. And the more songs they sang, the better all three of them thought they sounded. And no one else seemed to object to their singing either, so the girls kept it up until they ran out of songs.

And by nightfall, they had reached the borders of the Forbidden Forest.

* * *

“I think we should camp for the night...” Tikala suggested. It was a little earlier than normal for them to pitch camp, but it would give them all more rest. “...Because we’re going to want to make haste through that forest and if we keep up a fast enough pace, we should be to the other side in three days.”

“Why the hurry to reach the other side of this forest?” Geri inquired.

Tikala turned to her. She couldn’t bring herself to tell them the truth about the Forest just yet. In her brief silence

following, she could feel both Keirus and Tamor watching her. The Kuruuk took a deep breath. "...We're just running short on time, that's all."

Geri's gaze then shifted between Tikala and Keirus. "Well, how much time do we have left?"

Keirus shook his head. "We don't know for certain, but we are running out of it..." and he glanced into the darkened forest. "...And as we get nearer to Crodis, the dangers will become greater and he'll throw more at us to try and stop us. And these next few days are going to be especially hard ones."

She huffed. "Well I'm ready for anything," she said confidently. "...This Crodis hasn't won yet, and I don't think he's going too."

A small grin came to Keirus's face. Geri was so optimistic, she had been since they first met. And no matter what had happened to them along the trail, nothing dampened her spirits. He especially liked that about her. And he gave a small nod in agreement with her. "Not if we can help it," he said.

"Exactly," she said. She sat down next to him and he slid an arm around her. She rested her head on his shoulder.

Tikala was still a little agitated over the two of them, but as they traveled, her agitation was slowly going away when she realized that no matter how hard she tried, she wouldn't keep them apart. And then when she found out who Geri really was,

she really tried to pull herself out of the picture. But every time she saw them together, it still pained her.

The Kuruuk slowly rose to her feet and let out a sigh. “I’ll be back,” she said, not really being able to hide the discontent in her voice this time. She grabbed her sword and started walking away.

Keirus watched as she walked away from them. She usually didn’t wander unless something was really bothering her. “I’ll be right back...” he said to Geri and she picked her head up. “...You might want to think about getting some rest though,” he said to them.

Tamor turned and saw as Keirus caught up to Tikala and the two of them went walking. He clasped his hands and rested his muzzle in them as he turned back to the fire.

“What’s going on?” Geri asked and turned to him.

“It’s pretty obvious...” the fox said and then his brown eyes lifted to meet her gaze. “...And I’m sure you can figure it out, Geri...” and then he shook his head. “...But it is not my place to say anything further. It was going to come up sooner or later and I guess...now is the time.”

Keirus cleared his throat as he approached Tikala. Her ears flipped back as she acknowledged him, but she didn’t turn. She just stood there with her back to him.

He glanced back at the fire and saw the orange glow, but they were quite a distance away from it already. “What is it?” he asked her.

“Keirus...” she started after a moment. “...I have known you your entire life. I have watched you grow from a tiny infant...into the *amazing* young man that you are now and it’s...” she began to say, but then stopped. She could say all she wanted, but it wouldn’t change anything. And at that thought, the Kuruuk’s ears drooped and her shoulders slumped. She let out a sigh. “...It’s nothing.”

He took a few more steps towards his Guardian. “It’s something...” he said. “...You usually aren’t so withdrawn. Tell me, what is it?” In the darkness, as his eyes adjusted, he saw as she straightened up, glancing listlessly to the horizon.

“It’s too hard, Keirus...” she began and then paused. She let out another deep breath. “...Seeing you two, together. In the beginning, when she first came here, it didn’t really bother me that much, but as we all began traveling together, and you two became more acquainted with each other, I saw as you two got closer, and I...” and she paused again.

After a moment, she glanced over her shoulder towards him. “...I became jealous, insanely jealous.”

He stared at her for a moment. “Of Geri?” he asked.

Tikala let out another breath. “Yes...” she said. Her fur began to bristle irritably and she turned to him. “...I was so jealous of her that I even tried to sabotage it, steer her away from

it, but then *you* had to come along and interfere!” She had all but completely snapped on him, even though he wasn’t to blame for any of it, but she was so tired of keeping her emotions pent up. They were starting to take a toll on her. She angrily paced around in her spot.

“And I just couldn’t *stand* it anymore, Keirus!” She hadn’t meant to snap that time, but she had and he was there, and she thought it about time he knew. “...Seeing you two together! I just-it tears my heart to *shreds!*”

He let out a few breaths and turned away from her. The she-Kuruuk had raised him from infancy and had always been a big part of his life as long as he could remember. But for all Keirus knew about his mentor, he *never* would have thought she’d be confessing feelings of a deep love for him. After a moment, he glanced back at her, but she shook her head and turned away from him. Finally, he spoke up. “Tikala, how long has this been?”

“Keirus...” she started in a calmer tone of voice. “...I was jealous of Isabelle because I knew that she could have something that I never could. And when she died, it pained me to see you in such distress, but at the same time, a part of me was ecstatic. I could have you to myself again, to watch you and take care of you. But then when Geri and her friends came along, the jealousy flared up again...” and she started pacing around again.

“...And once more, I had to watch as you and she grew close to each other...” and she shook her head. “...And I

couldn't stand it. And I thought that if I could not have you, than no one else should either. Tamor knew all along and he tried convincing me otherwise, but I was so blinded by that jealousy..." and her voice trailed.

He shook his head and there was another awkward pause between them. Tikala was a very dear friend to him, and here she was pouring her heart out to him, but he just didn't share those same feelings for her, and he never could. "But Tikala..." he started. "...You know it could never be between you and I. There is just too much difference between us. I'll admit, I care for you very much-I would even go as far to say that I love you, but as a dear friend and a mentor, nothing more."

"I know that, Keirus..." she said and closed her eyes. She rarely ever cried, but this was one of the few instances where she couldn't help it. "...I've known that all along, but I-I've often times wished it could be different, somehow. I know I can't change anything and I know I was selfish and I'm sorry, but...I couldn't help it. I thought it might go away over time, but...it hasn't."

He let out a sigh. It was hard enough on him to be in this position, but he didn't want to lead her into something that could never be. "But Tikala, it is never going to go anywhere. I know it upsets you, but...we can't change that. This is how it is, and it's always going to remain this way."

“I know...” she said and gave a small nod. “...I know...” and she let out a deep breath. “...And I’m trying to accept that, but it’s just so hard to do.”

He walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. “Tikala, I know it’s hard. I’ve had to go through it too, but...” and he heard Geri’s words in the back of his mind. “...You can’t dwell on it, or it’s going to beat you down for the rest of your life. And we both know you’re stronger than that. Look past me, at what lies ahead of you. There is so much more for you. You just have to find it.”

There was a silence between them. In the distance, they heard the shrill call of a *nightbird*, and aside from the wind rustling the trees, everything else was silent. “...Okay?” Keirus asked her after a moment.

Tikala sniffled and slowly nodded. She wiped the tears off her cheeks and then looked at him. “Okay,” she answered quietly. They gave each other a hug.

“You know...” Keirus began. “...If ever you need a friend, or a shoulder to cry on, you know I’ll always be here.”

Tikala nodded as they pulled out of the hug. Well, her heart and her feelings had been crushed at the grim reality that she could never have him. But, oddly enough, she felt better now that something had been said. “You’ve always been kind like that Keirus,” she said

“Well...” he said. “...I’ve always had very prominent guidance.”

“I should hope so...” she said. “...Since I’ve busted my tail to raise you so properly...” and then she shook her head. “...But I think, that I’ll be all right now.”

Tamor’s ears flipped back when he heard them coming back to the fire. He put his hands behind his head. “Has everything been resolved now?” he asked when the two of them sat back down.

“Yes, Tamor,” Tikala said. She picked the stick up and prodded at the fire.

Geri was beginning to doze off, until she heard both of them come back. She opened her eyes for a moment, but then they drooped shut again. She felt when Keirus lay down behind her and she snuggled further into her sleeper roll. “What happened?” she asked him, half muttering as sleep crept up on her.

Keirus looked towards Tikala. It was a personal issue, he thought, and for the Kuruuk’s sake, he didn’t feel comfortable telling Geri unless she was okay with it. Tikala glanced at him and then prodded the fire again. “It was just an issue that long needed resolving,” she said.

Geri yawned and held onto her blanket. “Okay...” she said, but that was it. After that, she was gone. He pulled the few strands of hair off her face and then gave her a kiss on the cheek before getting himself settled in for the night.

“You two can go to sleep if you want...” he said to the Kuruuks. “...I can take the night watch.”

“Are you sure?” Tikala asked.

Keirus nodded. “Quite. Rest yourselves for tomorrow. I’ll be fine.”

The Kuruuks exchanged glances with each other and then Tikala turned back to him. “All right,” she said. She and Tamor both settled into their sleeper rolls.

Keirus didn’t particularly feel tired at the moment, so he felt fine enough to stay awake for a few more hours. Once he started getting tired, he would turn into Faolan to get through the rest of the night.

-xxii-

When Geri opened her eyes the next morning, she saw the sky beyond the mountains was a light shade of violet-pink as the sun began to rise. She felt a warm bundle behind her and turned to see Faolan, but he was still sound asleep. She couldn't help to give the fluffy, white bundle a good-morning hug. He lazily opened his eyes in response, but they fell shut again.

"He just went to sleep a few hours ago," she heard Tikala say and turned to her.

"That's *it*?" she asked.

The Kuruuk nodded. "Yes. He wanted to stay awake long enough until the first of us woke up. So when I woke up, I told him to go to bed. We'll give everyone a few more hours until the sun rises and then we'll be on our way."

Geri looked towards Faolan again. "Is he going to be okay to travel today?"

"He will. Keirus rarely sleeps longer than four hours a night anyway."

“Are you serious?”

She nodded. “Yes. That’s just how he is, always has been. You can still sleep a little longer too, you know. If you’re still tired.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m, surprisingly awake.”

There was still an early morning chill in the air, so Geri pulled the blanket around her shoulders and glanced over the small fire at Tikala. “Uhm...can I ask what happened last night?”

Tikala looked at her. “It was just as I said. It was an issue that long needed to be addressed, and...” and her voice trailed. She took a deep breath and looked down at her wooden mug, which was steaming in the cool morning air from the warm beverage inside it. “...I apologized to him last night for it and now...” she went on, then turned back to Geri. “...It’s only fair that I apologize to you as well, for getting in the way.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is...I did have desires in him for a long time, and though I knew nothing would ever happen, a part of me just held onto it for so long, in hopes that it might someday change. It was there when he met Isabelle, and after she died, it went away for a little while...but then when you came along, it happened all over again, but...Keirus and I talked it over last night and afterwards, it just felt good to have finally gotten that out.”

“Did he ever know?”

She gave a small shrug. "If it ever crossed his mind, he never read too much into it. He tends to have that sort of impact on anyone who sees him, as do the others, I suppose."

Geri looked at her. "What impact?" she asked. *Did I fall victim to it too?* she asked herself.

"The impact that the Gods have on mortals..." she said. "...When they allow themselves to be seen."

"What?" she queried again.

Tikala met her gaze. "Tell me, Geri..." she said. "...Honestly. When you saw Keirus clearly for the first time, that day in the tavern when you and your friends arrived, what did you think about him?"

"Well..." Geri said, speaking a little hesitantly at first. Tikala knew that she really liked him, but she felt especially awkward now, knowing that the Kuruuk had felt the same way. "...I...thought he was kinda cute..."

Tikala raised her eyebrows. "Really?" she asked. "...If that's all you thought, then you have an unusually strong willpower for a mortal woman."

And then Geri's shoulders slumped as she let out a breath. "All right..." she huffed. "...I thought he was the most gorgeous guy that I've ever seen before."

"And that's the impact of the Gods..." Tikala responded with a nod. "...Even in their alternate forms, they are irresistible to mortals, male and female alike..." and then her gaze went towards Faolan. "...Even though the dark-haired young man

that you are completely smitten with is actually his true form, because of his father, Keirus is the same way...

"...And the idea of a God and a Kuruuk is absolutely ridiculous, but apparently..." and she put a hand on her chest. "...We can fall victim to their divine influences as much as any other mortal..." and then she took another deep breath.

"Keirus is a wonderful young man, Geri..." Tikala went on. "...And I tried hard to sabotage it for both of you, but I lost in the end. It's hard to see you two together, but I'll get over it, I'm sure. If you two really care for each other that much, you shouldn't be hindered."

"Gosh..." Geri began and pulled the blanket around her again. "...I'm..." and then she turned to the Kuruuk. "...I'm so sorry. I didn't know that you..." and she lowered her voice. "...Felt that way."

Tikala shook her head. "You've no need to be, Geri. You haven't done anything wrong. What happened, couldn't be helped. You can't deny your feelings..." and she gave a small shrug. "...It just doesn't work that way."

"I know..." she responded. "...But I-I feel like I stole him from you or something."

"Don't..." Tikala said. "...He and I talked it over last night. It would never happen between us, ever. Keirus..." and she gestured to the wolf. "...Does not share the same feelings for me as I do for him. His heart does not belong to me, and I dare say that it ever will. I just have to accept it, that's all."

Geri pulled the blanket around her shoulders and glanced at the Kuruuk. “You two have been together an awfully long time, haven’t you?” she asked.

“All his life...” and then her gaze landed on the sleeping wolf. “...I just cannot believe how much he’s grown in all that time...” but her voice trailed as a thoughtful smile came to her face. “...I still remember when he was an infant.”

“You know...” Geri began and she looked down at the ground. “...If you don’t mind me asking, but how did you wind up as Keirus’ Guardian?”

Tikala took a deep breath and glanced down at her mug of tea. “I was very fond of his mother, Delana. She and I were good friends. After her death, I was the only one that Lord Hycen would trust with his son’s life.”

“What was she like?”

“She was a very beautiful and very caring woman. She would always give to those in need, even though she never had much to give. She loved life and she enjoyed every day to its fullest extent...” she mused, but then spoke up again. “...And, she and Hycen loved each other very much.”

“I thought that the Gods didn’t like mortals.”

“It isn’t that they don’t like them...” Tikala said with a shake of her head. “...The Gods just feel that the mortals ask too much sometimes-even over small things. They feel that the mortals need to stop being selfish and help each other, as well as learn things on their own. The Gods will help this Realm during

times of need, but mortals do not need them to do everything. Delana was different though, that's what drew Lord Hycen to her.

"...Delana did pray to the Gods, as all mortals do, but what she asked of them, she never used for her personal gain. She was such an exceptional woman."

"Was she ever allowed to remain in your Realm?" Geri inquired.

Tikala's glance met hers. "One of the very few who were, actually."

"Because of what kind of person she was?"

"If only it would have been that simple. That would have been enough to convince me, but the Gods are not so easily influenced. Like any mortal who wishes a God's blessing, Delana had to prove herself to them and pass a test before she would be permitted immortality, and the privilege to remain in our Realm."

"What test?"

"Whenever the Gods wish a mortal to pass a test, it is not one as simple as a question they have to answer. In Delana's case, she and Lord Hycen's firstborn had to be a son."

"That isn't fair..." Geri burst out. "...You can't determine if you're going to have a son or daughter before they're conceived. It's impossible."

"Maybe it is in your home, but here, it is not so hard. There are blessings for such things, but Delana was allowed

none. If she were, that test wouldn't have been a test at all. Even if she would have bore him a daughter though, Lord Hycen loved her so deeply, that he would have given everything up to be with them...

"...Over the duration of her term though, she was able to stay in the Realm, simply because the Gods wanted to be sure she didn't take a potion for her child, and the Kuruuks were the ones who tended her if she needed. When it was determined that she would in fact bear a son, Delana was allowed to stay, and she was granted immortality. And it was because of her blessing, that Keirus also received it."

"I don't understand it..." Geri said. "...You said that she died before Keirus was even born. If that was what happened, how could he even have come into the world, not that I'm complaining, but-"

Tikala gave a nod. "I told you that Delana had the gift of foresight, which often came to her in her dreams. She saw her death in one of those dreams, but I was the only one she told about it. She knew it was going to happen and she knew it would be before she gave birth to Keirus, and she told me that her last wish was that her son be saved."

"How did she die?"

"Crodis..." Tikala muttered and put her ears back. "...He never liked mortals and when Lord Hycen took a mortal woman to be his bride, it infuriated Crodis. He and Morgia poisoned Delana to kill her, and also the child inside of her.

But...she was far enough along that we were able to save Keirus' life before the poison affected him, as was Delana's last wish."

Geri let out a breath and looked at the fire. "Nothing can overpower a mother's love of her child," she said.

"No..." Tikala responded. "...It can't. But I also wonder...if she knew that this..." and she looked around the area in regards to Lirosial's present state. "...Was going to happen. I wonder if she knew that Keirus was going to be the only one to escape Crodis' attack..." and her glance landed back on Geri. "...If she foresaw all of you coming here to help us. But, I suppose we'll never know. She kept secrets well."

"Does Keirus resemble her at all?" Geri inquired, trying to picture what his mother may have looked like by picturing him in her mind.

The Kuruuk took a deep breath. "He looks more like his father, I think. That's who he reminds me of, but he does have Delana's eyes, and her smile, when he does smile and I don't mean grin or anything. I mean when he *really* smiles. *That's* something I've not seen in a long time."

"He's got a lot to worry about though," Geri said.

Tikala nodded. "That he does."

Since they were the only two awake, surprisingly, Geri and Tikala spent a considerable amount of time just talking with one another. Once the sun had risen though, they both roused all their traveling companions and they all packed up camp. They

ate a quick breakfast out of their rations, but after that, they continued their journey.

And now, everyone faced the Forest in front of them. The entire day was clear, with blue skies as far as any of them could see, but not the woods. The trees were dark and unwelcoming. It seemed as if all the clouds from the previous day had now been absorbed into the Forbidden Forest.

Mist was lingering in the air, weaving through the rows of trees like a threaded tapestry. Even the air that came from the Forest seemed colder than the air outside of it.

Geri looked into the intimidating forest. “What is this place?” she asked.

Tikala let out a brief sigh. “It’s called the Forbidden Forest,” she said.

Missy slowly turned to the Kuruuk. “Uh...how did it get its name?” she questioned.

“It doesn’t matter...” Tikala responded, purposely trying to steer them away from any questions about the frightening forest, so they weren’t overwhelmed with fear. “...We have to pass through it regardless. It is the only way to Laraniros.” Which, of course wasn’t true, but through the Forest was the quickest path to the accursed land. Any other route, and they might reach Crodis too late.

Geri's glance shifted to Faolan as he concentrated on the path ahead of them. *:I'll go first:* he said and began skulking into the trees.

"Wait..." Tyler said and looked around. "...What about Keirus?"

"Don't worry..." Tikala said and shifted the pack on her back. "...We're all accounted for. He's decided to take the lead," and then she began following after him.

It took Tyler and the others a few moments to grasp what she was saying, but as they looked ahead at the wolf, they recalled that Keirus was able to shape shift.

Chris paused for a moment though. "Wait..." and then he glanced at the wolf and pointed. "...Keirus is that wolf?" and then he looked at the two Kuruuks. "...I thought you said his name was Faolan."

And then the white wolf stopped and glanced over his shoulders. *:That is the wolf's name. As I said, all the Gods have alternate forms and it just so happens that Faolan is mine. And you are the only ones who know this:*

And then everyone's surprised gazes, except for Geri's and the Kuruuks', all went towards the white wolf. "Dude..." Chris said. "...Get out of my head. That's creepy."

:I'm sorry, Chris, but this is the only way I can speak when I'm in this form: he answered coolly. And then he proceeded into the woods.

One question had been answered about Faolan, but there was another lingering in the others' minds now too. Why now, of all times the wolf appeared to them, had Keirus decided to remain in that form? Of course, they were all probably better off *not* having that question answered yet.

:*Stay close*: Faolan said as they began their path through the woods. As they walked, the chill throughout surrounded them all. Even the Kuruuks had to tighten the cloaks around their bodies.

The stillness in the air was very eerie to all of them. Every once in a while, a light gust of wind would howl through the skeleton trees, shuttering the branches like dry bones. Sometimes, they would hear a noise similar to the hooting of an owl, but whenever they looked in the same direction, nothing was there.

No one knew why, but it seemed as if a great evil had its sight on them in here, just waiting...waiting...waiting to strike at them. None of them exchanged any words out of fear that they might miss hearing something, though no one knew what they were listening for.

Geri kept nervously glancing down at Faolan, but he took no notice to it. The wolf was just concentrated on the sounds and sights around them. With even the slightest noise, his ears would flick in the direction it came from, but never once did he turn to it.

The wolf kept the pace up for the party and though it seemed much hastier than normal, none of the travelers objected to it. They just wanted to keep going and going until they saw the other end of the Forest in front of them. Had the Kuruuks been stronger than they were, or had the rest of the party been a lot smaller, both Tikala and Tamor would probably pick them all up and carry them hastily to the other edge of the Forest. But since neither was the case, the journey through the Forest would be a slow and treacherous one.

“What are we running from?” Geri found herself whispering into the wolf’s ears.

Faolan shook his head. *“We do not speak of them, ever, not even at home. Because if they hear us, they’ll come. We must just keep moving as we are, concentrating on the path ahead of us:”*

That in itself told Geri all that she needed to hear. She didn’t know what ‘they’ were, but from how the wolf was talking, she didn’t want to know. Like everyone else, she just wanted to reach the other side without conflict.

* * *

Faolan remained with the party all that day as they traveled their first unsettling journey through the Forbidden Forest, but even that night, Keirus didn’t want to change. He wanted to hear, see, and smell everything around them. He

could sense that there was a presence surrounding them as they sat around the fire, but again, he couldn't see or hear it. He didn't even smell it, but he felt it. As a wolf, his senses were even more acute than those of the Kuruuks.

They had found a temporary shelter in a thicket, surrounded by shrubs and trees, where the five friends were all trying to rest themselves for traveling. But all of them were sitting up as they leaned against each other, trying to keep the chill out. There was no fire this time.

Faolan was lying on the ground while Geri rested her head against him, but he was fully alert. His ears moved on occasion, as did his silver gaze, but his nose was moving like crazy.

Tikala glanced at him. If there had been anything close to them, both she *and* Tamor would probably smell it too, but neither of them picked up anything. But Faolan was awfully intent on something. "What do you smell?" she asked.

The wolf shook his head. *:Nothing. Nor do I hear anything...but I can feel something, and that's what's worrying me:*

"Great..." Tamor commented dryly. "...If you're worried, than I *know* something is wrong," and he let out an uneasy sigh.

Faolan turned to the male Kuruuk. *:But you mustn't be afraid. Like Tikala said, if we fear them, they will overpower us. Fear is what they feed off of. They can sense it, and it's the*

hardest emotion to resist. We must stay on our guards though, and not let it overtake us:

“How much longer do you think we should let them rest, before we move again?” Tikala asked him.

His silver eyes flicked to her. *:Perhaps another hour, and then we should move. We don't want to linger, not in this place:*

-xxiii-

It was going on daytime, or so everyone thought. But now, because they took fewer breaks and were only allowed a few hours of sleep at a time, the five friends were dragging themselves along the trail. Faolan and the Kuruuks could feel themselves getting tired, but they were able to condition themselves to keep going. In two more days, they would be out of the Forest. But still, those two days weren't passing fast enough.

Faolan suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. His ears flipped up and his nose went in the air. A strange, musty scent was lingering.

"What is it?" Tikala asked him and then the scent caught her nose, but she couldn't recognize it. Still, it was enough to send a shiver down her spine.

The wolf's glance darted from side to side and his fur began to bristle. A snarl spread across his muzzle. *:We're not alone:* he said. All at once, the swords were taken out of their

sheaths and everyone was ready for it, even though they didn't quite see it yet.

:*Come...*: Faolan said as he looked around. He began slowly walking along the trail again. :...*We must stay together*:

Everyone uncertainly glanced around the area to try and spot what he smelled, or heard, but when they saw nothing, they continued on their way.

Just as Faolan was doing, Geri was watching the area surrounding them. She thought, through the mists, she saw something. But it was only a black silhouette in the distance, which might have been anything. Still though, she tightened her grip around the hilt of *Ara Siliel* and turned back to their present course.

All of a sudden, they heard Faolan let out a loud snarl, just as a large creature leapt out of the bushes and tackled him to the ground. Faolan was a good-sized wolf, but this new creature that had just jumped at him was even bigger.

It had short, but coarse brown fur scantily covering its body. On the creature's back, there was a large hump with a series of protruding spines coming off it. It had a long, pig-like snout with four large fangs that stuck out from its mouth. The *moghrim* had three, gnarled fingers on both of its hands. Each finger had a razor sharp claw on the end. And on the beast's forehead, there was one stubby horn. The creature was man-sized, but it didn't look like much otherwise. It was very bony

and skinny, appearing to be half-starved, which only added to its hideous appearance.

Geri had never seen the wolf so ferocious as he was at that very moment. His ears were pinned flat against his head and his fur was bristling from end to end. And he was baring more teeth than she had ever seen before as he and the *moghrim* viciously wrestled around. At the moment, Faolan was winning the scuffle while the beast was lying on the ground and he was biting at the horn on top of the *moghrim's* head. But the creature wouldn't allow Faolan to get any further. In a last desperate attempt to regain itself, the beast struck Faolan's side with its barbed tail. They all watched in horror as the wolf whimpered in pain and backed down, a nice-sized welt on his side.

"*Keirus!*" Geri shouted and got ready to jump after him, but then a second *moghrim* revealed itself and almost took a bite out of her, but Tamor was quick enough to knock her out of the way before it happened.

As soon as Tamor dove at Geri to get her out of the way of the *moghrim's* deadly bite, the beast had caught him by the tail and viciously hurled him wherever it could. The fox had flown right into a tree and hit it hard, not quite getting knocked out, but he was stunned long enough to become an easy target for the monster.

Geri sat up from where she had landed in just enough time to see as the creature got ready to pounce on the stunned fox. "Tamor..." she said. She frantically searched around for

Ara Siliel and saw it lying on the ground not too far from her. She scrambled over to grab the blade as fast as she could and then stood up. She shouted as she charged at the *moghrim*.

As soon as it heard her, the beast turned around and saw as she was running towards it. Just before she hit it, the beast lunged at her and pinned her to the ground.

A third one jumped out and scattered the other four, while a fourth one jumped down from the trees, breaking them apart even further. Tyler and Missy both worked to try and bring down the third one, while Chris and Shauna narrowly avoided the aerial attack

Tikala had tried getting as many hits on the *moghrim* as she could with her bow, but now that everyone was fighting, she didn't want to risk hitting anyone in her party at the rate they were darting around.

"*Keirus!*" Tikala shouted over the rabble. Despite his wound, the wolf was still tangling with the first of the *moghrim* in an attempt to bring it down again. Her attempt to break him away from the creature at the moment was very slim. So, she darted through the fight as fast as she could to reach him.

"*Keirus!*" she shouted again. Again, the wolf was working to take off the *moghrim*'s horn. "...We could really use your help right now!" and she threw a stone at the beast to try and divert its attention for just a moment. "...And I *don't* mean the wolf!"

:*If you can buy me a minute...*: he answered and dove out of the way to avoid a bite.

The she-Kuruuk drew her dagger. “Minute granted,” she said. She climbed up the nearest tree to them and when she was in position, she jumped out of the tree and landed right on top of the monster.

The beast snarled at its new opponent and tried to bite at her first, but she avoided it. Then it tried to whack her with its tail, but again, the fox dodged it.

While Tikala distracted the creature for a moment, Keirus got out of the way to buy himself just enough time and transform again. And when he did, since he didn’t have *Nairanol* at the moment, Keirus picked up the largest, strongest stick he could find and ran after the beast.

Tikala saw when he transformed, but because she was distracted, the *moghrim* kicked her off and got to its feet, just as Keirus whacked it from behind. The monster immediately retaliated and snapped at him again.

The *moghrim* that was facing Chris and Shauna lashed out and kicked Chris to the ground. And as it approached Shauna to attack, it snapped on her, startling her and causing her to drop her sword. And then it used its tail to strike at her and pull her to the ground, though not succeeding in its attempts because she kept getting out of the way.

Shauna dodged again and rolled out of the way to catch her breath. While she was composing herself though, the beast

skulked over to her and crawled on top of her, pinning her to the ground. It opened its mouth, saliva dripping from its fangs as it got ready to bite her.

Chris had been slammed into a tree when the creature kicked him, but he was still conscious. When he heard Shauna's scream though, he snapped back into reality and saw what was about to happen. He shook his head. "Oh, no you don't..." and then he reached over to grab his sword. He jumped to his feet and hurried to help her. The beast's tail was wildly swinging in the air as it towered over her. Chris raised his sword to strike at it and cut the barbed tip clean off the monster's tail.

The beast suddenly reared back and screeched in alarm. It spun around and retaliated, swiping one of its arms at Chris and cutting him right across the middle. He let out a yell and put his arms over the wound.

"*Chris!*" Shauna cried when she saw what happened. She grabbed her sword and struck the beast to pull it away from Chris.

Missy and Tyler both heard Shauna's shout and they saw what had happened to Chris. "*Go!*" Tyler shouted and struck at the beast again. "...*Help Shauna!*" While he distracted the *moghrim*, Missy might actually have a chance at getting away so Shauna wasn't left alone against one of them. But just as she made a break for it, the beast wildly swung its tail and caught her right in the leg with its spikes. "*Ahhh!*" she screamed and fell to the ground. One of the *moghrim*'s barbs had broken off at the

impact and got stuck in her leg. And as she fell, she landed right on top of it and screamed again as the barb went even deeper in.

“*Missy!*” Tyler shouted. But now, he was more determined than ever to bring this monster down.

Tikala opened her eyes and sat up where she had fallen. She saw, first, as Keirus battled it out with the *moghrim*, having only a stick for his defense. The Kuruuk reached around to grab his sword off her back. “*Keirus!*” she shouted and brandished the blade.

He both heard and saw the Kuruuk when she pulled *Nairanol* from its sheath, but the *moghrim* wouldn’t allow him another second longer before it snapped on him again. But when it bit at him, Keirus dodged it and rolled out of the way, towards Tikala.

She tossed the sword towards him and when he rolled out of the way, Keirus was able to catch the hilt. And just as the *moghrim* made another attempt to snap at him, he brought the sword up and cut the horn off the top of the creature’s head.

The beast loudly bellowed in defeat as the horn fell to the ground, and then it keeled over, dead. He turned to Geri as she fought with the beast. “Geri! The horn! Cut off the beast’s horn!” He trusted Geri’s abilities enough that he didn’t think she needed any more help than she was getting. If she were able to slay an ogre by herself, a *moghrim* wouldn’t be any different. The ones who really needed help right now were Tyler and Shauna.

Just as the *moghrim* tried to nip at Geri again, she suddenly brought her sword up and cut the horn off it. Again, the beast reeled in pain as the horn fell, but just like the first one, it keeled over dead. After her victory, she turned to Tyler, who was still fighting off the *moghrim* alone, and rushed to help him.

“We need to get its horn!” she shouted to him and both of them ducked just as the beast swung at them.

Both Keirus and Tikala moved into a position to help Shauna drop the *moghrim* before her. At the same time, both of them jumped at it while its attention was focused on Shauna and knocked it to the ground. The beast scrambled and tussled around with both of them, but they were able to keep it off its feet.

“Go for the horn, Shauna!” Tikala shouted as she fought to keep the creature’s arms pinned.

Without hesitation, Shauna gave a nod and swiped at the *moghrim*’s horn. Again, the beast kicked and struggled, but once the horn had fallen off, it was gone. And as the three of them worked to defeat that *moghrim*, Tamor and Geri helped Tyler to bring the last one down. Finally, with the beasts dead, everyone had a few moments to breathe and regain themselves.

Chris was sitting back against one of the trees, keeping his arm over the gashes on his stomach, but they were deep and he was bleeding badly. Both of his arms were covered in blood as he kept them around his mid-section.

“Oh my god, Chris!” Shauna shrieked and ran over to him. Keirus as well as the two foxes went to aid him as well. His wound was far worse than Missy’s was, and both Tyler and Geri were checking on her to make sure she was okay.

All Missy was able to do while everyone was still distracted by the *moghrim*, was try and pull the fang out of her skin. Her entire leg was in excruciating pain and she let out a scream, but she succeeded in tugging the fang out. Even though it was out of her leg, Missy wasn’t able to move it at all.

“Missy, are you all right?” Tyler asked when he got there. He knelt down next to her as she held onto her wounded leg.

Missy tightly shut her eyes and hissed through her teeth as a pain shot through her leg. “Ah, I-I can’t move it,” she squeaked.

He nodded. “All right...” he said and looked to Geri. “...Geri, can you grab one of those first aid kits that we got?”

“Sure...” she said and gave a nod. Their packs were strewn all over the area, so as soon as she saw one, she opened it and dug inside to pull out the flat, wooden box that the Nevryes had given each of them.

“Tikala...” Keirus said to her and then gestured towards the other three. “...Go and help them, make sure that Missy’s all right.” The Kuruuk nodded and went over to them. “Tamor...”

he said and the he-Kuruuk turned to him. "...Go and find one of the healing kits *and* a waterskin." And Tamor took off.

Keirus looked at Chris, who was trying not to look at the wound because that only seemed to make the pain worse. "Chris..." and he looked at Keirus. "...You need to move your arms so we can get at that wound."

Shauna already had tears streaming down her cheeks as she kept one arm behind her fiancé's shoulders, and the other on his chest. She could feel him trembling from the pain as he pulled his arms away. And Keirus was quick enough to tear the shirt around the wounds so they could tend to them. "Keirus..." Shauna said and nervously bit one of her fingernails. "...What's gonna happen?"

He looked at her. He really didn't know what was going to happen because Chris' wounds were pretty bad. He wasn't sure if their healing kits would be adequate enough to tend Chris' wounds before he lost much more blood. But as he looked into her eyes, he had to at least try and comfort her. "We're going to mend them right now, and he should be all right."

Just then, Tamor came back to them with one of the waterskins and a Nevrye healing kit.

Tikala knelt down next to Tyler and Missy just as he got ready to begin bandaging her leg. "Wait!" she said and Tyler stopped. She turned to Missy, who was holding one of Geri's

hands to try and bear the pain. "...Are you able to move your leg?"

Missy shook her head. "No, I can't."

And then Tikala's gaze switched between Geri and Tyler. "...Have you flushed out the wound?"

"Yes," Geri answered.

Tikala looked at the wound on Missy's leg. It wasn't bleeding anymore, but part of it was starting to bubble and blister up. "...Where's the barb?" she asked and looked around.

"It's right over there," Tyler said and nodded to where the spike had fallen.

The Kuruuk reached over and carefully picked it up around its root area. She examined the tooth and saw Missy's blood spattered all over it, but there was a clear liquid that dripped from the very tip. "Damn..." she cursed under her breath. She hurried to check the healing kit. "...Don't bandage it yet," she said as she fumbled through it. At least the Nevryes had labeled what everything was so it didn't take long for her to find the herbal salve that she needed.

"What is it?" Geri asked her.

Tikala wiped her hands on one of the rags in the healing kit and then pulled the cork right off the top of the salve bottle. "Some of their poison seeped into the wound..." and before any of them had the chance to respond, she poured some of the salve onto the blistering area. As soon as the salve touched her wound, Missy felt a sharp stinging and she let out a scream.

The Kuruuk took no notice to the cry and just continued working on the wound. "...That's why she can't move her leg, but..." and she poured just a few more drops of the salve onto the wound again. "...This should slow the poison down now before it spreads..." and then she looked at Tyler. "...Now you can bandage it."

With Tamor's help, Keirus was able to wash out the gashes on Chris' stomach and both of them now were working to bandage the wounds up. He was still bleeding slightly, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it had first been.

-xxiv-

Both the he-Kuruuk and Keirus had to douse their hands in water to get most of the blood off while Shauna stayed by Chris' side, softly talking to him and comforting him. Tyler and Geri were able to help Missy over to where Chris and Shauna were sitting, so the five of them could sit together and reassure each other. And while the friends stayed in their huddle, Tikala approached her charge.

"Keirus..." she said and he glanced at her. She looked to his right side where he had gotten hit too. "...The others' wounds are dressed, how's yours?"

"Mine?" he asked.

"Yes..." she answered simply. "...The *moghrim* struck you too, didn't it?"

It took him a moment to realize what she was talking about. "*Oh*, yes, that..." and he pulled up his shirt to inspect the wound, but he didn't see anything.

“Keirus...” Tikala said as she looked at his side and then met his gaze. “...It’s miraculous that nothing happened to you, considering that the impact sent you flailing back.”

“Well, for one, it had to get through a thick layer of fur, and for two, its barbs didn’t so much hit me, it was more the rest of the tail that did.”

“Well count your blessings then, Keirus. It could have been much worse.”

He nodded in agreement. “I am, and I don’t doubt it for a moment.”

And then the she-Kuruuk let out a sigh as her gaze went to their five travel companions. “So, what’s going to happen with them?” she asked.

Keirus looked towards the group of friends and then turned back to the Kuruuks. “Missy and Chris are not going to be able to finish the rest of the journey, not with the wounds they received.”

“Yes...” Tikala said with a nod. “...I agree. Missy was hit with some poison from the *moghrim* and she is unable to move her leg because of it. It should wear off within the next few days, but we do not have time to wait.”

Keirus nodded. “And Chris’ wounds are quite severe.” He let out a deep breath and shook his head, lowering his voice afterwards. “...I don’t know if he’s going to be able to withstand it or not.”

“And he’s still bleeding from them, even after we’ve dressed them,” Tamor added quietly.

Tikala’s gaze darted between both of them. “So, what are we to do? We can’t travel with them, nor can we just leave them behind.”

“No...” Keirus said. “...We can’t. So, we have to split up.”

“Split up?” Tikala asked and looked around. “...In this place? Keirus, are you mad? The eight of us were barely able to beat the *moghrim* and now...splitting into even smaller groups? We’d never make it.”

“I wouldn’t worry about the *moghrim* at the moment...” he said. “...We’ve beaten four of them, and now, we know how to beat them again, *if* they come after us...” and then he shook his head. “...Which I’m not thinking they will, not any time soon, because when they see what’s happened, they’ll know we aren’t easy prey.”

“Well...” she began. “...Are we going to send those five off alone then? And the three of us continue to Laraniros?”

Already, Keirus was shaking his head. “No...” and then he pointed to them. “...You two are going to take them out of here, back to Federain. You two are the swiftest out of all of us and I know you can make it out of here before the *moghrim* find you.”

“What are you going to do?” Tamor asked.

Keirus turned to him. "I have to keep going, I don't have a choice. Someone has to stop Crodis."

"Alone, Keirus?" Tikala asked him.

"Like hell you're doing this by yourself," they all heard and turned around. Geri was standing there with her arms crossed.

"Geri-" Keirus started.

Before he could finish though, she started shaking her head. "Don't even try," she responded. "...Because whether you want it or not, I'm still going with you. I made a promise and I intend to keep it." And then Tyler and Shauna joined her.

"She's right..." Tyler said. "...There's still three of us standing and as long as that's the case, you're not gonna get rid of any one of us."

Geri nodded. "And while you three were in a conference, the five of us had a conference of our own and already settled it."

"We said we'd help..." Shauna said as her head bobbed up and down. "...And we're going to. Right until the very end of this."

"Well then..." Keirus said and turned back to the Kuruuks. He gave a small shrug. "...I guess it's settled. You two can get Missy and Chris back to Federain in half the time it took us to get here, while the four of us..." and he looked towards the other three. "...Continue to Laraniros."

“But Keirus...” Tikala protested and shook her head. “...I can’t leave you like this, any of you. It isn’t right to make you four go at this alone. I too made a promise, when we first started on this mission. I can’t break that promise.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “Tikala, listen to me...” and he looked towards Chris and Missy. “...They need you more than we do...” and his glance shifted to Tamor for a brief moment. “...They need both of you. Go with them.”

Tyler, Shauna, and Geri all worked to downsize the load that they would need to carry. With only four of them, they figured they’d be able to make the journey with two packs. And as they traveled, they would alternate on who carried the packs.

While the three were downsizing the load, Keirus and the two Kuruuks were able to rig up a litter that Chris and Missy would be able to ride on with the packs, while the Kuruuks pulled them along. It wasn’t the most comfortable they had ever been, but as long as Tikala and Tamor were able to move swift enough, Chris and Missy could deal with it. It certainly beat trying to walk.

Shauna tucked the blanket around while he lay on the stretcher. “You be careful, you hear?” she said to him, trying to choke back her tears, but failing miserably.

Chris put his hand on her cheek and wiped her tears away. “I’ll be all right,” he said quietly. He winced slightly

when he took a deep breath, but he ignored the pain. He knew it wouldn't go away over night.

"I'm more worried about you..." he went on and looked towards the path that she would soon be traveling. None of them knew what the path ahead held for the travelers and he wasn't quite ready to send Shauna off alone. "...Sure you can handle this?"

She let out a little snuffle and wiped her eye again. "Don't...worry about me, Chris. You just worry about taking it easy for a little while..." and her glance went towards the others. "...I'm not gonna be alone. The four of us are gonna finish this, and we're gonna come home...I know we will."

He slowly nodded. "Yeah..." he began. "...I know, but, it's just that we've never...been separated like this before. It just isn't gonna feel right-not waking up with you there, not being able to see you every day, not hearing your voice-hell, not even hearing you call *Christopher*." he added in his imitation of a nagging voice.

A soft smile spread across her face and she touched his cheek. "I'm gonna miss you..." she said and her smile broadened. "...But don't worry, I'll have plenty of those *Christophers* waiting for you when I get back.

He grinned. "Yeah..." he added. "...Bring it on, babe."

"Oh, I will," she said. They leaned in and kissed each other.

“I don’t want you to go...” Missy said to Tyler. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. “...What if something happens to you?”

He rubbed her shoulders reassuringly. “Nothing’s going to happen, Missy. We’ll see each other again.”

She was balancing herself on her good leg and holding onto him while they talked. A sigh escaped her lips as she shook her head. “I’m just so worried, Tyler. You don’t know what’s out there, none of you do-and that scares me to death.”

He looked right into her eyes. “Whatever’s out there...” he began. “...We’re all ready to face it...” and he looked towards everyone else. “...I’m gonna have Geri, and Shauna, and Keirus all there with me. And with them there, I’m not thinking we’re gonna lose. I’ve got faith in this, Missy. You should too.”

“I do have faith in you, in all of you, but, this is just going to be so hard, Tyler. This is worse than the first time.”

“But the result is going to be the same, you’ll see. When this is all over with, we’re all coming back.”

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and buried her head in his shirt. When she felt his embrace, she only held him tighter. “Be careful,” was all she could get out.

He tightened his arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder. “I’ll come back to you, I promise.” After a few more moments, the two of them let go and Tyler helped her over to the litter.

Once everything was settled, they all bid a final farewell to each other before going their separate ways.

“Be swift,” Keirus said to the Kuruuks.

Tikala turned to him before she picked up her end of the litter and gave a small nod. “And to you, as well...” she said. “...We look anxious for your return...” and her gaze went to the other three. “...All of you. And we wish you strength and speed on your journey.” With that, she turned and picked up her end.

Tamor took his cue from his sister and gave them one last glance. “Good luck, my friends.”

Tikala turned back to him. “Ready?” she asked.

“After you, sister,” he responded and then the two of them took off.

The four travelers watched as the Kuruuks took off like two bolts of white lightning, gradually disappearing into the distance.

“I hope they’ll be all right,” Geri said as her gaze remained fixed on where the Kuruuks had been. Her two friends were wounded, which already gave them a disadvantage if they came under attack.

Keirus took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze and she turned to him. “They’ll be all right...” he said. “...Tikala and Tamor will take good care of them.”

Shauna turned to him. “We-we’ll see them again, won’t we?” she asked slowly. She wasn’t so much concerned for

Missy and Chris, she knew that the Kuruuks would look out for them, but she was more concerned about their own group.

He gave a small nod. "Of course we will..." he said.

"...You don't have to worry. This will be over before you know it."

"I hope we don't run into more of those things though," Tyler said.

Keirus shook his head. "No. After this last conflict, I don't think they'll bother us."

* * * * *

-XXV-

A sinister chuckle echoed throughout the desolate halls of the dark fortress in Laraniros. Again, Crodis had his eye on the travelers. “So...” he began. “...They are splitting up after all. This works with my plan perfectly.”

Morgia’s voice sounded from somewhere in the great hall. “You’ve anticipated this move, my lord?” she inquired. Deep violet mist began swirling through the hall and expanded itself. The sorceress manifested right beside him.

“It would only have been a matter of time before the inevitable happened,” he responded, but still kept his icy stare on the looking glass. The smaller the party was, the easier they would be to defeat. He sniggered again. “...Keirus is a fool, just as his father was. His overconfidence in himself will be his downfall.”

Morgia’s gaze landed on the God. “It can happen to anyone, my lord, *if* they are not cautious.”

Crodis' glance went from the looking glass to the sorceress after her snide remark. "*Watch* it..." he said to her. "...You will do well to heed your own words, Morgia."

She gave a small shrug. "I meant nothing by it, Lord Crodis," she answered coolly.

He then looked back into the mirror and rubbed his hands together. "My plan is falling into place so perfectly with *this* chain of events. Keirus and the *Great Warrior* will fall into my trap sooner than I thought."

"I know that they aren't much, my lord..." Morgia said. "...But do not underestimate the other two either. If Dina has a hand in this, they may yet have a purpose to serve. We should not overlook them."

"Of course we won't, but for now..." and Federain's white palace suddenly appeared in the mirror. "...I think we'll focus on something else. General Bemish," he called and another man stepped out of the shadows.

"Yes, Lord Crodis," he said and gave a bow.

"Your army has been reformed, and it is now time to put them to work. I want you to prepare them to march to Federain Kingdom."

"But, Lord Crodis..." Bemish began. "...Rodin's army was the ultimate, and now, after their failure--"

"Rodin..." the God went on. "...Was nothing more than a test to see just how strong the kingdoms are. And now, after

one battle, I've no doubt that Queen Fiora is sending messages to all their neighbors to form an alliance."

"Which will make them infinitely stronger than us-"

"Not *this* army. This army has a secret weapon that none of them will expect. And now, with the *nogo* and the *Great Warrior* out of the picture, it will make our victory all the easier. Go now, and prepare your retainers. You will not be disappointed, General."

* * * * *

-xxvi-

The two Kuruuks had been moving nonstop since they left Keirus and the others behind in the Forest. And now that they were far out of range of it, they decided to stop. “All right...” Tikala said with a small sigh as she set her end of the litter down. Tamor did the same. “...We’re going to break for a few moments to eat, and to drink something, or we’ll exhaust ourselves,” she said to him.

“Good idea...” Tamor said and he looked off into the brush. “...I’ll be right back.”

Tikala turned to check on both Chris and Missy, but the two had fallen asleep. How they were able to do that though, she didn’t know. She certainly wouldn’t have been able to sleep on something so uncomfortable, and especially not if it was constantly moving, but somehow, the two managed it. She carefully pulled her waterskin off one of the packs and uncorked it.

She looked around the forest as she drank the water and realized that the sun was actually shining in this one. The trees were green with leaves, the air was fresh, and she heard all the noises of a normal forest. And that had her thinking about the other four, who, to her knowledge, were still in the Forbidden Forest. Although, by now, they should be very near the edge of it, she hoped.

“Oh please, Gods...” Tikala said quietly. She clasped her hands as she thought about Keirus and the others. “...Please grant them strength enough to finish this,” she said in a tiny prayer. She wasn’t sure if any of the Gods would hear her plea, but she didn’t think it would hurt to try. No one really knew what sorts of dangers were beyond the Forbidden Forest. And now that they were getting very close to Crodis, she didn’t know what else the God might throw at them, especially with Morgia’s aid.

Tamor quickly had to find a spot to relieve himself and while he stood there, a strange scent carried on the air around him. His sensitive nose actually picked up quite a few different scents on the air, but all of them seemed to mesh into one. He looked around and saw where another edge of the forest was. Beyond that, if he was figuring correctly, it was the Badorian Mountains.

When he was done, his curiosity had gotten the better of him and he crept towards the open edge of the forest. As he

neared the end, the strange smell only grew stronger and he peered through the trees.

It was going into the evening and as he looked from his hideout, he saw something that he really didn't need too.

Camped out not more than half a league away from him, he saw the small glows of various campfires. There was another army, a bigger one than the very first they had faced, that consisted of men, as well as other creatures. Some of the soldiers he recognized what they were, but others he had no idea.

All he saw were rows and rows of this army, thousands of fighters, not normally allies, except this once. They were all brought together with one goal in mind, and that was to destroy the Lirozialen Kingdoms. And when he saw the pennant brandished on a long pole in the center of the camp, he didn't wait any longer and hurried back to his sister.

"*Tikala!*" he cried, panting heavily because he had just bolted back at full speed.

"Tamor?" she said when she heard him. "...I was wondering where you had gone. What is it?"

"I saw it..." the frantic Kuruuk said through breaths. "...In its entirety-thousands, *tens* of thousands even..."

She glanced at her brother. He really wasn't making any sense in all his rambling and she shook her head. "What? What are you saying?"

Chris and Missy were now awake and intently concentrating on the Kuruuks.

Tamor looked down. “It’s another army, Tikala. Crodis has sent another army, but this one is far greater in size than the other one was. And it isn’t just men, there’s lizard warriors and orcs as well. I think there might even have been a few trolls in the mix, and they’re no doubt heading to Federain, or somewhere nearby.”

“Federain is just recovering from the first battle still, and now, there’s another one on the way?”

Tamor nodded.

Tikala let out a small breath. “All right, come on. We have to get there in enough time to warn them so they can prepare...though, with the losses from the first one...” and she shook her head. “...I don’t know how well they’ll do.”

The two of them walked back to Missy and Chris. “What’s going on?” Chris asked them, not being able to hear them before.

“Crodis is sending another army, a bigger one this time. We have to make haste to Federain and warn them.”

* * *

Neither of the Kuruuks slept a wink since they parted from the others. And after Tamor had seen the army, they were more determined than ever to beat the army to Federain. It

wouldn't give the kingdom much notice, but it would give them enough that they might be able to get word out before the army was upon them.

Tikala's arms were aching all the way up to her shoulders from having carried Missy and Chris, as well as all their gear, all the way to Federain. She and Tamor were running on no sleep, little food, and the occasional sip of water. Relief came over her entire body when she first saw the silhouette of the white palace, towering over the land in the distance. She even saw the gate that went around the palace and its confines. By late afternoon, early evening, they would be there. She and Tamor only had a little ways left to go.

Her ears perked up when she saw the palace. "I can see it, Tamor! I can see it!" she shouted happily.

He looked just past Tikala and also saw the palace in the distance. His ears went up as well. "We should be there by tonight!" he called to her.

Tikala looked back at him. "If we hurry..." she said. "...Come on!"

And the two Kuruuks felt a last burst of energy as they began running again. If they didn't stop, they would be able to keep going until they reached their destination.

Just as the sun was ducking beyond the horizon, they reached the gates of the palace. Right away though, two guards

stopped them. “State your name and your business here in Federain.”

“I am...Tikala Snow Tail...” she said through breaths. “...Of the Kuruuks. Two of my companions have been badly injured and need proper healing, and...” she had to paused to catch her breath and then she faced the guards. “...I have urgent news for Queen Fiora.”

The two guards looked at each other. They were obviously unaware that these two Kuruuks had just been in Federain nine days before. Now though, since the battle, the guards had been told not to allow anyone beyond the gates without just cause.

Tikala let out a few huffs of breath. “Please, good sirs...” she said to them. “...You must believe me. Look for yourselves...” and she nodded towards Chris and Missy. “...We were here just nine days past. We helped Federain battle Rodin’s army. And now, we come back to you to ask for your aid.”

The guards exchanged glances once more and then they turned back to her. “All right, Tikala of the Kuruuks...” the first one began while the other unlocked the gate. “...You and your party may go on and your companions will get the help that they need.”

She gave a small bow of her head. “Thank you, good sirs,” she said. She and her brother than proceeded to the palace.

Once they had gotten past all the guards and were finally allowed in the palace, those inside recognized them right away. They gave their greetings and ‘welcome backs’ and before anything else, both Chris and Missy were escorted away from them to get the attention they needed. Tikala and Tamor were then escorted into the throne room.

*

Fiora had been sitting on her throne, but as soon as she saw the Kuruuks, her eyes danced and she stood up. “Tikala! Tamor! You two came back to us in a hurry,” she said.

Both Kuruuks got down on one knee before her throne. “We have, you’re Majesty,” Tikala began.

The queen’s gaze shifted between them. “Well, what brings you two back so soon? You bring tidings of the others?”

“We do bring tidings of the others, if you desire to hear them,” Tikala went on.

Fiora kept one of her hands on her knee and held her other one out towards the Kuruuk. “Yes...” the queen said. “...Please, share them. I would like to know how everyone is doing.”

Tikala let out a deep breath. “First of all, you’re Majesty, our group had to come to a final decision a few days ago...” and she went on to tell Fiora about their encounters along the road.

“...We had to bring Chris and Missy back here because with the wounds they received, they were unable to travel any further. Keirus and the others...” and she paused for a moment, silently praying that they were still all right. “...Are still traveling the route to Laraniros.”

“And, you’re majesty...” Tamor said and glanced up at her. “...We’ve also come to warn you.”

Fiora’s cheerful expression changed into deep concern. “Warn me? About what?”

“There is another army...” he continued. “...A bigger one, that is en route to Federain. I saw it with my own eyes, you’re majesty. And in four days, it should be here.”

“Another one? In four days?” she questioned. “...But, we’re still recovering from the last...” and then she shook her head. “...Federain is in no condition to fight again, not yet. It’s so soon.”

Tikala nodded. “We know, you’re Majesty. We hope we’ve come in enough time so that you may at least get messengers out to ally with the other kingdoms. Because once this army reaches Federain, they will not stop. Federain is first on their present course, and then they will keep moving until every kingdom is destroyed. As Keirus told your father, if the Lirosialen Kingdoms stand against Crodis alone...” and she shook her head. “...They will not make it.”

Fiora looked down. “King Dram and his army just left two days ago, they shouldn’t be too far away yet. We might be able to get Caloon back in a matter of days.”

“And what of the others?”

She sighed. “I will have messengers sent out at once, to rally the other kingdoms. This problem is not only Federain’s anymore. It now involves all of Lirosial’s kingdoms. Rina...” she said to one of the handmaidens who stood by her side.

The woman stepped forth and bowed. “Yes, you’re Majesty?”

“Go and find Birdmaster Toltaire. Tell him that I must see him at once, and he is to bring his four surest, swiftest kestrels.”

Rina bowed once more. “Yes, you’re Majesty,” and then she hurried out of the room.

The Kuruuks remained down on their knees and Tikala looked up at her. “Is there something you would have *us* do?”

Fiora looked down at her. “No...please, just stay here with me. I’m so nervous right now, I...don’t know what to do...my father is dead and now suddenly...I’m faced with another war.”

Tikala looked up at her. “Oh, you’re Majesty, nothing you have done yet has been wrong. This is a hard situation for a new queen to go through. There’s no book or scripture or scroll written about something like this and how to get through it. You

just need to follow what your heart says to do, that's all. It will lead you in the right direction."

"I know..." Fiora squeaked and gave a small nod. "...I know, but, this is all just so...sudden, Tikala. I-I've been prepared for this moment throughout my entire life and now, now that it's here..." and she shook her head. "...I'm just not ready for it."

As Tikala looked at her, Fiora's strength and pride as a queen suddenly seemed to leave her. She seemed just like a little girl, scared and confused over something so important. And the Kuruuk couldn't help but to stand up and walk over to her. She wrapped her arms around the queen.

"Fiora, my dear..." Tikala began and felt Fiora's embrace. "...Every person faces a great challenge like this throughout their lives. And no matter how trying a situation may be, a good, strong person will overcome it..." and she put a hand on the queen's cheek.

"...And you are such a person, Queen Fiora. All this is, is a test. A test to prove your valor, which you will. Your kingdom is great, and your people are very fortunate to have you leading them to victory."

Fiora wrapped her in another hug. "Oh Tikala, you're so wonderful. Keirus and his friends are very fortunate to have you with them."

“As of right now, you’re Majesty...” Tikala began as she gently hugged Fiora. “...My allegiance, and my services, all belong to you.”

Tamor stood up, but kept a hand on his chest. “As do mine, you’re Majesty,” he said.

Fiora’s glance shifted between the two. Up until she first met and saw them, Fiora had only heard stories of the legendary fox warriors. And now, now she had two of them ready and willing to aid her in her time of need. A small smile came across her face as she looked at them. Fiora didn’t think she could have handpicked two better Kuruuks than the ones before her. “Thank you, thank you both,” she said.

And just then, they heard as the doors were pushed open. Three men strode into the throne room. The first was relatively tall with brown hair, a brown mustache and beard. He wore a green tunic over a brown shirt and breeches that tucked into his boots. A gray cloak was draped around his shoulders.

The two behind him were dressed very similarly. One of them had long, blond hair with a mustache, appearing very similar in age to the first man. The third one was a younger man, probably an apprentice birdtrainer, with cropped brown hair. Each one had Federain’s kestrel symbol embroidered over their chests.

The man in the lead had a single bird perched on his glove. The bird’s back and wings were deep scarlet, and it had the same color in the beautifully spotted pattern on its ivory

breast. This particular kestrel had a crest of the same sorrel on its head. The bird's golden eyes gleamed as it intently stared around the room. The other birdkeeper carried two kestrels, one perched on either of his arms. The apprentice too had a single bird on his arm. All the birds sat calmly and regally on their handlers' gloves.

"You're Majesty," the first man said and gave a bow. "...I have brought my four swiftest messengers with me, as you requested."

Fiora took a deep breath and stood up. "Thank you, Master Toltaire. This is a most crucial time for us and it is very important that I get these messages delivered."

Toltaire gave another small bow. "Then these kestrels will serve you well, you're Majesty. They are the most well-trained out of all our birds. Aarek is by far our swiftest messenger..." and he stroked the bird's chest feathers. He turned to the other two handlers. "...But these other three will do just as well."

"Good..." Fiora said. "...I need messages sent out to King Dram and his army, as well as to Altegar, Hradach, and Davanine. But they must be delivered as quickly as possible."

"Understood, you're Majesty..." Toltaire said and gave a small bob of his head. He pulled four small message canisters from his pocket. Fiora took the canisters and pulled the tiny, rolled up pieces of parchment out. One of her handmaidens gave

her a feather pen. She sat down and began writing an identical message to all of their neighboring kingdoms.

“Please, you’re Majesty...” Tikala said to her. “...Let us help you write those out.”

She nodded. “All right...” she said and handed both the Kuruuks one of the canisters. She told them what she wanted written and the foxes copied it word for word. When they had finished writing the messages, they gave her the copies to sign.

When the messages were ready to be sent out, they all rolled up the tiny parchments and put them back in the canisters. Then gave them back to Toltaire.

The birdmaster then tied one of the canisters around Aarek’s leg and put the bird on his shoulder. He quickly tied the other canisters onto the other birds’ legs. Toltaire gave a last small bow as he and his handlers began walking out. “I assure you, you’re Majesty...” he said to her. “...That we will send them out right away.”

Fiora nodded. “Thank you, Toltaire.”

-xxvii-

Tikala had walked out onto the balcony just outside of her room and leaned on the railing. Her ears picked up every little sound of the night, right down to the very crickets in the area surrounding them. The scent of campfire smoke wafted up to her room and she looked down into the courtyard below her.

Various fires dotted the ground below her. She saw the off white color of the soldiers' canvas tents against the darkness. The silhouettes of the men all danced in the shadows of the firelight. She was able to pick up the soft murmurs of the soldiers as they quietly conversed about their upcoming battle. Among the noises, she heard as someone tapped on her door, but she didn't say anything.

Just then, she heard her brother as he entered the chamber. "Tikala?"

The she-Kuruuk looked back into her bedroom and saw as he searched around for her. "Out here," she said. She then saw as his ears perked up and he looked towards the balcony.

Tikala turned back to the open space in front of her and heard the soft tapping of his claws on the floor as he walked out to her.

“It’s late, Tamor...” she said. “...You should be going to bed.”

He joined her on the railing and fondly turned to her.

“You haven’t said that to me since we were pups, sister.”

She turned towards him and managed a small smile.

“Well it’s as true now, as it was then. You look exhausted, Tamor. You should get some sleep while you still can.”

He looked out towards the land beyond the palace. He was tired, he could feel it, but he wasn’t ready to sleep yet.

“...In due time sister, I will, but I just had a revelation that I thought I should share with you.”

She turned to him. “A revelation?”

“Yes,” Tamor said with a bob of his head and then he turned to her, his expression completely serious, which Tikala thought of as very strange. Tamor was never serious about anything.

“What is it?”

He put his hands behind his back and let out a sigh.

“Let’s face it, Tikala. You and I both know that Federain is in no position to put up any kind of a fight, even with Caloon’s aid. Both kingdoms are equally exhausted from fighting. They need some relief fighters, don’t you think?”

“Well, Fiora said that she was going to send out messengers. Even if Caloon is the first to respond to her, they

should at least be able to hold off Crodis' army until more relief arrives."

Tamor shook his head. "But I don't think they can. They need more help, and they need it a *lot* faster than it would take for another kingdom to respond and prepare. By that time, Federain *and* Caloon could both be wiped off the face of Lirosial. We don't know what this new army of his is capable of."

"What would you have them do, Tamor?" she asked. "...Already they're scared, they're tired, I *know* they aren't ready for another battle so soon, but what other choice do they have? They *have* to fight-whether they're ready for it or not."

His eyes met hers. "We can help them, Tikala..." he said. "...The Kuruuks can help them. We can buy them enough time until the reinforcements arrive."

"How?"

"I cannot do this..." he said and then shook his head. "...My abilities are not quite strong enough yet..." and then he pointed to her. "...But you can."

"Do what, Tamor?"

"Contact Kannushi Fichu. He will hear you, and he can let the others know. I know the Kuruuks don't approve of coming into this Realm, but if the mortal world falls, so does *our* home. And all of us understand that. Call to him, Tikala. Have him send word to the Kuruuk fighters. They will be here in the same amount of time it will take Caloon, faster even."

She shook her head. “But I’ve not meditated in such a long time. I don’t know if I’d be able to send a thought message to him in such a short time.”

Tamor looked her in the eyes and put his hands on her shoulders. “I know you, Tikala...” he said. “...If anyone can do it, it’s you. It wouldn’t hurt to try.”

The she-Kuruuk let out a small breath and nodded. “All right...” she said after a moment and then looked at him. “...But you must not let anything disturb me when I’m doing this. Stand watch outside my door, and when I’m finished, I will let you know.”

He nodded.

“Promise me, little brother,” she said.

“I promise.”

“All right...” and she nodded towards her door.

“...Then go, wait outside.”

The younger Kuruuk gave another nod and headed out the door. Tikala heard the door click shut behind him. She then sat down and crossed her legs, facing the direction of the mountains. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths to calm herself until she wound up in a deep state of concentration.

Her mental state suddenly whisked her aura to a different place. She was no longer in the Mortal Realm, nor was she conscious of anything going on around her. Her spirit passed through the barrier in the mountains. She was now in a lush,

green field, blue skies surrounding her, and the golden rays of sunlight bathing her in their magnificence. She opened her eyes and realized she was home.

Everything looked just as she remembered it, long before the incident with Crodis. There was no turmoil over the land at all. Everything was peaceful and serene. She could even feel the soft grasses under her feet.

It has been a long time, since I have seen your spirit so at peace, Tikala Snow Tail, a voice said. She looked around, but she at first didn't see anyone. She recognized the voice of the speaker, but she could not see him.

Please, Kannushi... she said, but her lips didn't move. *...Show me where you are? I am in dire need of your council.*

Suddenly, she was no longer alone in the field. The Kuruuks' shaman, Fichu, manifested right before her eyes. He didn't look very different from how she remembered, he was just older now. And the whiskers on his nose had grown some in length, and were now only a few feet from the ground. He stood there with his hands in the sleeves of his robes.

What is it that you ask of me, Tikala? he responded, but again, his mouth made no movement.

Kannushi... she began and clasped her hands. *...Please, hear me. Lirosial is in desperate need of aid. The armies of good are few, and those few are in no shape to take on Crodis a second time yet. They need help, kannushi.*

The shaman nodded. *I have foreseen it. I saw the first army that he sent and I have seen the second one. But it is much larger, and stronger than the first.*

Tamor has seen it... Tikala went on to say and then shook her head. *...But I have not. What sort of army is this most recent one?*

Fichu opened his eyes and looked at her. *An army of many different forces, man and beast alike. But there is something else too...* but the kannushi's voice trailed and he shook his head.

Tikala's eyes lit up with alarm. *What? What is it?*

Again, the elder Kuruuk shook his head. *I know not. All that I know, is that Crodis has delved into a dark world that has been forgotten for centuries. He has made a pact with Skorak, and he has gained supreme powers because of it, and then he lowered his head.*

And the only way that this new darkness will be stopped is if Crodis is defeated.

Tikala let out a sigh. She hadn't seen, or heard from Keirus or the others in a few days. And now, *her* deepest fears were beginning to surface. If something had happened to Keirus and the others, there was no hope for anyone.

Please, tell me, Kannushi Fichu... her thought-voice pleaded. *...What has happened to them?*

The Kuruuk shaman shook his head. He could see exactly where Tikala's frightened thoughts were. *Fear not,*

daughter. They are very much alive and still working their way into Laraniros, but there is a problem.

What?

The travelers are weary, and they are plagued with uncertainty, including Lord Keirus. He is beginning to despair, as is the Great Warrior. As for the other two, their hope is hanging by a thread.

The she-Kuruuk shook her head. It's not true, kannushi! Tell me it isn't! If they can't overcome this and believe in themselves, how can they win?

That, I do not know, Tikala. But as long as doubt lingers among them...the outcome of their final battle is cloudy and uncertain. We who are fighting behind them must not lose our faith in them, because our faith is what gives them the strength to keep moving on day by day.

I have never doubted Keirus in anything, she said. He knows that, and he knows that he has the strength of the Gods to accompany him until the very end of this.

But what of the others? the elder Kuruuk queried. They are in a strange place, a strange time, far from everything that is familiar to them. Keirus knows this land, he knows the people of this land. But the others do not. They need to realize that all of us believe in not only Keirus, but in the rest of them as well.

Tikala looked down at the ground. She certainly was full of praise for Keirus, but how did that make the others feel? The kannushi was right. None of them knew the land, they

didn't know the people or the Gods. The only ones they knew, were each other. And now, the bond that they shared was beginning to fray, now that they had been separated, and that had never occurred to her. She nodded to herself.

I will tell them, I will tell all of them. All of Lirosial stands behind them, and they need to know that.

The kannushi gave an agreeable nod. *That is what they need, Tikala, and I know it would mean a great deal to them to hear that from you. And do not fret any longer. I know the reason you came here, Tikala. And I will tell the others of your need.*

Lirosial's need, she corrected.

Fichu gave a nod. *...Of Lirosial's need. Let Federain know to expect the Kuruuks within the next two suns...* and with that, he started to become transparent. *...Be sure to send word to Keirus and the others and let them know they are not alone...* and his voice trailed as he disappeared.

Suddenly, Tikala opened her eyes as a light breeze blew through her window, and she looked around. She was in the very chamber that Fiora had given her for the night. She heard the sounds of the men below her and the clanking of their swords as they brushed up on their skills. She slowly stood up and walked over to the door.

Tamor was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall as he slept. She knelt down and gave him a light squeeze

on the shoulder. “Where is it?” he suddenly asked as he woke from his dream and then realized it. He turned to her.

“...Tikala? I thought you had fallen asleep.”

She shook her head. “No...” she answered calmly.

“...Fichu and I had a nice, long discussion.”

Tamor’s eyes lit up in anticipation like a Kuruuk pup waiting for a gift. “Really? You really contacted him?”

She nodded. “I did.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said to alert Federain that the Kuruuks will be here in two days to aid in the battle.”

“I knew he would do it, I just knew.”

“Yes, I had a feeling he would too. He has Seen the struggle going on here and he knows of Lirosial’s need. And somehow, we need to contact Keirus and the others, to let them know that we are still here. Fichu believes that they are beginning to doubt, and that would be their greatest downfall.”

* * * * *

-xxviii-

Two trying days came and went as the travelers journeyed through the Forbidden Forest. Now that the group was smaller, none of them wanted to take any chances. Though Keirus remained confident enough that the *moghrim* wouldn't attack them again, Geri, Shauna, and Tyler weren't so sure.

And though he resumed Faolan's form for the majority of their travels, even at night with the wolf on full alert, none of them slept. A big part of that was their sadness that two of their friends had been badly wounded, and suddenly taken away from them. None of them knew if Chris and Missy were all right, if they had made it back to the palace. Even with the Kuruuks taking them, that was no certainty that they made their journey successfully. Not to mention that both Tyler and Shauna were emotionally drained from worry over their significant others' safety.

Even Geri was disturbed by their separation, but she had to remain strong for them. Despite she and Keirus's attempts to

cheer the two up, Geri had definitely noticed a change in her two friends. Without Missy and Chris, they just didn't seem motivated enough to keep going, though they both denied it when she asked. She hoped that once they cleared the Forest, things might change.

Finally, the day came when they all saw the other edge of the Forest ahead of them. After their trying past few days, seeing the edge of the Forest was an accomplishment. And for the first time since they parted, Geri saw that her two friends' hopes were slowly restored.

As they walked out of the Forest, they found themselves in broken countryside. It looked like the plains had continued after the Forest, but this part was hillier than the first part they went through. There were a few scattered trees around them as they walked and the mountains seemed even further in the distance than before.

Still though, there were more boulders in this part. They were all of different sizes, shapes and colors. They went from large to small, some were oval or circular shaped, while others were abstractly shaped, almost appearing as if someone had carefully sculpted the stone. Most of the boulders were a mixture of black, gray, and brown colors. A few were almost ruby colored and the tiny crystals in the rock sparkled in the waning sunlight.

"We made it!" Shauna exclaimed as they passed through the field. "...Oh my god, I don't believe it. We *made* it!"

Geri smiled at her friend. "I told you we would-over and over again, I told you, but you didn't believe me."

"Well..." Shauna shrugged. "...Things have been kind of bleak these last few days, still are kind of, but this-finally getting out of that place, that's a sense of relief."

Keirus nodded. "To all of us, I think," he said.

"Yeah," Tyler responded and looked back at the Forest. "...Hey, what were those things anyway?"

Geri turned from her friend to Keirus. "Yeah? You said that you guys didn't talk about them because it, called to them."

The demigod gave a small nod. "Yes. We don't speak of them in the Forest because that is their domain, but outside of it, it's all right..." and then he shook his head. "...They cannot pass through the borders."

"Well, at least we know they won't be able to follow us then," Geri added lightly, hoping to lighten the situation up even further.

Tyler looked back over his shoulder. Even from this area, the Forbidden Forest seemed darker than anything else as they walked further and further away from it. "Good. I think I've had my fill of dealing with those things for the rest of this quest," he said.

"Those things..." Keirus began and also glanced towards the Forest. "...Are the *moghrim*. They were actually part of *our* Realm ages ago, long before man was created, but no one really knows of their origins, even us. But it is popular

belief that Amalene created them, but then something, though we don't know what, changed their nature."

"What do you mean?" Tyler asked.

"Well, the *moghrim* are bloodthirsty, territorial creatures. That is the reason they were banished from the Realm. All the forests in our Realm have many different inhabitants, but the *moghrim* are the worst of the lot. They would kill viciously until they were the dominants in the territory..." and he shook his head.

"And when Amalene realized this, she sent my father and the others to destroy them. It wasn't a very long battle, because compared to the True Gods, the *moghrim* were nothing. They couldn't all be destroyed, so my father banished them from the Realm. And to keep them in one area, so they couldn't get out and terrorize *this* world, Amalene was able to create a barrier around them. They cannot leave that forest, we can pass through it, but the *moghrim* cannot escape it."

"Who is Amalene?" Geri inquired.

Keirus turned to her. "Amalene is our Mother Goddess, the Giver of Life..." and he looked all around them. "...She is the Ancient Goddess who created everything on Lirostial, save for the great Kutowan Sea..." and then he looked up to the sky. "...And the Heavens," and then his wandering gaze landed back on them.

"Who created those?"

A small grin of amusement came to his face. “Another of the Ancient Gods is the sea God, Kutowa-he *was* the sea, long before any of *this* was created. And in his solitude, he fell in love with the Ancient Goddess, Eveline, who gave us the very sunlight that we have now. Together, they created Amalene. And once she matured and was able to sustain her powers, she asked that her parents release their spirits to be together. And they did, but the sea and the sun remain.”

“Sooo...” Tyler started after a moment. “...What about all the other Gods? Like your father? When did they come into the picture?”

Keirus turned to him. “Amalene created them. She is the Great Mother of *all* the Gods in the Realm, except for me. Everything that Lirosial is right now; the forests, the mountains, the plains, the lakes and rivers, all the good creatures of the world, men included, is all owed to her...” and then he let out a sigh. “...But sadly, she is hardly recognized for it anymore. She has very few followers left.”

“How come?” Geri asked.

“It’s another long story,” Keirus said.

“So? That’s fine. This is really interesting stuff. It’s like a whole history of Lirosial.”

“Sort of...” he said. “...What I’m telling you now though, is just condensed down from the whole. Stories of Amalene and the creation of Lirosial are going way back into our history.”

“But that’s what’s so cool about it...” Shauna said to him and she put her arms out. “...Ancient history, *I* think, is the best part of history.”

“Well why don’t we set up camp first?” he suggested.
“...And if you *still* want to hear about it, I’ll tell you.”

They walked a little longer until they found a decent spot to camp. “Keirus...” Geri said as she approached him and he turned to her. “...Uhm, can I try lighting the fire tonight?”

He grinned. Since her first experience lighting a real fire, Geri hadn’t quite had the chance to test her skills yet. Usually, it was one of the Kuruuks who set the fire for the night. “Sure,” he said.

“Cool.”

Keirus and Tyler hallowed out a small hole for their firepit in a matter of moments, while the two girls gathered some kindling and a few larger logs to at least start it. When they were finished, Keirus dug out the flint and steel and gave it to Geri. “All right. Remember how to do it?”

She sat on her haunches over the firepit. “Yup!” she said with a smile. “...I need to strike it hard enough to make it spark.”

“Exactly...” he said and then his gaze went to Tyler. “...And while the girls are taking care of this, you and I should probably find some more wood to keep the fire going through the night.”

Tyler gave a small nod. “Sure,” he said. He normally wouldn’t have felt right about leaving the two girls to defend the camp while he and Keirus were gone, but after everything they had been through so far, he was pretty confident Geri and Shauna could hold their own-if the situation called for it.

-xxix-

While her friend was bent over the firepit trying to light it, Shauna started putting out their sleeper rolls, keeping them close enough to the fire though. And as she finished unrolling Tyler's, she stopped and looked around their tiny site. She was so used to seeing the ground littered with sleeper rolls when the larger party had set up camp. But now, with just the four of them, it all looked so empty.

Even the air around them seemed cooler to her. It was just she and Geri, Tyler and Keirus now. She missed Chris and Missy. She missed them more now, than she had before. She even missed having Tikala and Tamor around. Granted, the two siblings usually bickered more than they talked, but she even missed that. Without everyone else there, it just wasn't the same.

Shauna took a deep breath and continued unrolling the sleeping bag. She was partially lost in her own world, thinking

about Chris. After a moment though, she glanced at her friend. “Ger?” she asked.

Just as Shauna spoke up, so did Geri. “Damn it!” she cursed. She hadn’t gotten a fire going yet. “...I’ve done this once, I can do it again...” she said to herself, but she did hear her friend and glanced up. “...What’s up?”

Shauna let out another sigh. “Realistically...” she began and turned away from Geri. She clasped her hands. “...Do you think we’ll ever see them again?”

Geri sat up and stopped her fire lighting briefly and slowly nodded. “I do...” she said. “...I really do.”

“I’m scared...” Shauna said and their gazes met again. “...I’m scared that I won’t see Chris, or my mom and dad, or *anyone* again...” and her voice cracked as small sobs escaped her. “...None of us know what’s going to happen to us ahead...and...now that we’re so much smaller than we were before...it’s just so frightening...” and she wiped the tears off her cheeks.

Geri put the flint and steel down and crawled over to Shauna. She wrapped her in a hug. “Oh Shauna...” she said. Shauna put her hands over her face and cried into Geri’s shoulder. “...Hon, we are going to make it through the end of this, you’ll see. Listen to me,” she said and picked her head up.

Shauna lifted her glance to meet Geri’s, ignoring the tears on her cheeks.

Geri put her hands on Shauna's cheeks and continued. "We *are* going to make it through this, but you cannot start doubting yourself, Shauna. That's a sure way to failure. You just have to hold onto the hope that you are going to see Chris again, and we will all get home. I know you're sad and scared..." and she put a hand on her chest.

"...And I won't lie to you, I am too. I am scared about all this, not knowing what's going to happen to us, but I just keep holding onto the hope of finishing this, and finally going home."

Shauna looked down in thought for a moment. She could feel her skin tightening around where the tears had been, but they were almost dry. "You're right, Geri..." she said after a moment. "...You're right..." and slammed her fist into her palm. "...I *will* see Chris again. And we *are* going to get home."

Geri nodded. "All right, that's the frame of mind we need to keep..." she said encouragingly. "...And hey, if you ever start to doubt anything, always remember that Chris is waiting for you."

A small grin spread across Shauna's lips. "Yeah..." she said with a nod. "...I know he is. Thanks, Geri."

Geri smiled and they hugged. "That's what friends are for..." she said. "...We're here when the others need us. But..." she added quickly as they pulled out of it. "...We won't

be for long if I can't get that damn fire started," and she crawled back over to the fire pit.

Shauna sat cross-legged on the sleeper roll and looked at Geri. "I thought that Keirus showed you how to do this."

"He did, like, a while ago. I got a fire going once, so I'm sure I can do it again..." and she began rubbing the steel on the stone again. "...And if I don't, man, Keirus's gonna razz me about it to no end. I can guarantee that."

Shauna studied her friend's silhouette against the darkness. The sun was almost completely gone now except for a few last remaining rays in the sky. She let out a small breath. "You really like him, don't you?"

That question seemed to stab Geri like a thousand knives, but she was able to keep her mind concentrated on lighting the fire. "Yeah..." she answered quietly after a moment. "...A lot."

"Have you given any thought to what's going to happen, later down the line?"

Geri shook her head. "I..." and she pressed the steel chip down really hard against the stone. "...*Try* not to. I-I've got him here now and, I plan to enjoy every last minute of it. Because once we go home..." and she pressed really hard again. "...That's it for us..." and her voice trailed.

Suddenly, one of the kindling sticks was hit by a spark and a tiny flame started up. Geri's eyes lit up with the little orange glow. "Hey, what do you know? I did it."

“Great job,” Shauna complimented.

“Yeah...” Geri said as she looked over the ever-growing fire. Bit by bit, the tiny flames caught on the kindling in the fire pit, crackling and hissing as they engulfed the wood. Geri put her fire starters down again and watched her fire, but her smile slowly faded. The very first time when Keirus had coached her through lighting a fire was when she began to realize her feelings towards him. And now, weeks later, they were halfway done with their journey. And when that was over, everything between them would have to stop. But all her thoughts were interrupted when she heard the voices of Tyler and Keirus behind her.

“There you guys are...” Shauna’s voice said. “...We were about to come searching for you,” she teased.

“Hey, you try finding sticks for firewood in the dark and see how quick you are,” Tyler answered with the same amount of humor in his voice. The sticks clattered to the ground as he set them near the fire and then Keirus put the sticks he had on top of the pile.

“Nah...” Tyler said as he sat down. “...We had a nice, long discussion about our upcoming journey.”

Keirus sat down next to Geri as she gazed listlessly over the fire. He gently put his arm on her shoulders. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Her gaze didn’t change as she slowly shook her head. “It’s nothing. Just thinking...” she answered quietly. She leaned back and rested her head against him. “...So tell us more about

Amalene,” she said, purposely changing the subject. “...What happened to all of her followers?”

Keirus gave a small shrug. “They converted,” he said.

“To what?” Shauna asked.

He took a deep breath. “When Amalene divided the powers of nature among Her children, she appointed one Domain to each. My father, because he was the eldest and the strongest of her children, was given the Heavens. His sister, Dina, was given the Domain of Time. Herul, one of my father’s *other* brothers has the Spirit Domain. The Goddess, Euene, is water...and so on and so forth. And once the other Gods were given more recognition over their Domains, Amalene gradually seemed to fade out...

“...In this Realm, her temples and worshippers are few and far between. Even in *our* Realm, She only has one temple. We all recognize her for what she is, but now the one most recognized for nature is Trilena, the Woodland Goddess.”

“How many Gods are there?” Tyler asked.

“Ten, since Crodis was banished.”

“Boy...” Shauna commented. “...This Amalene got shafted royally. Everything was taken away from Her?”

Keirus shook his head. “Nothing was taken from Her. She gave it up, but it was of Her own choosing. Amalene has been here since the very beginning of Lirostial, long before the other Gods. After all she’s done, she deserves a rest. It’s just unfortunate that not many acknowledge Her. She’s still very

much in control of the natural forces of Lirosial, just not recognized for it,” and he prodded at the fire with one of the longer sticks they had.

“Okay, okay...” Tyler began. “...Amalene is the Mother Goddess of everyone, right?” and Keirus nodded. “Your father has the power of the Heavens, like the sun, the moon, the stars, whatever, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And all the other Gods and Goddesses in your Realm have their own thing-Domain...” and Keirus nodded again. “...So, which one does Crodis have?”

Keirus snorted. “It’s ironic, that he *used* to be the *Retriever*. Whenever a spirit was released, he was the one who retrieved it and brought it before Herul. Now, the Spirit Domain solely belongs to Herul, and Crodis has decided to retrieve demons instead.”

“And what about you?” Geri asked him. “...Since you’re one of the Gods, what Domain was given to you?”

“None,” Keirus answered casually. “...Outside of fighter circles, I’m just the Son of Hycen. *Among* fighter circles though, that’s where *Blademaster* comes from.”

“Y’know, where *did* you learn how to use a sword?” Tyler queried.

“Believe it or not, Tikala was my first mentor. She taught me the basics of swordsmanship, but as you all know, she prefers to use her bow to her blade. She’s a master archer and

she tried to teach me, but I never got into it. I preferred using a sword. So, she sent me to some of the other Kuruuks to fine-tune my abilities.”

“Wow,” Tyler said. “...They must be exceptional swordsmen then.”

He nodded again. “Yes they are, but they’ve never been that willing to share that knowledge with the mortals of this Realm. I will though, if I’m asked too, which happens frequently. So, I tend to be here more than any of the others. And, once upon a time, I was *also* known to be able to drink any man under the table.”

“No way...” Tyler said. “*You?*” Even when they were at the party in Federain, he didn’t see Keirus once take any of the liquor.

“You don’t believe me?” Keirus queried.

Tyler settled back on his sleeper roll. “Man, we have been here at *least* a month, and the *only* time I saw you drinking was that first day when we got here, and that was *maybe* a few sips.”

“Well, I *did* get a little distracted that night.”

“No excuses, man, and I’m calling your bluff. You didn’t even drink at that party, so when we get back, we’re gonna see just how well you *really* hold up in a drinking contest.”

“Would this be an official challenge then?” Keirus asked.

“You bet your ass it is. It’s gonna be you, me and Chris.”

“Fine then,” Keirus said lightly. “...I will accept the challenge.”

“See...” Geri commented and turned to Shauna.

“...That’s where all Tyler and Chris’ brain cells went,” she teased.

Shauna grinned. “Oh, believe me. *I know.*”

“Hey, not all of them,” Tyler said, playing into the girls’ teasing. He put a finger up. “...Just some.”

“My ass...” Geri chuckled. “...When have you and Chris *ever* been sober around each other for more than an hour at home.” She threw her pillow at him.

Tyler caught it just before it whacked him in the face. “Oh, oh, you should *talk*, y’alkie...” he teased. “...On your twenty-first, you couldn’t even *walk* straight and, I might add, you repainted the toilet in your house *more* than once that night,” and he threw the pillow back at her.

“*Whatever,*” she commented and chucked it at him again.

“Oh yeah...” he joked as he caught the pillow. “...And then there was that one Halloween party...” and he threw it back again.

Geri tried to move behind Keirus to hide from being hit with the pillow. “Whoa, whoa...” he said and put his hands up. “...I’m not about to be your shield. You brought it on yourself,

my dear...” and just as she moved behind him, Keirus ducked to avoid a pillow to the face and Geri was hit again.

“You bastard,” she giggled and then hit him with the pillow.

“Whoa...” he chuckled. She was still beating on him with the down pillow, even though he probably could have avoided it at any time. He figured to give her the victory for the moment. “...Why are you all of a sudden attacking me? I’m the neutral party.”

“You brought it on yourself, *my dear*,” she teased.

Tyler took the pillow off his sleeper roll and waited until he got a clear shot at Geri and then threw it at her. It took Geri a few moments to figure out what had happened after she got hit and while she was distracted briefly, Keirus took the opportunity to retaliate and hit her back.

“Yeah,” Keirus said victoriously as he sat up, still holding his ‘weapon’. “...Not so tough now, are you?”

“Oh...” Geri said through giggles as she sat up. “...You are *so* going to pay for that,” and then it was no holds barred in their pillow fight.

When Tyler threw his pillow at Geri, Shauna seized the opportunity to help her friend (despite Geri’s incessant giggling) and hit him with her own. “Hey...where did *that* come from?” Tyler asked lightly after she hit him.

“You boys think you’re hot stuff with your teaming up on her, well we girls stick together too...” she teased.

“...Prepare to eat feathers!”

“Uh, oh...hey Keirus!” he shouted. “...Quick! Toss me a pillow!”

Before Geri got her next hit on him, Keirus tossed his pillow towards Tyler and was able to grab another just in time. It had been such a long time since they had had so much fun and their laughter seemed to fill the valley well into the early hours of the morning.

* * * * *

-xxx-

Tikala strode through the doors of the council room, hardly being able to contain her excitement (both over finally being among her own, as well as being able to give so much aid to the struggling kingdom). Queen Fiora was in there with most of the members of her council discussing some business.

“You’re Majesty!” Tikala said as she entered and they all turned to her. “...I apologize for interrupting, but I bring good news!”

“What is it then, Tikala?” Fiora asked. These last few weeks had been nothing but bad tidings for she and her people. Any good news to be heard was a great relief.

Tikala approached the table. “The Kuruuks...” and she put a hand on her chest. “...My people, have agreed to aid the Lirosialen Kingdoms against Crodis. There’s at least a thousand, if not more, strong of Kuruuk Warriors. And they will be here in no more than two days.”

Fiora stood up from her seat. “Tikala, that isn’t just good news, that’s *wonderful* news. In our state, the aid of your people is greatly appreciated by all of us.”

Just then, the Birdmaster came into the council room. “Queen Fiora,” Toltaire said. He had the kestrel, Aarek, sitting on his arm. “... We have received a response from King Dram already.”

Fiora clutched the broach on her chest. “And?” she asked hopefully.

“And he says that he and his army can be back within two days’ time.”

She clasped her hands and let out a sigh of relief. “Good, good, that will be two additional armies. That should give us enough aid, plus more, while we wait for the other kingdoms to respond...” she said and then turned to Toltaire. “...Thank you, Toltaire...” and then her gaze went to Tikala. “...And thank you again, Lady Tikala.”

Both Tikala and Toltaire bowed before her again and then they left the room so she and her council could finish their meeting.

“Birdmaster?” Tikala said to him before he got too much further ahead. He stopped and turned to her as she strode up to him.

“Yes, milady?” he said and gave a small bow.

“I’ve a favor to ask of you...” she went on. “...Might I be able to have one of your messengers to send out?”

“Of course you may...” he said. “...Might I inquire why though?”

“I wish to send a message out to Keirus before he gets too far along on his path.”

“If you can wait until tomorrow, Lady Tikala...” and he looked towards the kestrel. “...Aarek will be fully rested and able to carry out your message. He is by far my best one.”

Tikala stroked the bird’s breast with her finger. “I can wait, but if you’d rather keep him here if a more important message needs to be delivered, I can take another.”

“If Lord Keirus is on an uncharted course, I would only trust Aarek to deliver the message. He will find him.”

“I thank you very much, Birdmaster, but might I be able to have a message slip?”

He pulled a tiny capsule out of his pocket again and gave it to her. “He will be ready first thing tomorrow morning.”

Tikala met up with her brother as she made her way to her bedchamber to get a quill.

“What’s that?” Tamor asked when he saw the paper.

“I’m sending out a messenger tomorrow morning to find the others. I think if we all sign this, it will help them along.”

“Are you sure that the messenger will be able to find them? We really don’t know where they are right now.”

“Birdmaster Toltaire assures me that the message will be delivered. He is letting me send his most trusted kestrel out to them. And since this particular bird has already relayed a message to King Dram, I believe he will find them.” And she opened the door.

The sunlight was shining through the open balcony doors. Tikala walked over to the desk and pulled the feather pen out of its holder. The two Kuruuks walked down the hall to Missy’s room and Tikala tapped on the door.

“Come in,” Missy’s voice sounded through the door.

Tikala pushed the door open and they saw as Missy was standing by her window, trying to put some pressure on her bad leg. She was still wincing slightly, but not so badly that she couldn’t handle it. She actually seemed to be doing better. “How are you feeling?” Tikala inquired.

Missy turned to her. “A lot better than yesterday...” she said. “...Thank you. Did Queen Fiora have any luck with her messages?”

Tikala gave a small nod. “The message reached King Dram and he responded right away. Caloon will be aiding us in this fight again, as well as *our* people,” she said and nodded towards her brother.

“You mean, there’s more than just you two?” she asked.

Tikala let out a small chuckle. “Of course there are, my dear...” and then she shook her head. “...We don’t live in this Realm though. We live with the Gods, but I was able to contact

our kannushi, or shaman, if you will, and he relayed the message to our warriors.”

“Are a lot of Kuruuks coming?”

“A fair amount of them. A few hundred at least...” and then she walked further into the room. “...And I thought that, before things get really bad, the four of us might send out a message to the others, to keep their spirits up.”

“Sounds good,” Missy said. She had a slight limp as she slowly made her way over to them.

“Did you want to sign it here? If it hurts you to walk, that’s fine.”

A soft smile spread across her lips. “It hurts a little bit, but I’m fine. I gotta be if I’m gonna be helping you guys in this battle. I can walk, I’m just a little slower at the moment.” She began walking to the door.

“How is Chris?” Tamor inquired and opened the door for them. “...Have you heard?”

“He’s hanging in there, getting kind of crabby though, but I can’t blame him.”

“Being bedridden has a tendency to do that to a person,” Tikala said, remembering Keirus’s detestability when he was stuck inside. “...But you’re right, I can’t blame him either.”

The three of them went down the hall to the room where Chris was staying. They had to wait a few moments before they could go inside, but they soon saw the healer come out with the

used bandages. When he saw them, he gave a little tilt of his head in acknowledgement. “Good day,” he said and then went on his way.

Chris was lying on the bed with his back propped against a pillow, but he was still sitting rigidly. “Man...” he said when he saw them all come in. “...Why couldn’t I have gotten a woman to come in here and do that? Everytime that guy’s in here, I feel like I’m being violated.”

“Well Fiora assures us that he is her best healer,” Tikala said calmly.

“Yeah, I know, but it still feels strange...” and he put his hands down on the bed to adjust how he was sitting.

“Well his skills seem to be working, are they not?” she asked lightly.

Chris looked up at her. “Yeah...” he said. “...A little.”

She put her arms out. “Than see, perhaps you’ll be out sooner than you thought, young Christopher.”

He gave a small shrug. “Didn’t think about that one...” he mused and then turned back to them. “...So what’re you all doing here anyway?”

“We’re having a messenger sent out tomorrow morning...” Tikala began. “...To Geri, Shauna, Keirus, and Tyler. We just want them to know not to lose hope. I thought we could all sign the message. I think it would mean a lot to all of them.”

“Sure...” Chris said and slowly adjusted himself again. “...Has the message been written yet? Or are we all supposed to come up with something?”

The Kuruuk shook her head. “No, it hasn’t been written yet. I figured we can all decide on something to write, after all...” and she unrolled the tiny piece of message paper. It was no bigger than two post-it notes combined. “...We do have limited space.”

“How ‘bout we just write ‘kick the shit out of Crodis’? That should boost their spirits, if not, they’re adrenaline for sure.”

Tamor let out a small snort of amusement. “I agree to that one,” he said.

Tikala put her ears back and looked at her brother. “Oh stop it...” she said and looked back at the sheet of paper. “...We want to give them something encouraging.”

“Okay...” Chris began. “...’We *believe* you can kick the shit out of Crodis.’ How’s that?”

Missy turned to him. “Come on...” she said in a light reprimand. “...That isn’t very encouraging, if you ask me. We should write something nice, so they know they’re not alone-” but she paused and turned to Tikala. “...Wait, what if we write just that?”

She cocked her head. “Write what?”

“‘You’re not alone. We’re all here and we’ve got faith in you’, or something similar. It’s simple, it’s to the point, and it

encourages them. Plus..." and she put a finger up. "...It's short enough that we can all leave a little message."

"I like that," Tikala said and gave a small nod in agreement.

"But that's so mushy," Chris protested.

Missy's tongue clicked against her teeth. "It is not. That's just what we want them to hear."

"How about this..." said Tikala. "...You're not fighting this battle alone. We're all there with you and we will be to the very end'..." and then she looked at all of them. "...Does that sound good?"

"But it's still so mushy," Chris said.

"You know, Chris..." Missy began. "...The only reason *Hallmark* exists is because guys just don't know the right things to say."

"Now that's not always true..." he said to her. "...Some girls aren't exactly *Hallmark* poetic themselves."

"I know, I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just saying that girls are better with the short, simple statements. I like what Tikala just said and I think we should stick with it. Besides, here's still gonna be room for us all to sign and leave a little message for them. So you and Tamor can both write 'kick the shit out of Crodis' if you like."

Tikala walked over to the desk in his room and set the paper down. "We're going to stick with this message," she said

and began writing. When she was done, she passed it to all of them to sign.

* * * * *

-xxxi-

The rain poured down like a geyser. All day as they traveled, the rain was off and on. Sometimes it would be heavier, and sometimes it would be a light drizzle. And now that they had been out of the shelter of the trees for almost half a day, the four travelers had no choice but to keep moving on.

In the beginning of the day, travel was easy and normal, despite the rain, but as they kept going, the terrain became harder as they got into the foothills. The mountains kept following them throughout their travels, but the further they went, the further away the mountains seemed.

They continued trudging on, exchanging very few words with each other. All the gloom had brought out their feelings of doubt again. And at the rate it was going, the rain didn't look to be stopping any time soon, so all their doubts and worries only seemed to grow heavier with each step they took.

Now that the hard rain had been continuing for a while, their path only grew muddier as they trudged along. The ground

was starting to become slick all around them and one false step could mean trouble. They began concentrating more on the sopping ground beneath their feet than on anything else. And what was worse was that they still had a long path ahead of them just that day alone.

Keirus was at the head of the party, while the others were following after him, but they wanted to stop at least until the rain let up. It was one of those days where all of them were on pins and needles, not knowing what was going to happen. And all of them had short fuses.

Geri suddenly stopped walking and put her hands on her hips. “*Keirus!*” she called over the sound of the rain, not being able to hide the irritation in her voice. He stopped and turned to her. “...*We have to stop! We can hardly see where we’re going!*”

He looked around the muddy area surrounding them. There was really nowhere they could even break except on the trail. But setting up a camp was completely out of the question while they were on uneven ground, if that was what she was getting at. “*Where do you propose we stop then?*” he asked, yelling over the sound of the rain and putting his arms out to the side.

She looked around. It was just gushing out and the ground was so wet that they were practically sinking into it. “I don’t know, but...” and her hand slapped her thigh as her arm

fell against it. "...We can't keep going like this. This is just ridiculous."

He took a few steps towards them. "Well we can't really stop until we're on even ground. We don't have much of a choice."

"Well can't you, I don't know...turn into something that'll get us out of here faster then?"

Again, Keirus looked around. He couldn't turn into anything with wings because the rain would just weigh him down too much. He couldn't turn into anything of decent size because the ground around them was so sopping wet. "Nothing that will do us any good," he said.

"Well isn't there anything you can do? I mean, you're pretty smart about this stuff. Can't you think of anything?"

He took a few steps back towards them. "What would you have me do, Geri? I can't control the weather, I can't get us out of here any faster, I can't make us a path through here that's any safer than the one we're on." He knew that they were strangers to this land, but he was getting a little irritated with having to do everything for them. They weren't helpless, they had all demonstrated that.

"...And unless you can think of any better ways to get through this, all we can do is just keep walking as we are."

"Wait just a minute," Tyler began when the tension started rising, but his voice was lost in the storm.

“What do you mean by that?” Geri asked and narrowed her eyes. She crossed her arms.

“I mean just as I said. I can’t think of everything to get us out of messes and so far, I’m the only one who is. I don’t have all the answers to everything, so if any of you can figure out an easier way to get through this, then by all means...” and he stepped off to the side, gesturing to the path ahead of them. “...You take the lead.”

Geri put her hands on her hips. “Hold on just a minute...” she said to him. “...What right do you have to be getting all huffy with us?”

He let out a deep breath and put his hand on his temples. “I’m not trying to be *huffy* with you...” he began, trying to remain calm, but the tension was starting to get to all of them. “...I was only saying. I can’t think of *everything* for us to do. That’s why we traveled *together*—” but he stopped talking in mid sentence and looked around.

“What?” Geri asked, still slightly irritated.

Keirus was about to respond, but then suddenly, the ground gave way beneath all their weight. They all slid along with the mudslide all the way to the bottom of the foothill and landed in a huge, muddy puddle.

Tyler sat up and pulled his hands out of the water. “*Keirus*...” he started, no longer being able to hide the frustration in his voice. “...Where in the *hell* are we?”

“How am I suppose to know?” came the agitated response. They were all submerged into the muddy puddle, each on hands and knees trying to regain their balances.

“Well you’re the one who *led* us here! Where in the hell did you *drag us*?”

And that comment was the grain of sand that tipped the scale. Keirus pushed his hair out of his face and stared at Tyler. “Whoa, whoa...” he said and put a hand up. “...Back up for a moment.”

“Man...” Tyler said. “...You heard what I said. What the hell possessed you to drag us through all this shit?”

Keirus slowly shook his head. “I haven’t dragged any of you *anywhere*. You’ve all been free to leave whenever you wanted too, but you *didn’t*. So *don’t* try to pin any of this on *me*. All of this, everything that’s happened, has been *your* choice. I warned you all about this from the start.”

Tyler didn’t know what it was, but he had been on raw nerves since the party had split up into two groups. It was probably a combination of stress, fear, anxiety, being lost so far from home, and losing Missy to an unknown fate, that did it. But he was on his very last nerve and it had finally snapped.

“*Don’t give me that shit!*” he shouted. “...*What the hell did you expect us to do?*” And before Keirus could respond, Tyler lunged at him.

Keirus was just as agitated over everything that was happening, and he too was on his last nerve. He probably

wouldn't have picked a fight if he had a choice, but when Tyler leapt at him, Keirus didn't back down from it.

Shauna had just gotten to her knees and was now sitting in a puddle that went waist deep on her. "Oh man..." she sobbed and sniffled. She wasn't hurt in the slide, but she couldn't help it. She pushed her wet hair behind her ears, but was suddenly startled when she heard a loud splash next to her and she fell over to avoid it. She turned only to see when Tyler and Keirus started to fight.

"Oh my god..." Shauna muttered and slowly got to her feet. It was a little harder because of the knee-deep water and the uneven ground. She turned to her friend. "...*Geri!*" she called.

Geri had just stood up when she heard her name. Her hair was all in her face, so she pushed it off and just turned in the direction of the two young men. "*Keirus! Tyler!*" she shouted and widened her eyes. She trudged over to them. "...*Knock it off!*"

"*Stop it, you guys!*" Shauna yelled as she approached them, but she wouldn't get too close because both were thrashing around in the water.

Both men were equally matched because they both shared the knowledge of offensive and defensive martial arts. But all the while they were shouting and cursing at each other. And whenever one got in a position to inflict a lot of damage, he was countered by the other right away.

“Both of you! Stop it right now!” Geri shouted again. Just like Shauna, Geri didn’t want to wind up in the middle of their fight either.

The two of them rolled over again, splashing water around as they moved, and Tyler had gotten Keirus pinned again, but it only lasted a moment until Keirus retaliated and knocked Tyler off.

Geri balled up her fists as she watched the two. She heard Shauna shouting and calling to them to stop, but her voice only seemed lost to their ears. Geri took a deep breath and let it out. She clenched her fists again and as soon as Keirus pinned Tyler again, she ran towards him.

Keirus wasn’t expecting it, and Geri had used so much force when she plowed into him, that she knocked him off Tyler and wound up pulling him into the water with her.

The demigod was sitting upright in the puddle trying to figure out what had just happened to him when a huge splash of water hit him in the face. “What’s the *matter* with you?” he heard Geri’s agitated voice sound. “...With *both* of you!”

He opened his eyes and blinked himself back into reality. He saw as Geri had just shot a look towards Tyler.

“Jesus Christ...” she grumbled as her gaze darted between them. “...You two are acting like *children*. Who cares who is, or *isn’t* to blame for this? The *point is*, that we’re all stuck in this together whether we want to be or *not*! We’re supposed to be *helping* each other, not *fighting* each other...”

She got to her feet again and put her hands on her hips. "...This is hard on all of us, not just you two and we've *all* been like this all damn day. Yeah, the weather sucks. Yeah, we've been separated from our friends, we're all far from home, we're tired and cranky, but none of that gives any one of us any reason to behave just like you two were. *We're* the ones who *volunteered* to finish this, *all* of us did. And if we can't cooperate, there is no way we're going to win this."

Tyler put a hand on his forehead. "Oh shit..." he groaned, still keeping his hand over his eyes. "...I can't keep doing this, I just can't. All of this is messing with my head..." and he shook his head. "...I don't know what the hell's wrong with me."

Shauna knelt down next to him and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Hey..." she said. "...I know this is hard on you, Tyler. It's hard on all of us..." and she looked at the other two. "...But we've just gotta be strong, for each other..." and then she turned back to him. "...And think about Missy. I mean, if we can't keep you going, I'm sure she can. She's probably thinking about you right now, waiting to see you return to her. You've just gotta be strong, just a little longer."

He let out a long sigh and paused for a moment. "I know she's waiting for me..." he said quietly. "...But man, I didn't think this would be so hard..." and then he looked

towards Keirus. "...Man, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap like that."

Keirus looked towards him and shook his head. "Don't worry about it..." he said. "...I was no less to blame for it, and I apologize too."

"You shouldn't have to, man. I was the one who started it..." and then he shook his head again. "...I don't know what came over me."

"We were both at fault..." Keirus said and then looked at Tyler. "...So forgive and forget, right?"

Tyler gave a small nod. "I can settle for that," he said and got to his feet.

"Well now that that's resolved..." Geri said and looked around. The rain had calmed down somewhat in the few minutes from when they slid down, to now, but it was still drizzling.

"...Where are we?"

* * * * *

-xxxii-

The woodsman stood in his post above the treeline looking over the distance. The green canopy of trees really stood out against the gray skyline. In the distance, he saw a flash of lightning in the sky, and the musty scent of rain lingered all around him. A storm would soon be coming.

And then the man heard the shriek of a bird and looked up into the sky, just as a gust of wind blew by him. He saw the black silhouette of a bird battling the wind current as it flew to the west of them. He clenched onto his spear and glanced through the hole in the floor. He saw the ground far beneath him and his comrade was posted at the base of their lookout.

“*Niles!*” he called and the man looked up at him. “...Climb up here!” and so, Niles began the ascent to the post.

“What is it, Darwin?” Niles asked when he reached the top.

Darwin glanced over the distance. “The winds’ve changed...” he said as his glance kept circulating. And then he

turned to his comrade. "...I'm going to tell Carrick. Stay watch while I'm gone."

Darvin hurriedly took the familiar path back to their village to speak with their leader. He jogged over the wooden bridge that extended over the small stream that supplied the entire colony with water. And as he kept up pace, Darwin began to see the familiar sight of his village.

Most of the village dwellings were in the trees, but there were still some on the ground so that their crops could still be tended. The woodsmen had a village garden, but it was in a separate area away from the rest of their settlement. So if they ever came under attack, they wouldn't lose everything and they'd be able to start anew.

It was still early, and the men and the women of their group were bustling around in their normal, every day routines. Darwin made his way through the village center and began to climb one of the ladders into the trees. He had to cross over another bridge that was hung between two of the trees to get to the band leader, Carrick's hut. As Darwin got to the end of the bridge though, he hoped that their leader would be inside.

And just as he reached the hut, another of the guards was walking out. "Baerder," Darwin said when he saw the man.

"Yes?" Baerder asked.

Darvin approached him. "Is Carrick in there?" he asked.

Baerder gave a nod. "Yes he is. Just got back actually."

"Thank you..." Darwin responded and then proceeded to the hut. "...Carrick?" he asked as he pushed up the door flap.

Carrick had just put his spear back as the guard entered. "I hope you've not left your post abandoned, Darwin," he said.

Darwin shook his head. "No, sir..." he said. "...Niles is on the lookout right now. I came back to tell you that the winds've changed."

"Again?" Carrick asked and his retainer nodded. He took a deep breath and thought for a moment. The last time that the winds changed, Federain Kingdom had been attacked, and that was just over a week ago.

"Yes, sir. What should we do?"

"Well..." Carrick said. "...As I said before, if the winds have changed so quickly, I think that this problem is much more than we thought. The eight travelers must still be fighting their way to find Crodis-" and just then, there was a rumble of thunder in the distance.

Carrick glanced up at the thatched ceiling of his hut. "A storm is coming, but it's not the rain or thunder that worries me..." and he paused to listen for a moment. Light rain began to fall and Carrick turned back to his retainer.

"Spread the word, Niles, to every able-bodied man in the village. In a few days' time, we journey to Federain..." and he glanced around again, listening to the rain as it gently fell to the

ground. He nodded. "...I think that this time, they will need our help."

"Yes, sir," Niles said.

* * * * *

-xxxiii-

Tikala looked over the gloom outside. The sky was gray and foggy, and it was lightly showering. Before the weather had gotten so bad that day, she and Toltaire released Aarek to deliver the message. Now that it was raining, she was hoping that he would get to Keirus and the others.

All day, Tikala couldn't shake the feeling of dread that had been stirring in her gut. She didn't know what it was, if it was her own nerves getting the better of her, or what. And then she wondered if the fact that the others were beginning to doubt, if it was starting to affect her as well.

It had been two days since she had spoken with Fichu, and it was going on mid-afternoon already. But so far, there was no sign of the Kuruuks anywhere. Perhaps they had already intercepted with Crodis' army, which wouldn't be bad for Federain because the Kuruuks were exceptional fighters. They would at least be able to knock the army down some before it reached the palace.

And then she looked down to the grounds below her. The kingdom of Davanine, Federain's neighbors to the northwest, had responded to Fiora already and agreed to ally. Davanine would be sending their army to Federain, while Fiora had been given permission to send all the women and children to the safety of their palace walls. Federain was the central kingdom and it was going to be hit first by Crodis' army. But if they received enough help, they might be able to keep the army from going any further, so Davanine Kingdom was pretty safe for now.

Just then, Tikala's thoughts were interrupted when she heard one of the gate sentries below her calling. "Make way! King Dram has returned! Tell her Majesty at once!"

She watched as the little man went running down the road beneath her, but then he disappeared under the balcony. Once he disappeared, her gaze went to the gates at the very head of the road as they started opening. Hundreds of men on horseback came riding through. Two of the riders at the front were brandishing blue flags, gold tassels stitched all around the edges as they flapped in the breeze. Caloon's symbol, a coiled, green sea serpent, was stitched onto both. And at the very head of the army, she saw Dram leading them.

Those soldiers who were camped out on the palace grounds were now standing, applauding and cheering that the army had returned. Tikala saw as Dram and two of his generals dismounted at the front and walked into the palace. The rest of

the soldiers began dismounting and leading their mounts off the path so they could tether them with the rest of the army.

Once the soldiers and their horses were clear though, the gates remained opened. Tikala felt a jump inside her and she perked her ears up. She leaned over the edge of the balcony and waited. And then she saw as her long awaited allies marched through the gate. The Kuruuk army was far larger than Dram's army though, having several hundred at least, that she could see, and still more came through.

"Thank the Gods," she said and hurried out of her room, nearly colliding with Tamor in the hall.

"Gee, you must have noticed that the Kuruuks have finally come," he commented.

"I have, and I am anxious to meet them..."

"You and I both, sister," and then the two of them both ran to meet up with the Kuruuks.

Tikala and Tamor arrived at the main doors just as three of the Kuruuk generals strode in. Their colors were varying shades of white, as the other two. They were armored in leather scale suits, which was typical of the Kuruuks because the leather wouldn't hinder their abilities to move (which was their greatest defense/offense in battle).

The biggest of them was the head general, Osias Strong Claw, a good friend to their father. And accompanying the

general were two of his best retainers, Akio Snow Ear, and Miach Ebon Foot.

“Tikala! Tamor!” Osias greeted and met up with them. “...It’s been so long since we’ve seen either of you. You’re both well?”

“Too long...” Tamor snorted. “...We’re anxious to return home.”

“Indeed...” Tikala answered with a nod. “...But yes, we’re both fine. And thank you again, General Strong Claw, for coming with such haste. We are all in need of any aid we can get.”

“It is no trouble, Tikala. Even before Kannushi Fichu heard from you, we were debating on coming here...” and he looked around the room. “...It has been long indeed since you and Lord Keirus had gone. And then we sent Tamor to find you, but when we didn’t hear from him, we started to worry.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t contact you sooner. We’ve just had so many diversions lately. I didn’t mean to make any of you worry.”

“It’s all right...” Osias said and put a hand on her shoulder. “...At least you’re all right...” and then his gaze went to Tamor. “...You’re both all right. And that is what matters to us.” And they began walking to the council room.

“Is Lord Keirus around?” he inquired as they walked. “...Not much has changed since he left, but I’m sure he might want an update.”

Tikala shook her head and turned away. She still felt guilty over having to leave he and the others alone to finish the mission. Perhaps once *this* battle was under control, she might be able to go out and look for them. “No, he’s gone,” she said.

The Kuruuk general stopped walking and turned to her. “Gone?” he echoed, fearing the worst. He shook his head. “...Tell me it isn’t true?”

“It’s true...” she answered casually and gave a small shrug. She nodded towards her brother. “...Tamor and I had to leave him to get back here.”

“Leave him?” Strong Claw repeated. Now he was in complete shock. Tikala was always so devoted to Keirus, almost never leaving his side. And if something happened to him, the last thing Strong Claw thought was that she would leave him.

“Yes...” she answered. “...We were traveling in a party of eight, but two of our companions were badly wounded in our encounter with the *moghrim*, so with Tamor and I being the swiftest, we were chosen to hurry them back here to get proper attention.”

“The *moghrim*?” Strong Claw asked and raised his eyebrows. “...You mean, you’ve seen them?”

“Unfortunately,” Tamor added dryly.

Tikala nodded. “Yes, but all of us survived the encounter.”

The general let out a deep breath of relief. “Oh, praise the Gods for that. I was almost afraid that Lord Keirus was killed.”

“Oh no...” Tikala said. “...He’s still very much alive,” she went on, but at this point, even she was having doubts. ...*I hope*, she thought. They began walking again.

“Is he alone?” the Kuruuk asked.

Tamor was walking beside them with his arms behind his back, hearing every word of their conversation. “No...” he said when Tikala suddenly grew quiet. “...He isn’t. There’s three others with him and one of them, is the *Great Warrior*.”

Strong Claw turned to the younger Kuruuk and widened his eyes. “The actual? Out of the legend?”

“Oh yes...” Tamor answered smugly. He was fully confident in Geri. “...We didn’t tell you?” and the general shook his head. The young Kuruuk gave a small nod. “...Yes, we found her, quite by accident, but in this case, fortune worked to our favor.”

“Well that is most excellent news, Tamor. If we have the *Great Warrior*, our chances of defeating Crodis are far better than we anticipated.”

“Indeed they are. I fully believe in them,” and then they reached the council room.

It was more crowded this time than before. Fiora was sitting in there with a few members of her council, and they saw red-haired Prince Barak of Hradach Kingdom seated next to her.

Dram and two of his generals were in there, as well as the youngest Lirosialen monarch, King Teague of Altegar, and two of his most trusted advisors. And at the far end of the room, Tikala and Tamor were shocked to see the Nevrye, Elwina, and two of her bodyguards. There were also two other men in there, both having been sent to represent Davanine. Throughout the room, there were quiet murmurs as everyone consulted with each other.

“By the Gods...” Tikala commented as she looked around. “...I didn’t realize that so many were here already...”

Tamor leaned closer to her and lowered his voice as he looked around the room. “Tikala...” he whispered, and she tilted her head towards him. “...Who *are* all these people?”

She recognized some in the room, but others even had her curious. She slowly shook her head as she leaned towards him. “I don’t know,” she answered.

“I do believe that introductions would be in order,” Strong Claw said quietly. He didn’t recognize anyone. Of course, it had been so long since he had actually been in the mortal realm. Some of these people were probably the heirs to those who he had known.

Fiora stood up when she saw the Kuruuks enter the room. There were still a few vacant seats around the table and she gestured for them to come in. After she stood up, the murmurs in the room gradually drowned out as everyone turned

to her. By the time the Kuruuks had seated themselves, the room was silent and Fiora cleared her throat.

“Now that we’re all here...” she began. “...I would first like to thank you all very much for coming in such a time of need. At this moment, Lirosial, *our* home, is in a most desperate hour...

“...Right now, as I speak, there is a powerful force, just pulsing with evil heading in our direction. This force is unlike anything that any of us have ever known. It has been sent from the very bowels of chaos, Laraniros, a land that we have all feared for ten centuries. And the intention of this force is to completely annihilate our world, our home.”

After that, the murmurs started up again. Out of everyone in the room, King Dram and his retainers were the only ones who had tangled with Crodis’ army before. And then, Osias slowly rose from his seat and everyone turned to him.

He slowly nodded. “I am Osias Strong Claw, of the Kuruuks. And we have already seen this force...” he began. “...This, army that has been sent. We stumbled across a small scouting band on our way here, and I will admit that had it not been for our sheer numbers, we may not have beaten them. This is no ordinary army that comes. They are getting aid from a higher power,” he said, neglecting to mention Crodis’ name because he didn’t want to frighten these people any more than they already were.

Dram stood up and slowly nodded. "From Crodis..." he said. If no one had figured out what the 'higher power' was, it was about time they knew. "...And for those of you who don't know..." and his gaze went around the table. "...This is the second army he's sent. The first one was just a test of his own powers, I think, to see just how far he could go before he was defeated. This new army is going to be worse."

"And the numbers are greater," Tamor spoke up.

The murmuring started up again as Dram and Osias retook their seats, giving Fiora the full attention once more. "And this is why we must all come together. In order for us to defeat this army, we must combine our forces..." and she shook her head. "...Or I don't think we'll make it." And now, some debate was beginning over who was going to stay around.

Elwina then stood up from her seat, balancing on her staff and looked at all of them. "The Nevryes normally will not fight in wars..." she began. "...It is not in our nature, but this is a problem that cannot be ignored. It may be starting here, but if it is allowed to spread, it will consume all that is good in this world..." and she turned to Fiora. "...The Nevryes will give you our allegiance, you're Majesty. We will stay to help in any way that we can."

Osias stood up again. "As will the Kuruuks," he said to her.

Dram turned to her. "And you already have Caloon's allegiance, Queen Fiora."

“Hradach will aid as well,” Barak spoke up.

There was still some debate from the last two kingdoms, Altegar and Davanine. One of the representatives from Davanine, Tarmon, rose from his seat and placed his palms on the table.

“Davanine is already sheltering your people, Queen Fiora. We will continue to help you as long as you need it,” he said to her

One of the Altegar advisors also stood up. “You’re Majesty, please understand, Altegar is the smallest kingdom of Lirosial. And we’ve nothing against Federain...” and he looked around the table. “...Nor any of you, but something of this magnitude will require some discussion amongst ourselves-”

The second advisor stood up. “Popycock...” he said to his partner. “...This problem concerns every kingdom on Lirosial, Erasmus. It will eventually hit Altegar too, if it is not stopped-”

King Teague was sitting between his two advisors while they debated among themselves, his glance shifting between them, and then he interjected. “Enough...” he said to them. Both advisors turned to him. “...*Sit* down, both of you. You’re embarrassing me.”

The two men retook their seats without one word, as Teague stood up, and everyone focused their attention on the young monarch. He had light brown hair, and he couldn’t have been much more than sixteen. Still though, despite his

youthfulness, Teague did his very best to carry himself like a king. And he turned towards Fiora. “Altegar’s army is small, but I assure you that we will aid as well, you’re Majesty.”

She looked towards the young king and a small smile came to her face. “Thank you, King Teague,” she said to him.

“But sire...” Erasmus protested under his breath.

“...This decision should be counseled first.”

Teague looked at him. “It has been decided, Erasmus. I will not stand by and watch as all of my allies go to war, while our kingdom lay quiet. Atalo is right...” he said and looked towards his other advisor. “...This problem will effect every kingdom of Lirosial...” and then he shook his head. “...And Altegar will be no exception.”

“You’re father would not approve of this, sire. He would have wanted it counseled first, before coming to a decision-” the huffy advisor went on to say, but Teague wouldn’t let it go any further.

“Well I am not my father, now am I? I am *your* king, and *as* such, you should respect my decisions when I make them. Am I clear on that?”

Erasmus looked down at the table. “You-you’re right, sire. Please, forgive my ignorance.”

Teague looked at his advisor. Erasmus had always been hesitant on his king’s decisions because he was so young. And the advisor had always insisted each decision be counseled before done, because of it. But after being the king of Altegar

for two years already, Teague felt he was quite capable to make such decisions on his own, especially in a time like this. “I will...” he said. “...So long as you don’t question my decision again.”

Still, the advisor kept his gaze lowered. “Yes, sire,” he said. And then Teague took his seat between the two men.

“Well said, sire,” Atalo commented quietly and Teague turned to him.

“I am the King of Altegar,” the young monarch began. “...And I will not continue to be slighted because of my age any longer.”

Tikala let out a small huff after hearing Teague’s determination, and a small smile of approval crossed her face. She admired that kind of determination because that was a surefire way to victory, for anyone. She cleared her throat and looked towards him.

“For what it’s worth, you’re Majesty...” she began and Teague turned to her. “...You’ve turned out to be an excellent leader to my eyes. The people of Altegar are very fortunate.”

-xxxiV-

Chris wasn't able to make to the counsel meeting because of his condition, so Missy decided to stay back with him. Regardless of what was said, she was pretty sure that either Tikala or Tamor would give them the rundown.

"Man..." Chris groaned and shifted anxiously on the bed as he looked towards the window. "...This really sucks balls. I can't do *anything*. I'm a...damned invalid."

Missy was sitting in the chair near the bed. She took a sip of her tea. "You were hurt pretty badly though. And those wounds need time to heal."

"Yeah, I know..." he grumbled. "...But I'm getting so restless. I mean..." and he gestured out the window. "...Shauna, and Geri, and Tyler, and Keirus are all out there right now, actually making a difference..." and then he turned to her. "...You're at least mobile, and what am I doing? Lying around in bed all day."

“I may be mobile...” Missy said to him. “...But I’m still in a lot of pain whenever I move. You and I both are just gonna have to be patient. We have to let these wounds heal up before we can really do anything. And that’s gonna take time, Chris.”

His gaze shifted to the window again. “Time...” he snorted. Time was what brought them to Lirosial in the first place. It was all they had to rely on in order to defeat Crodis, and finally be able to return home. And over their travels, there were so many instances where time seemed endless, forever going on and on, stretching so far out of reach that they couldn’t even see it. But now, it was what they needed more than anything, and it was also what they were beginning to lack. Chris shook his head. “...Time is evil,” he said.

Missy was about to respond, but they were interrupted by a knock on the door. They exchanged glances and then Chris looked at the door. “Uh, come in,” he said.

The knob jiggled a little as the person behind it tried to open in. And as the door opened up, they were half expecting to see the Kuruuks, but were quite surprised at who they *did* see.

Missy’s eyes lit up as the familiar little Nevrye stepped into the room. “Toki!” she said happily, as the little blue-haired Nevrye entered.

Chris looked at the Nevrye. Though he could be quite annoying at times, it was nice to see a familiar face among all the newcomers to Federain. “‘Yo little bro...” he said. “...Gimme five...” and he put his hand out.

“Yes!” Toki answered with a nod as he strode into the chamber and slapped the palm of Chris’ hand. “...Toki in the house! The Nevryes will be helping in the battle too!”

“But I thought the Nevryes wouldn’t fight, no matter what,” Missy said to him.

The Nevrye nodded as he propped himself on the foot of the bed. “Yes, true, very true, but Elwina predicts that the army of evil will spread, past Federain, if it is not stopped...” and then he shook his head. “...But Toki doesn’t want it to reach Eamalie. No Nevrye does. Eamalie is a sacred place, a pure place, for healing. It cannot be destroyed.”

Missy shook her head sadly. “No place deserves to be destroyed,” she said, beginning to wonder what the fate of Lirosial and its kingdoms, might actually be.

“Except maybe Laraniros...” Chris commented with some bitterness. “...That’s the place that started this all.”

Toki clasped his fingers and gave a small shrug. He turned to Chris. “Can’t be...” he said. “...Many have tried, and many have died...” and he looked down. He spread his tiny arms to the fullest extent that they could reach. “...Armies, whole armies have traveled to that wicked place and never returned.”

“Isn’t that just peachy?” Chris added sarcastically and looked towards Missy. “...And that’s where all our friends are going as we speak...” and then he let out a small sigh. “...I wish we could be there with’em, helping them.”

“So do I...” Missy said and glanced out the window.
“...I think that even though the army is coming *here*, they have a worse path ahead of them. I miss them all, a lot...” and she looked down. “...And I’m worried that we won’t see them again, ever.” Her heart sank deep into her chest at the thought, but she didn’t cry.

Toki reassuringly patted her on the leg. “Missy and Chris should not worry...” and he looked towards Chris.
“...They will see Geri and Keirus and Shauna and Tyler again. Must have faith in them...” and then he shook his head.
“...They are not like all others to go to Laraniros. They are special, have been chosen. So do not fret. They will come home.”

* * * * *

-xxxv-

Crodis chuckled maliciously as he looked into his globe at the council that had gathered in Federain. “Do they truly believe that they can stop my army? *Ha*, they won’t even make a dent.”

“They cling to false hopes...” Morgia added coldly as she watched the council. “...That’s what makes these mortals so feeble.”

“Hmmmmm, I wonder...” and then he put his arms in the air. Gusts of wind swept through the room, creating a vacuum that howled and bellowed throughout the desolate chamber.

Morgia put her cloak up to shield herself as the wind swarmed around the room. She even had to squint because it was so powerful and she watched as Crodis was swept up to the ceiling.

The wind turned him until he was facing the direction of Federain. He put his arms out. “*Go!*” he commanded and sent a black gust through the window.

* * *

Chris suddenly widened his eyes as he looked out the window. “What the hell?” he asked shockingly. Missy and Toki followed his glance and gaped. Outside, the already threatening sky took a turn for the worse. Dark gray clouds, nearly black as smoke, were swirling around the sky. There was no sun out that day anyway, but the black clouds filled the sky, blanketing the entire kingdom in darkness.

*

The council room suddenly grew cold, despite all the body heat that was in there and everyone exchanged their comments with each other and somehow, all their gazes landed on the window where the sky was turning.

A powerful draft suddenly burst through the windowpanes and they crashed against the walls. Tiny shards of glass from the impact flew all over the room. All those who had been on the side with the blown out windows either jumped over, or dove underneath the oaken table, to avoid being hit by the glassy debris.

Everyone huddled on the other side of the table, fighting to keep their ground, and avoid being carried off by the wind. They put their arms over their heads to shield themselves from the gusts. Some of the bigger individuals were using their own bodies as shields to protect those of higher importance from any danger.

Then the winds began to whirl and spiral rapidly over the table and expanded until they hit the tabletop. And then all at once, the howling gusts were lulled as a form took shape and the image of Crodis appeared on the tabletop. He wore dark crimson and black robes. A cape of similar colors went over his narrow shoulders and reached all the way to the heels of his boots. His ebon goatee matched his long hair, which was tied back, but it reached the length of his back. The God appeared to be a dark, handsome man of middle age.

“What is this?” he asked in mock surprise as he looked upon everyone in the room. A malicious glint came to his red eyes as his gaze went around the table. “...A council meeting? But how can that be? Not every kingdom of Lirosial was invited.”

“*Crodis!*” Tikala suddenly shouted and pinned her ears flat against her head. She pulled her dagger out of its sheath and gritted her teeth. “...*I’ll kill you, I swear!*” and she got ready to jump onto the table after him.

“Tikala! No!” Tamor shouted in an attempt to stop her.

“Yes, Tikala...” Crodis sneered. “...You’d listen to your little brother if you know what’s good for you...” and he raised one of his hands, clenching his fingers.

Suddenly, an excruciating pain began searing down the she-Kuruuk’s weapon arm and she gripped onto it with the other. Crodis shook his head as his tongue clicked against his teeth. “Such idiocy, Tikala...” he taunted. “...I thought you were smarter than that.”

The burning sensation shot through her forearm all the way down to her elbow until she could bear it no longer and let out a small yelp of agony. She dropped the dagger as the burning grew, until a stream of blood began trickling down her arm, but the burning persisted still.

Dram suddenly unsheathed his sword and pointed it towards the God. “Enough of this game, Crodis, or I shall *smite* you where you stand,” he threatened.

“Oh...” the God began sarcastically. “...Such a clever line, King Dram. Did you think that one up on your own?”

Dram put the sword closer to him. “I mean it.”

“Oh, well let me give you a little tip then...” Crodis began. He raised his other arm and Dram’s sword was suddenly pulled out of his grasp. “...A sword is *not* a plaything.” And then the sword switched directions and pointed towards its wielder. It suddenly flew at Dram, but the king dodged out of the way just in time as the sword embedded itself in the wall right behind him.

Crodis then looked around the room at all the alarmed faces. “Anyone else?” he asked. When no one responded, he continued. “...Good. Now you all listen to me. I will call off my army, if you all agree to surrender your kingdoms to me, sparing yourselves the carnage and devastation that will fall upon you in two days,” and he held up two fingers.

Before anyone else could speak up, Tikala did first, despite the pain still stinging her arm. “Lirosial will *never* surrender to you, Crodis...” and she shook her head. “...Not so long as there is still hope.”

The God let out a callous laughter. “Are you referring to your dear Keirus and the *Great Warrior*? Surely you jest, Kuruuk...” he said, but his voice trailed. Though his eyes were scarlet in color from all his years in Laraniros, his gaze was as cold as ice as he shot it towards her. “...Rely on them all you like because I’m not through toying with them yet. Their time is coming.”

And then his gaze went to everyone else. “...And as for the rest of you refusing to bargain, you may as well just give up now because your fate is already sealed. This war you are about to partake in will be the last one that any of you will ever know...” and the image began to dissipate. “...Think about it...” And then, he was gone.

* * * * *

-xxxvi-

Keirus suddenly glanced up at the gray sky. A chilling wind began snaking its way through the area. And then, the breeze grew fiercer all around them. He had to stop dead in his tracks so he wouldn't get blown over.

"What the hell is that?" Tyler asked as he kept his hands over his face.

The demigod shook his head. "I don't know!" he shouted over the howling gusts. As he concentrated on the sky, he saw as a streak of black clouds sped through the air above their heads. The dark clouds were moving at impeccable speed, whizzing and swirling against the sky. And they were all blowing in the direction of Laraniros.

Keirus took his arm down as the breeze began to lull, the dark clouds disappearing over the horizon, but he kept his gaze in the direction they were heading. "Crodis," he muttered.

"What was that?" Geri asked as she caught up to him and followed his gaze.

“So...” he mused, not seeming to hear her question.
“...He has become stronger.”

“Who has?” she asked again.

Keirus turned to her. “Crodis,” he answered. “...His power has been restored, which means that we have to hurry up and finish this,” and he began walking again.

“Wait, Keirus...” she said as she adjusted the pack and hurried to catch back up. “...What was that weird black cloud that we just saw?”

“It was him...” he responded. “...And from the looks of it, he’s already paid Federain a visit, probably in an attempt to get them to surrender. And from the ferocity of that wind, it didn’t look like they agreed.”

They kept going along their path. Aside from the wind blowing through the trees, all was silent. But over everything, a shrill screech rang out through the air. Keirus stopped walking and glanced up at the sky.

The other three looked around, but they didn’t see anything. “What was that?” Geri asked, thinking it was another strange beast out to attack them again.

Keirus wasn’t sure at first, but he didn’t think it was another attacker. So, he put his thumb and index finger at the corners of his mouth and let out a shrill whistle. When he did, everyone turned to him, but he took no notice and kept concentrating on the sky. The same trill sounded in response to

him. The clouds above them were slowly dissipating, but a lone bird's silhouette appeared. He held up one of his arms and the kestrel flew right down and landed on it. "Well, hello," Keirus said to the bird.

Tyler just stared in disbelief. "That bird just randomly comes to you out of the sky..." and then he shook his head. "...Man, you don't cease to amaze me."

Keirus glanced at him. "That's what this bird is trained to do," he said.

Geri had seen the same bird before and it took her a few moments to remember where, until she looked down at the pendant Queen Fiora had given to her. Then she looked back at the bird and pointed. "That's one of Queen Fiora's birds, isn't it?"

"That's right," he said with a nod.

"What's it doing all the way out here?" Shauna asked.

Aarek let out a small whistle and lifted his leg with the message canister on it. Keirus pulled the canister off and unrolled the sheet of parchment. He read the others' message and couldn't hide the grin that followed when he saw the signatures. "It's from the others..." he said. "...They all reached Federain, and Missy and Chris are perfectly fine."

"Let me see!" Shauna said and stuck her hand out. When Keirus handed her the parchment, Geri and Tyler peered over her shoulders to read over it as well.

Tyler even chuckled at the message. “Chris and Tamor...” he said. “...Always good for a laugh.” Even Geri and Shauna chuckled over their little post-message.

Keirus looked into Aarek’s amber eyes and concentrated. Once the kestrel returned his glance, the demigod held it for a moment. *:Tell them that we are all fine, and we appreciate their thoughts:* In response, the kestrel let out another whistle and then Keirus lifted his arm. The bird took to the air again. They all watched as his silhouette grew smaller and smaller and then disappeared.

Geri turned back to Keirus. “Were you, talking to him?”

He nodded. “Kestrels are the smartest birds on Lirosial. That’s why they make such good messengers. They can carry a message...” and he looked at the parchment she was holding. “...Like that one, but they can also deliver messages with words...” and then he put a finger up. “...As long as the words are short, and to the point.”

“What did you say to him?” Geri asked as they began walking again.

“I told him to tell the others that the four of us are all fine, and that we appreciate their thoughts. It’s good to know that the others are all right, and I’m sure they want to know if we are.”

* * * * *

-xxxvii-

Tikala let out a yelp as Tamor took a damp rag and started dabbing at the bloodstains on her arm. The pain that Crodis had inflicted on her was unnatural. “*Curses*, Tamor!” she shouted. “...*Easy* there!”

“I’m doing the best that I can, sister,” he responded.

“What did he do to you?” Missy asked. The Kuruuks had told she, Chris, and Toki of the interaction with Crodis at the council meeting, including when the God lashed out at Tikala.

The she-Kuruuk gritted her teeth. “Demon sorcery...” she muttered. “...That’s what he used,” she said. Her tolerance for pain was pretty high normally, but she had never endured something as strong as the evil touch from a God, especially one tainted with a demonic aura. But her wound wasn’t inflicted naturally. Whatever powers Crodis had used on her, he had conjured up from somewhere else. Until the God decided to attack the others, he had never been so powerful, and Tikala

shook her head at the thought. "...I don't understand it," she managed to get out.

"Don't understand what?" Tamor asked.

"How he became so powerful. He was *never* that powerful, even in the Realm, and he's only a Lesser God besides."

Tamor dropped the crimson rag into the water bucket and then picked up the bandages and began wrapping his sister's arm. Every time he went around the wounded area, she winced, but said nothing. So, he just kept taking it slowly. "He has Lord Hycen's circlet," he put in. "...That's probably how he gained most of his powers."

Toki was sitting on the edge of Chris' bed and clapped his heels together like a child. "*And* he is *in* Laraniros," he added. "...The evil from the time of Palmenor still curses it."

Tikala tightly closed her eyes as Tamor did another wrap around her arm. She turned away from the sight of him wrapping her arm. It wasn't that she was squeamish at the sight of scalded flesh, but if she didn't look at it, perhaps the pain wouldn't be as bad. She let out a sigh and opened her eyes. "I pray to the Gods that the others are safe," she said.

Tamor glanced at her. "They are..." he said. He didn't believe those words whole-heartedly, but he just had to keep the faith in their friends. "...If something had happened to them, things would be a *lot* worse than they are already."

The she-Kuruuk's glance shifted out the window.
"Crodis has something planned for them..." she added grimly.
"...I just hope that they are strong enough to overcome it."

Chris looked right at her. "They will be," he said, able to mask the agitation in his voice. Shauna was out there with them and he *would* see her again, if he had to go out alone to track them all down.

* * * * *

-xxxix-

The following day, there was quite a change in the temperature and conditions as the four travelers continued on their journey. Instead of the cool, rainy weather they had been having since the end of the Forbidden Forest, that day of travel was spent in the sweltering heat. The four exchanged few words in hopes to keep their energy up because otherwise, they couldn't keep themselves going.

Their clothing just felt like it was hanging on their bodies, weighed down by all the moisture in the air. They huffed and puffed over the foothills, ignoring the perspiration all over their bodies as they kept on.

"Man..." Tyler began and stuck his arms out to the side. His shirt was pretty torn up from all the battles and trudging through the wilderness, but it was still wearable. And now, even *with* all the holes in it, it was offering him little comfort. Still though, having the shirt on was a lot better than not because it was on his turn to carry one of the packs. He was sweating

enough as it were and having the pack sitting on only his bare skin, would only add to the perspiration.

“Any chance we’ll be stopping near a lake or a river or something in the next few hours? I think I wanna drown myself right now.” On top of being hot, the humidity was also bringing out all the dirt and mud that had collected on their skin over their travels. And the storm yesterday had only made that worse.

“Mmmm...” Geri mused as she thought about it. “...A bath *would* be nice-it certainly has been a while...” and she grimaced at the clingy clothes just hanging on her body.

“I’ll third that notion,” Shauna commented. “...Believe it or not, I really think I do need a bath. This is just gross,” and she wiped the sweat off her skin.

After hearing all three of them, Keirus stopped on the path and stood there for a moment in the silence, listening and looking around. It was too hot for even the birds to be out and even if they were, they weren’t singing. A stale breeze swept through the area and that certainly didn’t offer them any comfort. The breeze was just as warm as the air around them.

He stood there and kept listening. Now that the air was still, he might be able to catch what he wanted. And on the distance, he did hear the faint noise of a waterfall. He put his hands on his hips and tried to pinpoint which direction the noise was coming from. It was somewhere over the foothill they had been traveling and he turned to the semi-steep path they would have to take to reach the top. It was a perfectly doable path, it

was really just a matter if they wanted to bear the heat while getting to the top. He turned back to them.

“Just how badly do you want these baths?” he asked.

“Man...” Tyler began. “...I’d do *anything* for a bath right now.”

Keirus gave a small nod. “Because I think I know where there’s a lake around here...” and he shrugged. “...If you’re all willing enough to make that trip.”

“Where?” Geri asked.

He nodded up the foothill. “We’d have to go up, and over.”

Geri’s shoulders slumped. “Are you serious?” She really didn’t want to go up because heat had a tendency to rise.

“It’s perfectly doable...” Keirus said. “...But in this heat, I really don’t know how you feel about doing it.”

Tyler’s glance shifted from the foothill to Keirus. “You’re sure? You’re absolutely positive that there’s a lake over this hill? Because, I don’t know about anyone else, but I don’t want to do this if we’re gonna be disappointed in the end.”

“If you listen carefully...” Keirus started. “...You can hear a waterfall. I don’t know for certain that it’s a lake, but it’s at least a stream.” There was a silence as the others listened for the sound of the fall.

After a moment, Shauna asked: “But how do you know we have to go over?”

“Because it’s coming from *that* direction...” and he gestured up the hill. “...But we should decide quickly. It’s not too far from us, so we can make it. It might put us a little off course, but nothing crucial. And, it may very well be the last fresh body of water that we come across between here, and our destination.”

“O-kay...” Tyler said and rubbed his hands together. “...That’s enough to persuade me. So let’s do it, and get it over with.”

“Yeah,” both girls said.

“But Keirus...” Tyler said jokingly and pointed to him. “...If there’s no water when we get to the top of this hill, I’m throwing you over the ledge because man, that’s a nasty trick to be playing on us.”

Keirus looked at him. “If we don’t see any water on the other side, I’ll jump,” and he extended his hand to prove just how serious he was.

“Wow...” Tyler said and shook his hand. “...That’s some confidence.”

“I’ve been from one end of Lirosial to the other, been taught by the best naturalists we’ve got in this world...” and he gave a small nod. “...I know what I’m looking for.”

“All right *Safari Al*, I’ll take your word for it,” and they began their ascent up the hill.

Keirus cocked his head in confusion. “What?” he asked.

Tyler let out an amused snort. “Safari Al...” and then he shook his head. “...Look, don’t rack your brain trying to figure it out. It’s just an expression.”

“I see...” Keirus said with a nod and then shrugged. “...All right. Shall we?” and he gestured towards the hill.

All four of them trudged up the hill. The path was perfectly feasible, but had they been in something other than sweltering heat, it probably would’ve been much easier. They still reached the top though, even though pain was shooting through the backs of their legs, and perspiration was dripping off their foreheads like leaky faucets.

And at the bottom of the foothill, nestled in the center of several smaller hills, was the lake that Keirus spoke of. There was a small waterfall trickling down from the end closest to the bluffs. From their vantage point, they could see the very stream that the waterfall flowed from. The ravine that the lake was in was pretty open around them, with little to shield any of them from everyone else. Maybe a few years ago, this wouldn’t have bothered the three friends, but now it seemed kind of awkward to all of them.

“Wow...” Shauna said as she looked down at the lake. “...This is gonna be a little strange.”

“A bath is a bath...” Geri said. She turned to her friend and gave a small shrug. “...We’re both girls, we haven’t got anything the other hasn’t seen.”

“Uhm...” Shauna began. “...I’m not really concerned about the two of us, but with them...” and she looked towards Tyler and Keirus. She put her hand up and added quickly: “...It’s not that I don’t trust either of you, it’s just, it’s gonna be weird.”

“You don’t have to worry, Shauna...” Keirus said to her. “...You girls will have your privacy.”

“Now...” Tyler began as they started walking. “...Are we gonna have to climb *back* up the hill when we’re done? Because then the point of the baths is pretty moot.”

Keirus looked around the ravine as they walked. It was mostly foothills throughout the area, but there appeared to be, what resembled a path, between two of the hills in the far right corner. He couldn’t see much of it from where he was standing, but to give the girls their privacy, perhaps he and Tyler could check it out. “As of right now...” he said. “...I don’t really know. You and I can circle around the base of the foothill while the girls are bathing though,” and he made a circular gesture around the ravine.

Tyler’s gaze followed Keirus’s finger as he pointed around. “Yeah...” he answered. “...That’ll work.”

“Gee...” Shauna commented smugly as she and Geri made their way to the lake. Keirus and Tyler had stayed behind them and were just talking briefly about checking out the path. Shauna glanced back at the two men and then turned to her friend. “...You sure you want *me* down there with you?

Because me and Tyler can keep ourselves busy if you two wanna, you know, have a few *special* moments to yourselves?”

Geri gave her friend a playful little shove as she chuckled. “Shut up,” she commented lightly. “...Y’know, contrary to what you and Tyler may think, Keirus and I are *not* jackrabbits.”

“Hey...” Shauna said defensively and put her hands up. “...I wasn’t saying that at all. I was just suggesting that if you two wanted a few moments, now that you certainly won’t have any interruptions, Tyler and I can be scarce for a little while.”

Geri thought for a moment and then her gaze landed on him. They had gotten there once and as she recalled it, she began to feel the intensity all over again. And she wanted to feel his soft touch again. And now, now it was a golden opportunity for them both and though she wanted it to happen, she wanted it to be spontaneous, not planned.

Then Geri shook her head. “As much as I would *love* the opportunity, it is just too damn hot right now.” And they continued on their path downhill. Even though they were going down, the heat was awful regardless.

The lake looked a whole lot bigger now that they were closer. The waterfall’s gentle flowing was hitting the lake like a soft rain shower. “Gosh that’s pretty,” Shauna said as she watched the waterfall.

“Kinda peaceful sounding too,” Geri commented.

“It is...” Keirus said with a nod as he and Tyler joined them. They both took the packs off their backs and set them on the ground. “...So we’ll leave you two to enjoy it,” he said.

“Where’re you two going?” Shauna asked.

Tyler nodded to the right. “There’s a path over here that we’re gonna check out. We’ll make sure we’re gone long enough to give you girls whatever time you need.”

“Just don’t get yourselves into trouble...” she said.

“...Cause Geri and I are gonna enjoy this until we’re satisfied.”

“Yeah, we don’t want to have to be interrupted to bail your asses out of trouble,” Geri teased.

“Just for that comment...” Tyler said to Keirus. “...I think we oughta go and stir something up.” He reached down to take his boots off.

Keirus let out a huff. “Right?” and then he turned to the girls. “...Don’t worry, you’ll have your peace and quiet. So, we’re gonna go and wander.”

There was a loud splash as Tyler suddenly plunged right into the water, clothes on and all. But just as quickly as he submerged, he came back up. “Shit, if I’m gonna be wandering in this heat, I’m at least gonna be cool enough to do it.”

Keirus pursed his lips together. “You know...” he said. “...You’re right.” He walked over to the bank and knelt down. He splashed a huge amount of water on his face, and anything else that it hit. He was sweating pretty badly and as the water

dribbled down his back, he felt a lot cooler. "Okay," he said.
"...Let's go."

"Check you girls later," Tyler said and they began walking off.

"Well at least we're even in both genders in *this* party," Shauna commented as she watched them.

"Yeah..." Geri said as she took her boots and pants off.
"...I guess it *would* feel kinda awkward to be the third wheel."

"Yeah..." Shauna said as she pulled her boots off. "...It would still be a lot easier though if Chris were actually here..."

"And Missy," Geri added

"Yeah..." Shauna added as she unclasped the back of her skirt. "...Then it'd be like a triple date kind of thing. We'd just be going to our dooms instead of out to dinner."

Geri's tongue clicked against her teeth. "Oh stop. It's not gonna be *that* bad. We're all gonna get out of this..." and she pointed to her friend. "...You watch."

Shauna threw her shirt on the bank and put her hands on her hips. "I'm gonna try," she said.

Geri gave a small nod. "You will, don't worry..." and then she nodded towards the lake. "...Race ya to the water."

Shauna pointed to her. "You're on..." and the two of them ran towards the water. They didn't even care how cold it was, it would just be nice to get out of the heat and into the water.

-xxx-

The path wasn't nearly as clear as Keirus and Tyler had thought it might be, but they could at least walk through it. Most of the green that was hanging onto the path was just skinny little stems from the brush. The only ones they had to watch out for were thorn bushes.

Aside from being warm, Tyler was walking around in near perfect comfort. He was sweating, but he was half expecting a mosquito colony to be swarming him because of it, especially in the terrain they were in. It was a swampy area and the soft ground squished under their boots as they walked, but both Tyler and Keirus were avoiding getting stuck. "Y'know, you Lirosialens are so lucky," he commented.

Keirus had stopped on the trail and took his shirt off, then twirled it around a few times until it was rolled enough that he could tie it around his forehead, which he did and kept walking. He ducked under an overhanging branch and then

pushed some leafy growth out of his way. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Tyler watched him for a moment, and then followed his exact course. “You guys don’t have to contest with mosquitoes. That’s a blessing.”

“What’s a mosquito?”

“They’re pests, blood sucking pests that when they bite you, it itches to no end for days. You guys don’t have ’em. You’re really lucky.”

“Are they small?”

Tyler gave a shrug. “Yeah, like any insect, I guess.”

Keirus nodded. “Then that’s nothing,” he said. “...We may not have mosquitoes, but we’ve got something that’s worse.”

“What?”

“*Swamp flies*...” Keirus said. He stopped and turned around. He held his hands about four inches apart. “...They’re big. And a tiny prick from their stingers, gives you a welt that’s about the size of a gold coin, which isn’t too bad. But if you get it worse than that, your entire arm could swell up in a matter of minutes.”

Tyler stopped and grimaced at the thought of a ballooning body part. He then gave a careless shrug and followed after Keirus. “Hmph...” he huffed. “...Don’t tell the girls about that, or we’ll never get ’em outa the water.”

Keirus glanced over his shoulder. “They live in the water...” and then he shook his head. “...But we shouldn’t have to worry about them around here. This area is, usually very mild...” and he looked up to the canopy above them. “...We must’ve hit a massive heat wave or something, because this isn’t normal for the foothills. Now an area like Neganuma, *there* we would find them.”

“Neganuma?” Tyler echoed and carefully pulled a thorny stem out of his path.

“The marshes, where the Huruchim took the girls—well, that general area anyway.” The two of them continued in silence as they just concentrated on not getting stuck in the moist ground, or getting whacked by thorn bushes.

It hadn’t been too long that they were following the path when they had completely walked around the foothill and stopped. Keirus glanced up the side of the hill and saw the path that all four of them had been on a short while ago, before they decided to walk over it. “Well I feel a little...dense,” Keirus commented as he looked at the path.

“Why? What is it?” Tyler asked and walked up beside him.

Keirus pointed to the path. “That was exactly where we were. If I would’ve known that this little pathway was here, we wouldn’t have had to walk up the hill.”

“Ah well...” Tyler said. “...What’s done is done, I guess. And besides, it didn’t kill us to conquer that hill. It just makes us appreciate the water a hell of a lot more.”

“I suppose,” Keirus said. “...Well,” and he turned back to Tyler. He gave a small shrug. “...At least we know we don’t have to walk back over it.”

“And that works...” Tyler said. “...It saves us on the time anyway.”

“And that’s the one thing we need...” and he began walking back towards the girls, but Tyler was hesitating. He stopped and turned around. “...You okay?”

“Yeah...” Tyler said, but his voice sounded a little preoccupied. “...I...” but his voice trailed and he caught up to Keirus. He stopped again and looked at him. “...Can I ask you something?”

He was caught a little off guard by the question, but he just decided to shrug it off. “Uh, sure.”

Tyler ran his fingers through his hair and brushed past Keirus on the path. “Ah, see, I’ve been thinking about this for a while and I want to tell someone, but I’m afraid that if I tell say, Geri or Shauna...” and he turned around. “...Word might get to Missy, and I really don’t want that. Not yet anyway.”

Keirus walked over to him. “Okay.” The two then began their walk back to the girls.

“Have you ever been in love?” Tyler asked him.
“...And I’m completely serious here.”

“I...” Keirus began and then his voice trailed after a moment. He almost said more than he was willing too. “...I was, once. It was a long time ago, but yes.”

“And how long did you know her, before you knew?”

“It took a little while...” he answered. “...On my frequent trips to this Realm, I would stop and see her every once in a while. But then I started making frequent trips just to see her and I just, realized that I loved her.”

“Did you marry her?”

Keirus shook his head. “No, I never did...” and he listlessly stared ahead of their path. “...I was always afraid that if anyone in our Realm found out, that Isabelle would share the same fate as my mother. And I couldn’t do that to her. So, we just kept it a secret.”

“Do you ever regret it, I mean, the not getting married part?”

“Sometimes. Lately though, I haven’t been giving much thought to it-until now, of course. Why do you ask?”

“You know...” Tyler started. “...Missy and I have only been together, just shy of three months, but I just can’t see myself without her, in the future, y’know? And it’s driving me up the fucking *wall* not knowing if it’s really love.”

Keirus’s head bobbed up and down. “Uncertainties do that to a person, but thinking about it is only going to frustrate you further. Agitation and confusion cloud your mind. And personally, I wouldn’t even try to think about it. What’s really

going to answer your question is your intuition. If you're truly in love with her, you'll feel it."

Tyler's brow furrowed in confusion. "Really?"

"Sure, that's how I know. I trust my instinct and that's what leads me in the right direction."

Tyler glanced at him. He didn't know if it was just a slip of the tongue when Keirus first responded, but he didn't seem to catch it. It was obvious to Tyler and everyone else, and why Keirus was so hesitant on his *own* feelings, Tyler didn't know. He really didn't think it had anything to do with Isabelle, as Geri had thought, which baffled him even more. "You know what, man..." he began and Keirus turned to him.

"... You really should listen to your own advice. I can't imagine it would do you any wrong."

"What?" Keirus asked.

"Give it a few minutes and it'll dawn on you."

-xxxxi-

The quiet rhythm of the fall trickling into the water was as soothing as a tranquil breeze to the girls. They were thoroughly enjoying their carefree moments in the water. For the small amount of time they were in there, all their troubles and worries seemed to leave their bodies. The water was calming and relaxing to them. And they both dreaded the thought of getting out. Until they heard the two men's voices.

"Oh, *crap*," Geri said. She didn't realize she had even been floating on her back until she heard them and she quickly brought her legs down.

"What?" Shauna asked and turned around. She saw both young men walking back towards them. "*Shit!*" and she quickly went under trying to cover herself. Even though the rest of her body was submerged in the water, her cheeks were plainly visible and they were as red as cherries. "Go away!" she called to them. "...You two are still supposed to be gone."

They both stopped on the bank and Tyler crossed his arms. "I can't believe that you two are *still* in there. We were gone a good hour or so at least."

Keirus gave a nod in agreement. "And you two aren't the only ones who need a bath."

"No kidding. I think you gals have had *plenty* of time."

"All right..." Geri said and crossed her arms. "...Then how about you two give us some space and we'll get decent. Now scram." And she shooed them away with her free hand.

Keirus and Tyler turned around and walked a few paces away to give the girls their space. "Women and hygiene..." Tyler commented. They both heard the splashing as the girls hurried out. He shook his head. "...You get in, wash up, and get out. It's not that hard, is it?"

Keirus shook his head. "*I* don't think so."

After a few minutes, they heard Geri say: "All right, you two can turn around. We're fine."

"Finally..." Tyler said as he pulled his shirt off and wiped the sweat from his brow. He had been cool for a little while, but once the sun began drying his clothes, it didn't last very long. And neither of them cared less whether the girls were standing there or not. They were both hot and sweaty and they had no qualms about shedding clothes and diving right into the lake.

Geri looked down at the two heaps of clothes on the beach and then craftily glanced at her friend. "You know, we could both be really rotten right now," she said slyly.

A smug smile came across Shauna's face as she glanced down. "You know, we could. It'd certainly be a hell of a lot funnier if we were close to some town, but I think this will be hilarious."

"After all..." Geri responded with a sigh. "...They did ruin our nice, peaceful baths."

Shauna nodded. "Oh yea," she said. They reached down and gathered up all the clothes.

"Oh boys!" Geri called and gave a shrill whistle. When the two turned to her, she wiggled a pair of pants in the air.

Tyler shook his head. "Oh, hell no," he said.

Keirus turned to him. "They, really wouldn't do that, would they?"

"Uhm..." Tyler started as he kept his eye on the two girls. They each blew both of them a kiss. "...Oh yeah they would, come on..." he said. The two swam to shore as fast as they could, but before they even got close, the two girls had already taken off.

The chase through the brush really proved interesting, but needless to say that Geri and Shauna had the upper hand the entire time. Eventually though, Shauna was nice enough to drop Tyler's pants, but Geri had been a little more ruthless with

Keirus'. But once he caught up to her, he didn't hesitate to tackle her and snatch his pants back.

The day had gone from being a hot, sweltering traveling heat, to just being a day to forget about everything and have fun. Even though time was running short for them, it was a day that they really needed. They had to camp by the lake that night, but while they were sitting around the campfire, they all came to an agreement to travel at double their normal pace to make up for lost time when they resumed.

* * *

Keirus had been lying on the ground with his hands behind his head looking up at the stars as they twinkled. And for whatever reason, the other Gods suddenly popped into his mind. As he thought about them though, he got to his feet and stretched. "I'll be back," he said and then began walking towards the lake.

Tyler and Geri were still awake and they watched as he disappeared down the hill into the darkness. Then Tyler turned back to his friend. "So..." he said and she looked at him. "...You gonna go after him?"

"Why...would I?" she found herself asking.

"Think about it, Ger..." he said to her. "...Something's bothering him, and he could probably use the consolation."

"What if he wants to be alone?" she questioned.

Tyler gave a shrug and reclined onto his bedroll. “Okay. So, give him a few moments, and *then* go sick’im. Come on Geri, golden opportunities rarely present themselves so straightforwardly. You two could be *alone* for once,” and then he put his right hand up.

“...And I promise, no interruptions from *this* party, ” and he glanced towards Shauna, but she was sound asleep.

Geri glanced in the direction of the lake, but Keirus was long gone already. Then her glance darted back to Tyler, but she said nothing as she pondered.

Tyler leaned towards her. “Look at it this way, Ger, you’re never going to get a better chance. Y’might wanna take it.”

She looked towards the lake again. She wanted a spontaneous moment and as Tyler had said, this was a perfect opportunity. And what could be more romantic than on a beach, on a clear, starry night, just the two of them. And if he needed consolation over whatever was bothering him, Geri could score herself some brownie points. But then her gaze landed back on Tyler as he sat across from her.

“Well...” she said to him. “...Are you two gonna be okay by yourselves?”

He glanced at Shauna again and then turned to her. “Yeah...” he answered passively. “...Go ahead. We’ll be fine. If we get into trouble, we’ll just holler, but...” and he glanced up

at the clear, still sky. All the stars twinkled brightly as they remained undisturbed. "...I'm highly doubting that right now."

"You're sure?" Geri asked again.

"Yes..." he said lightly. "...Just get outa here. Go, enjoy your time together."

She hurried over and gave him a hug. If there was anyone who understood her to a tee, it was Tyler. The two had been good friends for almost fifteen years already. He was like the brother that she never had. They understood each other, and they took care of each other. "Thanks," she said quietly and gave him a final squeeze.

"Oh, I think you're gonna want to be saving that. Just promise me that you'll stay out of trouble. I'm comfortable and I don't feel like getting up," he joked.

"It's a promise," she said and stood up.

-xxxxii-

Geri followed Keirus's path down to the beach. And as she traveled, all was silent around her except for the trickling of the waterfall. Though she couldn't quite see it in the darkness, Geri knew that the beach was down there somewhere. Of course, if she just happened to stumble into Keirus, that would be even better. But, if she wanted to get that far, she had to first reach the beach in one piece. So, she waited until her eyes adjusted to the dark before she continued.

When she felt she could see well enough, Geri cautiously continued her way down the hill. And suddenly, the ground went from hard and firm, to soft and squishy. She looked down and again, as her eyes adjusted, she saw the sand beneath her. She looked around and almost called out to Keirus, but then she spotted him.

At first, she thought it was a rock on the beach, but then she realized that he was kneeling down. She didn't see what he was doing, so Geri approached him, but then quickly stopped.

He was down on one knee with his hands clasped together praying.

Geri was glad it was night because she could feel her cheeks beginning to flush with embarrassment at interrupting him. So, she just stood in her spot, even being afraid to breathe. Here, she had one thing on her mind, while he was doing something that she hadn't expected. She glanced behind her and then cautiously took a step back.

"You don't have to be so quiet..." she heard him say with a light tone to his voice. "...It's all right."

"I'm sorry..." she said. "...I didn't mean to disrupt you."

"You didn't..." Keirus said as he stood up and walked towards her. "...I was finished."

She met his glance when he stopped. "I've...never seen you pray before."

Keirus let out a breath. "It's something I've not done in a long, long time. And I think about them every day. But sometimes..." and he glanced over the still water. "...You just need to give a little more than a thought."

"The other Gods..." Geri said to him. "...They're your family, hey?"

"The only one I have."

She glanced down. "Now I see why you're so determined to finish this. I guess if it would be my family who

was in trouble, I'd do anything to help them. I mean, if I didn't have my family, there's times I don't know what I would do."

Keirus gave a small nod. "Family is important and we shouldn't take them for granted," he mused.

Geri then decided to sit down on the sand. She glanced up at him. "Have a seat," she said and he sat down next to her. She stretched her legs out and crossed her ankles and then looked up at the sky. "...Boy, do I know that one..." she said in agreement with him. "...I never thought about it before, but I really miss my mom and dad-I even miss my sister. I wish I could see them again. I'd tell'em all that I love'em so much."

A moment of silence fell between them as they both thought about their families now, and then Keirus spoke up. "You know, the last words my father and I spoke to each other, before everything happened, we had gotten into an argument. And now, some of the things I said, I wish I could take them back."

Geri clapped him on the shoulder. "He's your dad..." she said. "...He understands. All kids and parents go through it at one point or another, sometimes even more, but that doesn't mean he loves you any less."

He nodded again. "I suppose you're right," he answered.

"So..." Geri started. "...How long've you been away from your home anyways?"

Keirus thought for a moment. "It's been seven years..." he said. "...Since Tikala and I left."

She turned to him. "That's a long time."

He nodded. "It is. You never realize just how important home is until you're taken away from it."

"Boy, do I hear that..." Geri commented. "...We've probably been gone a month by now, and I'm really getting homesick. But after seven years-sheesh-I can't imagine what it's like for you."

"Well, I miss it. My family is there, still imprisoned by Crodis' power. And as long as he still has my father's circlet, they'll remain that way until I can get it back..." and he shook his head. "...And I won't lie, it's hard. There's been many times when I doubt that I'll even succeed."

She looked down. She imagined that since she and her friends arrived, they probably did slow Tikala and Keirus down. "Is it because of us?" she asked.

He turned to her and shook his head. "No, the fact that he's still out there has nothing to do with you or your friends. He's been fleeing since he trapped them. Everytime I feel I'm getting closer though, he slips out from under my grasp, and then I have to start all over again."

"How do you know for sure that he's in Laraniros?"

"Because of the legends. No one has ever returned from Laraniros-there are unspeakable powers of darkness in that place. And somehow, Crodis has been able to harness them, or

he wouldn't be nearly as powerful as he is. And if he risked another move, he'd weaken himself. And if he's weak, he wouldn't be able to keep his armies strong."

Geri sat up and faced him. "What is it exactly that he's after? What's he trying to accomplish?"

"He wants to destroy every man, woman, and child on Lirosial. If he succeeds in destroying the world of mortals, he destroys our world. If the Gods don't have any worshippers, they lose everything. What keeps them strong, is this world. The more followers, the stronger they are, see?"

"Well, if he...succeeded in destroying everything, does that mean..." and she swallowed hard. "...You would die too?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't because I'm not a True God. This world doesn't affect me like it affects the others because I'm only half God. I've no Domain of my own, so I have no followers."

Geri grinned and leaned closer to him, playfully nudging him with her shoulder. "You've got us..." she said. "...But we'll never let anything happen to you. Just like we won't let anything happen to each other."

"I know..." he responded. "...And I wouldn't trade this party for anything. You've all been a great help on this journey, and I don't think I could've gotten this far without any of you. And I mean that."

"So do I..." she said and turned to him with a smile, but it gradually faded as they gazed at each other. They leaned in

and kissed. The moment was perfect, just how it was. And she didn't want anything to interrupt it. When they pulled out of it, Geri scooted closer to him and leaned her head on his shoulder. "This is nice..." she said. "...To have this moment."

Keirus slid his arm around her and rested his head on hers. "It's moments like these that you and I can both share, and take home with us. That's what makes them so special," he said and then kissed her forehead.

Geri smiled and glanced up at him. "Yeah," she said and their lips met again. They parted and kissed again, and then they lay in the sand.

* * * * *

-xxxxiii-

Elwina stood at Chris' bedside, keeping her hands just slightly above his wounds. As she kept her eyes closed in concentration, a soft lavender glow emitted around her hands, and the wounds.

The gashes were still stinging his flesh, but as the mystical healer worked her magic, the pain gradually went away. When the pain was completely gone, the soft glow disappeared. The Nevrye opened her eyes. "There you are, young Christopher, fully healed to the extent that *I* can do it. But it is much better now," she said.

Chris looked down at his bandages, and there wasn't even a hint of blood seeping through them. "Holy shit..." he said and straightened himself up. This time, unlike all the others since they had come to Federain, there was no pain at all. "...They're gone? They're completely gone?" he asked as he started unwrapping the bandages. All that was left were three faint scars in the wounds' stead. "...They're like, *gone*."

“They are...” Elwina answered. “...You are fully healed now.”

“Sweet...” Chris said as he slowly stood up. There was no pain, even when he fully stretched to relieve his muscles.

“How do you feel?” Tikala asked and put her bandaged hand to her chin.

“I feel totally awesome,” he said.

Elwina and Toki curiously looked at him and then exchanged glances with each other. “You are speaking in strange tongues, young Christopher...” Elwina said to him. “...You sustained no head injuries?”

“No...” Missy said and the Nevrye glanced at her. She stood up from her chair. Her wounded leg was healing quickly now too. “...He always talks like that. He means he’s feeling a lot better.”

“A *hell* of a lot better...” Chris said. “...Thanks,” and he flexed a little. “...Now I feel like I can take on the world.”

Toki put his hands on his hips and cocked his head. “You very strange, Chris...” he said and then gave a shrug. “...But you are human.”

Chris turned to the little Nevrye and raised his eyebrows. “And you’re very short,” he said.

The Nevrye balled up his tiny fists and put his ears back. “Toki not short!” he said loudly. “...He is small stature.” He stuck his chin in the air and then crossed his arms.

Chris put his hands up in defense. “Hey, hey, take it easy, little dude. We don’t need you to pop,” he added quietly.

Elwina stood up from her chair and clasped her hands. “You should still rest, Christopher. The wounds may be healed up now, but if you move around too much, they will tear.”

“Oh...” Chris said and then his arms slumped to his sides. “...Sorry.”

“Take this,” she said and handed him a small salve bottle.

“What is this?” he asked as he examined the strange bottle.

“If you rub it onto the scars, they will heal quicker and they will not tear.”

“Oh, that’ll work. Thanks again,” he said.

She gave a small bow. “You are welcome,” she responded and with that, she left the room.

“We have two more days left, before Crodis’ new army reaches the Federain borders...” Tikala said as she approached the window. And then she turned to them both. “...And now that you two are healed, you should be fitted for armor.”

“What kind of armor?” Missy asked.

“It will probably be chain. It is lighter in weight than plate, but it will protect you just the same. And if we are to go into battle, especially now, you should have something.”

“We didn’t need it the last time,” Chris said.

“That is because we didn’t have time for it,” and then she headed out the door. “...So come, this shouldn’t be too hard.”

Chris grabbed his shirt and then he and Missy followed after her.

* * *

They met up with Tamor on their way, but they didn’t have to go far. The palace armory was located in the basement of the palace. It was smaller in size than they thought, but it was adequate for their purposes. The armory was here mainly to fix up soldiers’ armor if they needed it, but there were still quite a few extra suits.

There was even a forge and four weapon smiths in the same area, serving the same purpose as the armorer, only with weapons in this case. And as they passed through it, two of the smiths were working at the forges, making extra swords.

“Bradamor,” Tikala said as she and the others walked in. The armorer was a middle-aged man, but his brown crown of hair was starting to show streaks of gray in it. He was sitting at his table fixing up a suit of chain mail. He looked up at them, recognizing Tikala from when he fixed a chink in her suit of armor.

Bradamor clasped his hands on the table. “Ah yes, Tikala. How’s the armor holding up for you?” he inquired.

“Very well, thank you,” she responded.

“Good, good...” and then he saw the other three.

“...And who are your comrades?”

“My brother, Tamor...” she said and nodded towards him. She walked behind the other two. “...And these two are the Lady Melissa, and the Lord Christopher. They need to be fitted for some armor. Can you do it?”

Bradamor fixed his spectacles as he studied the two. He turned towards the back of his small armory. “Ralric,” he called. A younger man, probably a few years younger than either Chris or Missy at best, came out.

“Yes, father?” he said.

Bradamor pointed towards Missy. “Size up the young lady for a suit of chain...” and then he walked over to Chris. “...Put your arms out, m’boy,” he said and took the measurements. After he was done, he shook a finger at Chris. “...I think I might have a suit in your size. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Shortly, he came out of the back room with a chain suit. Both sleeves matched up to Chris perfectly, and at its full length, the suit went down to his knees. “This should work,” the armorer said. “...Try it on.”

“Father?” Ralric said and Bradamor walked over to him.

Chris took the suit and looked at it. It was a little heavier than he probably would have liked, but when he was

wearing it, he didn't figure he'd notice it. He looked at the Kuruuks. "Uh, how do I..." but his voice trailed.

"Here..." Tamor said and walked over to him. "...Give me the chain," he instructed and Chris did. "...Stand straight and put your arms out."

Chris did and the Kuruuk helped him suit up. Once he had the chainmail on, Tamor went behind him and fastened it. "There you are, Chris," he said and patted the young man on the back. "...How does it feel?"

"She's a little smaller than normal, father..." Ralric said to his father when he walked over. "...She might need a lighter suit."

"Hmmm..." Bradamor mused and put his fingers on his chin. "...Let's see what we have in storage. We might be able to adjust one to fit her..." and the two of them walked in the back.

Chris stood there with his arms out to the sides. He could lightly feel the weight of it, but it wasn't unbearable. He'd get used to it. "Is this how it's supposed to look?" he asked. In any movie he had ever seen, chain mail was usually fitted to the wearer, but it seemed baggy to him.

"It will fit better once you've got the gambeson, and scabbard on," Tamor said.

"What's a gam-bee-son?" Chris asked.

“A padded shirt,” Tikala answered. “...It goes underneath the chain, so if you’re struck, it protects your body from the damaged links.”

“Oh.”

“And you’ll have a leather tunic over it as well...”

Tamor added. “...So you’ll be well protected. The armor fits you though?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, it’s a little on the baggy side, but otherwise, it doesn’t feel bad. I can move around.”

“Good...” Tikala nodded. “...Then you have your armor, and not a minute too late.”

The two smiths came back out and Bradamor was carrying another suit of chain. “Try this one, my dear,” he said to Missy and handed her the armor.

Missy took the suit from him and at first, she wasn’t prepared for it to be as heavy as it was and she almost dropped it, but caught it right away. She slid the armor on and Tikala helped her fasten it. When it was done, Missy just stood there. The sleeves were too long, and the suit went down past her knees. “Uhm...” she muttered as she looked the mail over.

“That’s the smallest one I could find,” Bradamor muttered.

Tikala carefully studied Missy, who was practically drowning in the mail suit. Then she turned to the armorer. “Can you adjust it?” she asked and shook her head. “...I would not risk sending this girl into battle unprotected.”

Bradamor was already studying the armor and making the adjustments in his head. "I can adjust it, but it wouldn't be ready until tomorrow morning."

"That doesn't give us much time..." Tikala mused and then looked at him. "...How early?"

"I can bring it to you at first light."

Tikala nodded. "All right..." she said. "...As soon as you can get it to us."

He gave a small bow of his head. "I will. I'll see to it personally."

"Thank you."

The chain links in the armor jingled as they walked. "Y'know..." Chris said. "...If we're gonna try to sneak up on this army, make sure you don't bring me. This is gonna get real annoying."

"Chain mail is not meant for sneaking..." Tamor said to him. "...It protects. And when you're fighting, trust me, you won't even notice the noise."

"That reminds me..." Tikala said and looked at them. "...Now that you're able, you two should probably do some sparring, just to get back in the swing of wielding a sword."

"I don't have my armor though," Missy said to her.

"You won't need it for sparring, my dear. Sparring is just for you two to touch up, since it has been a while."

“Yeah, almost a week, I think...” Chris added and then he shook his head. “...I don’t know what it is, but I’m like, feeling compelled to use my sword again. It’s weird.”

“It isn’t weird...” Tikala said. “...It’s normal. You get so used to using it, that when it’s taken away from you, it’s like leaving you in the dark. It’s that way for many fighters.”

-xxxxiv-

Osias Strong Claw stood behind the turrets of the tallest tower with his two closest retainers. Being at the height they were, the three Kuruuks were well able to see the lands surrounding them. The soft, early morning light was beginning to shed itself over the lands from the east.

“It seems quiet today,” Micah Ebon Foot commented as he looked around. Even the wind seemed awfully calm.

Akio Snow Ear joined the others by the turrets. “It’s too quiet...” he commented. “...And that makes me very weary.”

“One can never be too weary when it comes to Crodis...” Strong Claw said dryly. He leaned on one of the turrets. “...With all that he’s conjured up and done these past seven years, I’m amazed that this land hasn’t been devastated yet.”

“Indeed...” Ebon Foot answered. “...But even the Gods have limitations. And Crodis is no exception to that, but he’s lain quiet for so long that no one paid him any mind, until now.”

Strong Claw glanced at his retainer. “Lord Keirus has been pursuing him since the very moment he and Tikala escaped. But Crodis has continually eluded both of them, which leads me to wonder what he’s really capable of.”

“He’s a coward...” Snow Ear said. “...They haven’t been able to catch him because whenever they get close, he flees like a frightened pup.”

“But it’s that fleeing that has kept him alive for so long. It has enabled him to fully regain his powers. The Gods may have limitations, but even those should never be underestimated- which we’re all guilty of doing.”

While the other two were conversing, Ebon Foot had been keeping an eye on a hazy cloud in the distance. And as he watched the smoke cloud, it kept moving towards them. The smoke was being kicked up from the army as it marched onward. “General Strong Claw, sir...” he said, still keeping his gaze on the distant army, but soon, it would be upon them.

Strong Claw turned to him, but before he responded, he widened his eyes when he saw the approaching enemy. “I can see smoke rising in the distance. They’re almost upon us,” he muttered.

* * *

Tikala was on her way down to the armory when she saw as a small band of soldiers hurriedly passed through the

grounds. When she saw them, she turned and jogged the rest of the way.

The she-Kuruuk saw as Bradamor just hung up the suit of chain for Missy, to look it over one last time. “Bradamor!” Tikala called to him and he turned to her.

“Ah, Tikala, I’ve just finished adjusting the suit for the Lady...” and then he looked at the suit. “...This should fit her perfectly now.”

“Good...” she said to him and then she too turned to the chainmail. “...It is done?”

He gave a nod. “It is, as promised.” He pulled the armor off the peg and handed it to her.

“Thank you, very much Bradamor...” she said as she accepted it. She looked over the suit to inspect it and found no chinks in it anywhere, even the parts that had been welded together. Tikala then lifted her head to meet his gaze. “...Listen to me, Bradamor...” she said to him.

“...You need to get yourself and your family out of here...” and her big ears flipped back and forth as she shook her head. “...I fear it isn’t safe for you.”

The armorer gave a small nod. “We’ve been told to leave through the back of the palace, and make for Davanine with the few others who are still left here.”

“Good...” she answered with a nod. “...And you should. Get out while you can.”

“We are. We’ll be leaving momentarily.”

The Kuruuk's head bobbed up and down. "Good luck to you then," she said.

He nodded. "And to yourself, Tikala.

"Thank you," she said and with that, they parted ways.

* * *

Tikala strode through the hall on her way to give Missy her suit of armor. Her ears flipped back when she heard padding behind her, but she paid it no mind. She wanted to help Missy and Chris get ready for what was to come. But just then, she heard: "Tikala!"

The she-Kuruuk turned around only to see Tamor closing in behind her. She stopped to face him. "What is it, Tamor?" she queried.

"An emergency meeting has been called. All the main generals from every kingdom, including ours, have been called forth. And you, sister, as one of the Kuruuk Captains, have been summoned for it as well. And I stress its importance. They're all in the map room."

"All right..." Tikala responded and passed the armor off to him. "...If I have to be in attendance at this meeting, then it is *your* duty to see to it that Missy gets her armor..." she said as she pointed to him. "...And make sure that she and Chris get themselves ready. We've very little time," she said as she brushed past him.

Tamor's glance followed his sister as she disappeared down the long hallway. "You don't have to tell me that, sister," he mused. He glanced down at the suit of chain in his arms and then made his way towards Missy's chamber.

*

Tikala made haste to get to the map room and she pushed the door open. When the hinges squeaked, all eyes turned to her as she entered. She saw Dram, Barak, and Teague in there, as well as their closest retainers, dressed in full armor. And she also saw Osias Strong Claw, as well as his two retainers. They had all been in some kind of discussion before she arrived and she hated to interrupt them, especially if it was important. But if her presence was requested, they certainly wouldn't have gone too in depth.

"I'm sorry..." she apologized. "...I had to pick up a suit of armor, but as soon as Tamor told me, I hurried down here."

"It's all right, Tikala..." Osias said and then turned to face everyone gathered around the table. "...We were just about to start..." and then he looked across the table at Dram. "...You were saying, you're Majesty?"

"Yes..." the seaside king picked up as he leaned on the table. "...I was about to suggest an alternative to them coming here..." and then he looked back across at Ebon Foot. "...How close to the borders did you say they were?"

“Several hours, I think, and if they are not there by nightfall, they will surely be by tomorrow morn,” the fox responded.

Dram nodded. “And that’s why I suggest that, rather than them coming here, we should be the ones to meet them. It keeps Federain out of the fire if we battle on the borders. It isn’t much, I know, but, it at least gives the last few remaining here a chance to get to safety.”

Barak gave a nod. “I have to agree with King Dram. It would be wiser to meet them before they can get here. The armies are already assembled and prepared, they just need the word.”

Osias’ head bobbed up and down. “If everyone else is in agreement, then I say we do it.”

Slightly off the subject, Tikala put in, since Elwina wasn’t there. “What of the Nevryes?” she questioned. “...Would they be marching out with the rest of us?”

“Some of them will,” Dram said. “...We’ll need healers on the battlefield for certain. The others will remain back here. But we will have to keep an eye on all those who travel with us because they might be the first ones targeted because of their abilities.”

“Agreed...” Osias said with another nod. “...So then, it’s settled. We’ve agreed to marching out?” There were comments of agreement made throughout the room from everyone. “...All right,” the Kuruuk continued. “...Then I say

we assemble the armies and leave within the hour.” Again, everyone agreed and the council was dismissed.

After the meeting was over with, Tikala hurried back up to tell the other three. She found them all in Chris’ room and much to her surprise, both he and Missy were suited up and ready to go. She was carrying a small bundle and then set it on the dresser. Then she looked them over.

Tamor was just kicking back in a chair and he glanced at her. “What’s the word, sister?” he asked.

“We’re getting all the armies assembled...” Tikala explained. “...And within the hour, we’re all marching out to meet Crodis’ army on the borders.”

“Where are *we* supposed to go?” Chris queried as he and Missy exchanged glances. “...Or report to, or whatever.”

Tikala met his glance. “You two will be traveling with the Kuruuk army, alongside Tamor and I.”

“We’re not, gonna be holding you guys back, are we?” Missy asked timidly. She knew that the Kuruuks moved faster than a normal person and she didn’t know if she or Chris would be able to keep up with them.

“No, you won’t...” Tikala answered. “...We will be traveling beside the other Lirosialen Kingdoms. As soon as we set foot beyond that palace gate, we are no longer separate armies, but one together. And until the very end of this, that is how it will remain.”

She then grabbed the bundle and unwrapped it.
“Here...” she said to Missy and Chris. Inside the bundle were
two sets of leather bracers, and two sets of greaves.

“What are these for?” Chris asked.

She looked at him. “Just for a little more protection,
that’s all.”

* * * * *

-XXXXV-

Crodis was watching in his mirror as his army remained on its course. Soon, they would be upon Federain Kingdom and crush everything in it. His army was fully charged and ready for this battle. Little did the Lirosialen army realize that once Crodis released his secret weapon, they would be crushed in an instant.

“Go, my Warriors...” he said. “...Be not afraid of these pathetic mortal beings, for you all possess something that they do not,” and then the image changed to the four travelers en route to find him. Within the next few days, they would be in Laraniros.

A twisted grin came to his face. “Excellent,” he said when he saw them. Once they passed through the Laraniros borders, then he could start having fun with them.

“How are we doing?” Morgia’s voice sounded.

He turned to the sorceress, but then back to his mirror. “Excellent...” he said. “...Our status is excellent. Give it a few more days, and these petty mortals won’t know what hit them.”

“What of Keirus and the others?” she inquired.

Crodis’ glance shifted to her again. “Once they pass through the borders, you and I will have our fun.”

Morgia ran her fingers along the necklace she was wearing. “It’s about time,” she said. “...We should go and meet them.”

The God shook his head. “No,” he responded. “...We shouldn’t waste our time. There is plenty to keep them busy once they get here. When they’re least expecting it, that’s when we’ll do it.”

* * *

Keirus and the others had to trek through more foothills on their way to Laraniros. But as they neared the cursed land, the lands surrounding them seemed to be more barren and desolate than any of them had seen so far.

He had a separate blade that he used specifically for cutting through obstacles. Out of his respect to King Fellan, he would not use *Nairanol* for something as petty as cutting through underbrush along their path. And anything that he missed, Geri or Tyler would usually catch. As he hacked through one final

patch of underbrush and got a clearer view at the path ahead of them, he stopped.

“What is it?” Geri asked. She had been following him right up until he stopped walking.

Keirus gazed at the path ahead of them, or more appropriately, the pathway that lay ahead of them. Fog had settled itself over the growth-line, but from what they could see, it was pretty clear that the path led between the foothills.

With the fog settled there, and sight of the black void behind it, it sent a shiver down each one of their spines. And though no one could really see much, they heard the wind howling through the void between the foothills.

Geri peered past Keirus’s shoulder at the path. “Is-is that Laraniros?” she asked.

“No...” he responded as he shook his head. “...That’s the Forgotten Pathway. That’s what will lead us into Laraniros.”

“It’s creepy,” she said.

“Yes...” Keirus responded and then turned to face them. “...And now I will say this. All I asked, is that you follow me to this point, and I am sticking to it. None of you have to go any further if you don’t want.”

Tyler, Geri, and Shauna each exchanged glances, and then Tyler looked at him. “We all know that. And we said that we were going to help you finish this no matter what.”

Keirus’s expression softened somewhat as he gave a nod. “Very well then,” he said. “...Let’s get this over with.”

“Once and for all...” Geri put in and gestured. “...Lead on.”

“All right,” he said with a nod and began walking again.

While they made their way along the Pathway, there was still some growth they had to cut through. And now that they were about halfway through it, Keirus was the only one cutting it out of the way. The other three were a little too edgy to concentrate on anything other than getting out alive.

Finally though, Keirus hacked through a last bunch of overgrowth and stopped again. There was a desolate clearing ahead of him. All that was on the ground was dirt and stones. There were some boulders scattered around the ground, and any grasses that he saw were long, stringy, and brown. Skeletal trees, both dead and standing, dotted the empty landscape. And in the distance, there was a jagged mountain range. And some of the peaks had eerie red glows in their caps.

The other three joined him and looked at the frightening path ahead. “What is this place?” Geri asked as a surge of fright passed through her. She thought the Pathway was bad, but this empty landscape was worse. As soon as she saw it, she was scared.

Tyler and Shauna followed after them, but then they stopped. Tyler couldn’t take his eyes away from what he was seeing before them. And when Shauna’s eyes landed on it, she put a hand on his shoulder as she walked up behind him. “Oh my god...” was all she could get out.

Keirus's gaze over the landscape remained. "This is it," he said to them. "...This is Laraniros."

End of Part II